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Subalternity and Language: Overcoming the Fragmentation of Common Sense

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Abstract
The topics of language and subaltern social groups appear throughout Antonio Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks*. Although Gramsci often associates the problem of political fragmentation among subaltern groups with issues concerning language and common sense, there are only a few notes where he explicitly connects his overlapping analyses of language and subalternity. We build on the few places in the literature on Gramsci that focus on how he relates common sense to the questions of language or subalternity. By explicitly tracing out these relations, we hope to bring into relief the direct connections between subalternity and language by showing how the concepts overlap with respect to Gramsci’s analyses of common sense, intellectuals, philosophy, folklore, and hegemony. We argue that, for Gramsci, fragmentation of any social group’s ‘common sense’, worldview and language is a political detriment, impeding effective political organisation to counter exploitation but that such fragmentation cannot be overcome by the imposition of a ‘rational’ or ‘logical’ worldview. Instead, what is required is a deep engagement with the fragments that make up subaltern historical, social, economic and political conditions. In our view, Gramsci provides an alternative both to the celebration of fragmentation fashionable in liberal multiculturalism and uncritical postmodernism, as well as other attempts of overcoming it through recourse to some external, transcendental or imposed worldview. This is fully in keeping with, and further elucidates Gramsci’s understanding of the importance of effective ‘democratic centralism’ of the leadership of the party in relation to the rank and file and the popular masses.

Keywords
Antonio Gramsci; language; linguistics; subaltern social groups; subalternity; subaltern studies; common sense; folklore; hegemony

Introduction
Within Gramsci’s legacy, the concept of ‘subalternity’ and his attention to language politics often take secondary and merely supportive roles to the more...
influential themes such as hegemony, passive revolution, organic intellectuals and war of position. Not only are ‘subalternity’ and ‘language’ cast as second fiddles, especially in the English-language literature, but many meticulous scholars will note that Gramsci writes specifically about subaltern groups and language quite late in his prison notes. Indeed, when considering the chronological composition of the *Prison Notebooks*, the two thematically organised ‘special notebooks’ that Gramsci devoted to subaltern groups and language appear towards the end. Notebook 25 (‘On the Margins of History. History of Subaltern Groups’) dates to the period of 1934, and Notebook 29 (‘Notes for an Introduction to the Study of Grammar’), which is Gramsci’s last notebook, dates to the period of 1935. However, the themes of subalternity and language appear throughout the *Prison Notebooks*.

Elsewhere, the individual authors of this article have tried to show the profound centrality subalternity and language, separately, to Gramsci’s overall project. In different ways, we have argued that the examination of subalternity and language in the *Prison Notebooks* illuminates Gramsci’s entire social and cultural theory. This article brings these two perspectives together and discusses the inter-relationships between Gramsci’s lifelong concern with the themes of subalternity (if not the actual term) and language from childhood in Sardinia, through his university studies and pre-prison political activity to his prison writings.

Focusing on the relationships between Gramsci’s analysis of subalternity and his discussion of language reveals a central dynamic in his approach to politics, what might be called the *differentia specifica* of his Marxism, or at least one of the major themes within it. Where various strains of Marxism have seen it as an analytic or ‘scientific discovery’ that needs to brought from the outside (whether by Marxist experts or party leaders) to enlighten the exploited, Gramsci emphasised the need of intellectual activity to be immersed in the lives and experiences of the masses. Much of Gramsci’s critiques of both

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1. Following what has become the standard method, we will cite Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks* by giving the Notebook number preceded by a Q (for ‘Quaderno’ – Notebook in Italian), and then a § prior to the note (or section) number, following the definitive source, Antonio Gramsci (1975) *Quaderni del Carcere*, 4 Volumes, edited by Valentino Gerratana, Turin: Einaudi. The English translation of this critical edition is under way; the first three of five volumes have been published, translated and edited by Joseph Buttigieg and published by Columbia University Press in 1992, 1996 and 2007. Where we followed particular English translations, we will cite them. There are extensive and useful concordance tables available at the International Gramsci Society website: <http://www.internationalgramscisociety.org/>.

2. See Green 2002, 2006 and Ives 2004a, 2004b. In these works, our method is philological and pays heed to the chronological construction of Gramsci’s Notebooks, especially Green 2006. Here we will follow a compatible but different method of drawing connections across Gramsci’s research project to reveal dynamics that would otherwise remain obscured.
positivism and idealism rest on the very general position that they both separate the lived experiences of capitalism from the analysis and understanding of it purported to be necessary to overcome it. Gramsci raises this point in his critique of Benedetto Croce's liberal idealism, as well as that of Nikolai Bukharin's positivistic Marxist materialism. Of course, Gramsci's well-known and influential detailed analyses of the role of intellectuals, not solely within socialism, but in maintaining bourgeois hegemony, leads him to the focus on the role of 'organic intellectuals' who do not bring political consciousness and organisation from 'without' but work through the experiences, worldviews, fragmented common sense, folklore and languages of subaltern social groups.

As Kate Crehan has explored, while Gramsci had respect for 'peasant culture' and 'subaltern common sense', as she puts it, 'he was never sentimental about it, seeing it both as narrow and parochial, and needing to be transcended...' Crehan elaborates that it is the inability of subaltern people to produce coherent accounts of the world they live in that have the potential to challenge existing hegemonic accounts... in any effective way. However, she correctly emphasises that one of Gramsci's major criticisms of Bukharin was that he did not start from an engagement with the fragmentary nature of subaltern common sense. He was thus unable to grasp what, for Gramsci, was essential: the distinction between what Crehan calls 'explicit' and 'implicit conceptions of the world'; what Gramsci discussed as the contrast between thought and action; between a conception of the world 'borrowed from another group' that is affirmed verbally; and that of action, though it may only manifest itself 'occasionally and in flashes' and is perhaps only 'embryonic'.

Crehan goes a substantial way in showing how the 'common sense' of subaltern groups becomes fragmented and incoherent, according to Gramsci, and why this is a political problem and a detriment to political organisation and action. But she only begins to touch on the notion of how that incoherence and fragmentation can be overcome, that is, what it means to begin from the

3. The first two 'special notebooks' in Gramsci's prison *opus* deal directly with idealism and materialism. Notebook 10 ('The Philosophy of Benedetto Croce') contains Gramsci's critique of Croce's idealism, and in Notebook 11 ('Introduction to the Study of Philosophy'), Gramsci subjects Nikolai Bukharin's positivist conception of Marxism to critique.
8. In contrast to the familiar notion of 'common sense' in contemporary Anglo-American usage, as sound and uncomplicated judgement, the Gramscian notion of 'common sense' draws on the Italian spectrum going from 'senso comune' (common sense) to 'buon senso' (good sense). In this context, 'common sense' refers more literally to beliefs that are common, modes of thought, opinions, and conceptions of the world held by the masses, and 'good sense' has
position of ‘common sense’ and why it is that the process cannot, for Gramsci, be directed from a position outside of common sense or why order and coherence cannot just be imposed through rational analysis.

Similarly, as Fabio Frosini has emphasised, Gramsci explicitly distinguished his own notion of ‘common sense’ in relation to his philosophy of praxis from those of both Kant and Croce, both of whom sought an agreement between philosophy and ‘common sense’. Thus, Frosini notes how Gramsci’s discussion of ‘common sense’ is a critical response to the debates between Croce and Giovanni Gentile in the 1920s and 30s. Although Croce maintained that he abandoned ‘the traditional distinction between plain thinking and philosophical thinking’, he claimed that ‘the distinguishing feature of philosophy is consistency’ and that ‘[n]on-philosophers are those who are not troubled by inconsistency or incoherence and do not trouble to escape it’. Thus, for Croce, the distinction between philosophical and non-philosophical thinking is not ‘a logical difference in the quality of the thought’ but ‘a purely psychological difference of interest and attitude’.

Frosini makes an incredibly insightful argument about how Gramsci’s development of the concept of ‘translation’ repositions the relationship between ‘common sense’ and philosophy. We take a different, though not contradictory path, of highlighting and describing the process whereby ‘common sense’ and language change are integral to the process of transforming the fragmented conditions of subalternity. As André Tosel has argued, for Gramsci,

\[\text{the philosophy of praxis should thus be developed following two axes: On the one hand, as a reformation of common sense by employing the position that all humans are philosophers; on the other hand, as an exposition.}\]

which Tosel explains by quoting Gramsci more of the English resonance of ‘common sense’ as good practical judgement. See editor’s note in Gramsci 1971, p. 323, fn. 1.

11. Ibid.
12. Frosini 2003a, pp. 6–8. Frosini explores Gramsci’s concept of ‘translatability’ in this context, which is obviously related to Gramsci’s approach to language. Here, we wish to add to Frosini’s focus (also in Frosini 2003b) on Gramsci’s engagement with philosophy – what he astutely sees as the translatability between theory and practice – with our focus on the fragmentation of common sense from the perspective not of philosophers like Croce or Gentile, but the subaltern classes. Boothman’s (2004) discussion of translation is also important here, but well beyond the scope of this essay.
[of] ‘problems’ that arose in the course of the history of philosophy, in order to criticise them, demonstrate their real value (if they still have any) or their importance as links in a chain, and define the new problems of the present time.13

Most of the scholarship, including Frosini and Tosel, follows the second of these axes, focusing on Gramsci’s engagement with the traditional intellectual activity of various philosophers and philosophical systems. While these axes are obviously closely related, and not separable projects precisely because of the complex relation between common sense and philosophy, our point here is to focus on the first axis; the reformation of common sense, the difficulties that ‘everyone’ (that is, those in subaltern social groups) faces in philosophising, and how Gramsci’s writings on language and subalternity together are the best indication of what Gramsci means by this.

Thus, we offer a very different interpretation than that of Andrew Robinson who emphasises Gramsci’s notion of transforming common sense, but focusing on Gramsci’s negative assessment of ‘common sense’ as indicating the need to ‘break’ with it and resist the ‘tendency to pander to existing beliefs…’.14 We are proposing a different and more dialectical overcoming of the fragmentation of subaltern ‘common sense’. As Guido Liguori has shown, for Gramsci, common sense cannot be eliminated but is ‘what is at stake in the struggle for hegemony’.15 The transformation of the condition of subalternity requires not the elimination of common sense but the critique and transformation of it. Gramsci emphasises this point in his critique of Bukharin, for Bukharin’s attempt at producing a ‘popular manual’ failed because it did not begin from a critique of common sense, but, rather, it reinforced elements of common sense uncritically. In the struggle for hegemony, as Gramsci emphasises, the formation of a homogenous social group must be accompanied by the formation of a systematic philosophy that provides a basis for the criticism of common sense.16 Thus, the critique of common sense functions as an elementary phase in the struggle for hegemony. In Liguori’s words: ‘Revolutionary theory is born against existing common sense’.17

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15. Liguori 2006, p. 79.
17. Liguori 2006, p. 78. While it is well beyond the scope of this essay, our position is to insist on the importance of Gramsci’s discussion of ‘immanence’ in the process of transforming common sense to good sense and the philosophy of praxis, see, for example, Thomas 2008, and Ives 2004b, pp. 84–90. See also Frosini 2003b, pp. 143–9. This theme is also connected to Gramsci’s use of ‘immanent grammar’ as synonymous with ‘spontaneous grammar’ discussed below.
Our contention here is that looking at this aspect of Gramsci’s discussion of subalternity together with his writings on language provides a crucial insight into his understandings of the dynamics at the core of his political and cultural theory. These questions are obviously important precursors to evaluating any approach to political consciousness and ideology, or, most importantly, the appropriate way to transform conditions of oppression, exploitation and subordination through social and political struggle.

Our point is not to reduce Gramsci’s political analysis to questions of unification or differing conceptions of the world, but show how they are intimately tied to questions of political organisation and struggle. As Tullio De Mauro has argued,

\[
\ldots \text{for Gramsci, the economic-productive element is interwoven with the element of invention and cultural elaboration, and both cannot subsist without being woven into the capability of linguistic elaboration and communication and with the construction of life in common in both the ethnic and national dimensions of life.}^{18}
\]

These questions become all the more important with the advent of debates around postmodernism, ideologies of multiculturalism, the ‘culture wars’, discussions of ‘the multitude’ à la Hardt and Negri, and the complex of economic, social, political and cultural transformations unsatisfactorily described with the term ‘globalisation’. Our current contexts provide particular resonances for questions of ‘common sense’ and fragmentation. It is within these contexts that Gramsci’s ideas are so critical for us today and which focus our attention on how Gramsci understands the fragmentation of ‘common sense’ as shown in his writings on the subaltern and language.

I. The subaltern condition: ‘common sense’ and fragmentation

In the *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci develops a critical interpretation of the condition of subaltern groups, in which he surveys the factors that contribute to their subordination, in addition – but not unrelated – to their economic exploitation, such as their modes of thought, worldviews, levels of political organisation, and culture. In his analysis, Gramsci attempts to identify what prevents subaltern groups from acting as effective political agents and from overcoming their subordination. Subaltern groups in modern Italian history, in his view, are characterised by ineffectual political activity. Although the

history of their spontaneous political activity, such as peasant revolts and insurgencies, illustrates their discontent and their will to generate political change, the political activity of subaltern groups rarely goes beyond certain limits, and the groups appear to be incapable of achieving permanent victory or maintaining a level of political power. In this sense, Gramsci is grappling with what Frantz Fanon describes as the positive and negative attributes of ‘spontaneity’.19

One of the major impediments preventing subaltern groups from overcoming their subordination – economic and cultural – is the lack of conscious leadership and organisation to provide the groups with coherence and direction. Gramsci attributes this lack of coherence and direction to the composition of subaltern groups’ culture and consciousness. In Gramsci’s view, the common sense and worldview of subaltern groups in Italy tended to lack the critical elements required to provide conscious and organised leadership. In Notebook 3, §48, Gramsci observes that within spontaneous political movements

there exist a ‘multiplicity’ of elements of ‘conscious leadership’, but none of them predominates or goes beyond the level of the ‘popular science’ – the ‘common sense’, that is, the [traditional] conception of the world – of a given social stratum’.20

Because of this, Gramsci contends that common sense provides inadequate foundations for establishing an effective political movement capable of producing political change. Thus, in Gramsci’s view, common sense is one the factors that hinders the ability of subaltern groups to assert political autonomy and to overcome their subordination. However, his conclusion is not that ‘common sense’ needs to be or can be rejected in its entirety or that there exists some ‘philosophy’ outside of ‘common sense’ by which ‘common sense’ can be judged and corrected. Rather, Gramsci suggests that common sense needs to become critical. As Liguori points out, common sense is constituted by a ‘Janus-faced’ contra-position of fragmentary elements on the one hand and the potential to become critical on the other.21 We want to go further along the direction indicated by Liguori’s, Frosini’s and Crehan’s recognition of the nuances of Gramsci’s positive and negative assessments of ‘common sense’ by showing how he relates it to the fragmented conditions of subalternity and subaltern languages and how he sees the movement from there to non-fragmented consciousness and truly popular common language.

In other words, the Gramscian notion of ‘common sense’ can be understood as popular social thought or as the common beliefs and opinions held by ordinary people. In some ways, common sense can be understood as the mentality or psychology of the masses.\textsuperscript{22} Gramsci uses language to develop his notion of ‘common sense’ both metaphorically and literally.\textsuperscript{23} Gramsci also sees languages as an important element of ‘common sense’. At times, he goes as far as stating that ‘[l]anguage also means culture and philosophy (if only at the level of common sense)’.\textsuperscript{24}

In his attack on elitist notions of ‘philosophy’, he argues that it is essential to destroy the widespread prejudice that philosophy is a strange and difficult thing just because it is the specific intellectual activity of a particular category of specialists or of professional and systematic philosophers.\textsuperscript{25}

He then defines ‘spontaneous philosophy’; that is, the intellectual activity of ‘everybody’ as such:

\begin{quote}
[t]his philosophy is contained in: 1. language itself, which is a totality of determined notions and concepts and not just words grammatically devoid of content; 2. ‘common sense’ and ‘good sense’; 3. popular religion and therefore, also in the entire systems of beliefs, superstitions, opinions, ways of seeing things and of acting, which are collectively bundled together under the name ‘folklore’.\textsuperscript{26}
\end{quote}

He continues by referring to ‘language’ again as an indication of intellectual activity, even if unconscious, in which ‘there is contained a specific conception of the world…’, and then poses the question whether it is ‘better to take part in a conception of the world mechanically imposed by the external environment…’, or

\begin{quote}
to work out consciously and critically one’s own conception of the world and thus, in connection with the labours of one’s own brain, choose ones’ sphere of activity, take an active part in the creation of the history of the world,…\textsuperscript{27}
\end{quote}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{22} Colucci 1999.
\bibitem{23} We shall see below how ‘Esperanto’ becomes for him a metaphor of mechanical and artificial worldviews or modes of thought that are imposed on people with little reference to their own life experiences and their own creative input and thus may make ‘sense’ but are not ‘common’ in the literal sense.
\bibitem{24} Gramsci 1971, p. 349, Q10II, §44.
\bibitem{25} Gramsci 1971, p. 323, Q11, §12.
\bibitem{26} Ibid.
\bibitem{27} Ibid.
\end{thebibliography}
Thus, Gramsci’s analysis of the fragmentary nature of subaltern common sense is intimately tied to his notions of language and its role in conceiving the world. As Frosini argues, ‘[l]anguage [linguaggio] is not an instrument that can serve us arbitrarily, but it is a concrete real form that thought assumes; indeed, it is the specific historical structure of thought’.28

The implication here is that Gramsci’s strategy and approach to how to overcome fragmentation in ‘common sense’ can be garnered from its metaphorical and direct relation to his approach to language and, specifically, his concern about the effective lack of a national Italian language but also his rejection of particular methods of attempting to create such a language which he saw as unable to achieve a truly popular language.

In using language and linguistics in political and cultural analysis of subaltern common sense, Gramsci is drawing on his university studies in linguistics at the University of Turin with Matteo Bartoli. Bartoli was engaged in debates with the neo-grammian school from which Ferdinand de Saussure emerged and ‘structuralist’ linguistics was created.29 In addition, but not disconnected from, his more technical training in linguistics, the context of language politics in Italian society is very important. As a Sardinian born in 1891, Gramsci grew up in the midst of the Italian government’s attempt to ‘standardise’ Italian, that is, create a national Italian language used by its citizens.

Language was a central feature in the process described by Massimo d’Azeglio famous proclamation shortly after the Risorgimento, ‘Italy is a fact, now we need to make Italians’. Italian historical linguists estimate that, at the time, somewhere between two and a half and twelve per cent of the population spoke anything that could be considered ‘standard’ Italian.30 The many dialects were not mutually understandable from north to south. While literary Italian had existed for centuries as a written language, a truly common, national language for most Italians did not exist. Moreover, about 75% of Italians were illiterate, with regions like Sardinia having illiteracy rates as high as 90%.31

This lack of a ‘standard’ language, especially in comparison to the powerful nation-states of France and England, if not Germany, was of major political concern for the new nation. In 1868, one of Italy’s most renowned authors, Alessandro Manzoni, was appointed to head a government commission on linguistic unification. Having rewritten his classic novel, I Promessi sposi [The

Betrothed], in an Italian closely modelled on spoken, bourgeois Florentine 'Italian', Manzoni’s solution was to take Florentine as the ‘standard’ Italian, fund dictionaries and grammar books based on Florentine, and recruit school teachers for all of Italy from the Tuscan region. Gramsci was very critical of Manzoni’s ‘solution’ well before he was imprisoned. In 1918, in the pages Il Grido del Popolo, he launched an attack on it, comparing it to Esperanto.\footnote{Gramsci, ‘La Lingua Unica e l’Esperanto’, 16 February 1918, in Gramsci 1985, pp. 26–31.}

As we shall see below, central to his criticism is the rejection of any solution to problems of political, social, and cultural fragmentation through the external imposition of a structure, organisation or language. It is this theme that connects Gramsci’s university studies in linguistics, his early pre-prison writings and his mature analysis of subalternity and language.

With these linguistic realities and debates consistently in mind, in his prison writings, Gramsci considered common sense among Italian subaltern groups to be uncritical, unreflective, unsystematic, and operating with an incoherent conception of life and the world. In his view, these characteristics contributed to the subordination of subaltern groups and inhibited them from developing long-term political strategies. The point of his analysis is to understand the ways in which the masses think, conceive the world, and perceive their activity, in order to ascertain what elements prevent them from effectively organising and acting. Ultimately, Gramsci is interested in transforming common sense and developing a ‘new common sense’ and, by extension, a truly transformed language founded upon a critical awareness that will provide the masses with a foundation to transform their conditions. Gramsci suggests that critical awareness develops through a process of critical self-reflection, in which one understands one’s history, position, and activity in relation to dominant and prevailing structures of power. But this critical construction cannot take place without engaging with current ‘common sense’ and its various and contradictory elements. Gramsci stresses that it is necessary for subaltern groups to understand the historical and political origins of their conditions, instead of assuming their circumstances are the result of some sort of natural or spiritual determination or inferiority, which the Catholic Church’s worldview tended to reinforce.

Gramsci describes common sense as a ‘fragmentary collection of ideas and opinions’ drawn from differing philosophies, ideologies, religion, folklore, experience, superstition, and from ‘scientific notions and philosophical opinions which have entered into common usage’.\footnote{Gramsci 1971, p. 328, Q11, §12; Gramsci 1992, p. 173, Q1, §65. Also see Q1, §89; Q4, §3; and Q24, §4.} Common sense is composed of a variety of perspectives that often contain elements of truth but also tend to be
disjointed, incoherent, and contradictory. In the words of Marcia Landy, common sense assumes ‘pastiche-like qualities’; it contains fragmentary ideas, a collage of opinions and beliefs, giving the illusion of a coherent worldview and of acting which is not at all coherent and certainly not critical.

Gramsci’s discussions of common sense often appear alongside his discussions of folklore, and although the two categories often appear synonymous, folklore represents only one of the elements that comprise common sense. To understand common sense, in Gramsci’s view, it is also necessary to understand folklore and its influence in the composition of the masses’ worldview. Although both common sense and folklore contain heterogeneous and contradictory elements, Gramsci contends that they should be studied as one would study a coherent philosophical worldview, since they inform the worldview of the masses. ‘Folklore’, he writes, ‘must not be considered an eccentricity, an oddity or a picturesque element, but as something which is very serious and is to be taken seriously’. As Crehan emphasises, for Gramsci, folklore is not primordial or pre-modern, but is always in flux, always being modernised and is tied in some ways to the dominant classes. However, the instability of folklore and its readiness to absorb elements from the dominant culture are important in that they give folklore a potentially progressive quality.

In this sense, Gramsci analyses common sense and its composition of multifarious elements as a socio-historical phenomenon, as if common sense were a coherent ideology or philosophy, and he attempts to identify and isolate the elements of common sense in relation to their historical and cultural context. His purpose is to ascertain the content and meaning of common sense, to understand how the masses conceive life, the world, and politics, with the point of radicalising common sense and providing subaltern groups with the intellectual tools necessary to confront dominant hegemony, philosophy, and power.

Gramsci often refers to common sense as the philosophy of the people, in that it represents the ‘philosophy of non-philosophers’, the philosophy of

34. Landy 1998, p. 4.
35. Landy 1986, p. 57.
the man in the street’, 39 or ‘spontaneous philosophy’, 40 which implies that common sense represents the conceptions of the world and modes of thought practised by non-professional philosophers, namely the masses. Gramsci defines ‘philosophy’ as a coherent worldview, whereas ‘common sense’ refers to the popular ways of thinking and speaking among the people. 41 Gramsci compares common sense to philosophy, because common sense operates similarly to a coherent worldview in that it provides a point of reference for thought and action, even though it is incoherent.

However, Gramsci is not taking coherence of a philosophy or worldview as the gold standard or even the sole element of the analytical distinction between ‘common sense’ and philosophy. Along with his critique of elitist notions of philosophy as a specialised and difficult activity, he argues,

[p]hilosophy in general does not in fact exist. Various philosophies or conceptions of the world exist, and one always makes a choice between them. How is this choice made? … is it not frequently the case that there is a contradiction between one’s intellectual choice and one’s mode of conduct? 42

This leads Gramsci to contrast ‘thought’ and ‘action’ as displaying ‘two conceptions of the world, one affirmed in words and the other displayed in effective action’, which is why ‘philosophy cannot be divorced from politics’.

Whereas philosophy constitutes a coherent conception of the world and mode of thought, common sense actually represents ‘a chaotic aggregate of disparate conceptions, and one can find there anything that one likes’. 43 Unlike philosophy, common sense does not follow a uniform conception of life and the world, and it does not exist in a homogenous form. 44 In Gramsci’s words:

Common sense is not a single unique conception, identical in time and space. It is the ‘folklore’ of philosophy, and, like folklore, it takes countless different forms. Its most fundamental characteristic is that it is a conception which, even in the brain of one individual, is fragmentary, incoherent and inconsequential, in conformity with the social and cultural position of those masses whose philosophy it is. 45

41. Gramsci 2007, p. 360, Q8, §213, III.
42. Gramsci 1971, p. 326, Q11, §12.
44. Frosini argues, as do we, that Gramsci’s redefinition of ‘common sense’ highlights that it is not unitary and static but continually being transformed and redefined, that its role in unifying a social group depends on the way that the common sense comes about and that it must be actively utilised that it becomes ‘ours’. Frosini, 2003b, pp. 170–6.
One might assume that Gramsci is accepting a general presumption of rationalism and the Enlightenment in favouring coherence and consistency in any worldview or philosophy, whether spontaneous or more systematic. Thus, fragmentation, incoherence and a sort of eclectic amassing of various ideas, values, morals and understandings of the world are problematic and unfavourable in and of themselves. But, on closer examination, one of Gramsci’s most useful contributions to questions of ideology-critique is precisely the notion of why and how such fragmentation is problematic. He does not merely assume that fragmentary common sense is detrimental and coherence and consistency are preferable. Rather, he tries to show how ‘common sense’ and folklore, together with incommunicable dialects, are practical impediments to effective political organisation, political action and the transformation of society. This is perhaps one place where Gramsci still has much to contribute to debates concerning postmodernism and multiculturalism. The key is to understand how, for Gramsci, fragmentation and incoherence should be addressed. This point is evident in Gramsci’s critique of Esperanto and Alessandro Manzoni’s strategy for creating a ‘standard’ Italian language. It provides one example of how, for Gramsci, achieving a systematic and coherent language, or worldview, can be even more detrimental than holding a fragmented worldview.

II. Esperantism and Manzoni – imposing language and culture from above

As we have been describing, one of the crucial questions that runs through much of Gramsci’s wide-ranging prison research project is how to transform this fragmentary ‘common sense’ that is debilitating for subaltern social groups. One of Gramsci’s major contributions that has made him so influential across a range of academic disciplines and diverse political struggles is his insistence that transforming of ‘common sense’ cannot take the form of the imposition of a superior worldview or understanding of the world originating outside of the previously accepted ‘common sense’. Such responses characterise many so-called progressive attempts, Marxist and non-Marxist alike, to create a more just world by coming up with the ‘correct position’ or a blueprint that oppressed people should follow. Such approaches exacerbate one of the key elements of the conditions of subalternity – the dissonance between the imposed worldview and the conditions and understandings of those who are supposed to accept it. This reinforces passivity and does not create critical

46. This argument can be taken as a defence of Gramsci in the face of José Nun’s critique that he is overly critical of common sense in contrast to philosophy and postulates a ‘radical asepsis of common sense, defined as the opposite of philosophy’ (Nun 1986, p. 222).
engagement or, as Gramsci quotes Socrates, knowledge of oneself, but takes the meaning of this process for political organisation and collective struggle far beyond anything implied in any of Plato’s dialogues.47

But Gramsci is no anarchist and has little faith in the effectiveness of purely spontaneous uprisings, specifically because the fragmentary and inadequate understanding made possible by subaltern ‘common sense’. He agrees to some degree with Lenin, that the mere conditions of capitalism do not automatically lead to political consciousness capable of effective and organised resistance. Given, as we have seen, that Gramsci connects ‘common sense’ to language, it is possible to see him addressing this question of the fragmentation of subaltern common sense in his analysis of the so-called ‘standardisation’ of the Italian language.

Just as Gramsci argued that there is a choice, a political choice, to be made among different philosophies or ways of seeing the world (or the elements that make them up), so too he argued that the establishment of a ‘written normative grammar’ connected to a common language is a ‘political act’, ‘an act of national-cultural politics’. In this context, his argument about language, dialects and the question of a ‘standardised’ national Italian language parallels his analysis of the effects of fragmentation of ‘common sense’. In the last notebook that he started in prison, Notebook 29, Gramsci writes:

> it is rational to collaborate practically and willingly to welcome everything that may serve to create a common national language, the non-existence of which creates friction particularly in the popular masses among whom local particularisms and phenomena of a narrow and provincial mentality are more tenacious than is believed.48

On the one hand, this statement in favour of a national Italian language might not seem surprising and could tend to reinforce the view that Gramsci posed a harsh critique of the ‘backwards’ and particularistic parochial worlds of ‘common sense’, folklore and dialect – and that he simplistically wanted to replace them with a coherent Marxist worldview. On the other hand, this passage contains some enigmas that are productive in illuminating his more nuanced position that emphasises the need to work through ‘common sense’ and warns of the pitfalls of any imposition of an external worldview however coherence and logical. This passage implies that a common national Italian language, in 1935, does not exist and must be created. It seems anachronistic.

This description of the non-existence of an Italian common national language is perhaps accurate for 1861 as described above. But, by 1931, the overall level of illiteracy in Italy had fallen to 21.6% and in the ‘South’ was about 38.8%, with these gains from the previous levels of 75% and 90% respectively, being made in some language that could be called a ‘standard’ Italian.49 If we are to take Gramsci literally, then, this declaration of the ‘non-existence’ of a ‘common national language’ must mean that he does not consider this ‘Italian’ to be a truly ‘common national popular language’. To explain what he must mean, we can look to his pre-prison writings mentioned above.

In 1918, Gramsci published an article in Il Grido del Popolo, ‘A Single Language and Esperanto’, in which he criticises the proposal that the Italian Socialist Party should adopt Esperanto.50 In mounting his argument, he equates the notion of adopting an artificial language with that of Manzoni in ‘standardising’ Italian. Manzoni would likely have been appalled by the comparison.51 Gramsci’s response to Manzoni was that:

not even a national language can be created artificially, by order of the state; that the Italian language was being formed by itself and would be formed only in so far as the shared life of the nation gave rise to numerous and stable contact between the various parts of the nation; that the spread of a particular language is due to the productive activity of the writings, trade and commerce of the people who speak that language. . . . If a single language [i.e. Manzoni’s ‘standard Italian’ based on the dialect of Florence], one that is also spoken in an given region and has a living source to which it can refer, cannot be imposed on the limited field of the nation, how then could an international language [Esperanto] take root when it is completely artificial and mechanical, completely ahistorical, not fed by great writers, lacking expressive richness which comes from the variety of dialects, from the variety of forms assumed in different times?52

At first blush, it seems that, in 1918, Gramsci was against the formation of a ‘common national language’ or certainly any active strategy to create one. But, by 1935, so it seems, he welcomed it and argued that, as quoted above, ‘it is rational to collaborate practically and willingly to welcome everything that may serve to create a common national language’. However, this would be to

50. The entire exchange is available on-line at: <http://www.andreamontagner.it/?p=43>.
51. Manzoni was a romanticist who rejected the classicists’ attraction to the ‘purity’ of literary Italian. Instead, very influenced by German romanticism, Manzoni upheld actual spoken languages as being ‘living’ languages, as expressive, beautiful, creative and productive. As Bruce Haddock notes, Italian romanticism was not associated with conservative and reactionary views as it was in Germany. Haddock 2000, p. 23.
miss the point of both arguments, which go to the heart of the issues of fragmentation of common sense under the conditions of subalternity.

On the one hand, Gramsci is utilising the arguments of G.I. Ascoli, a prominent Italian linguist at the end of the nineteenth century and one of the main opponents of Manzoni, who argued that dialects and previous languages of speakers exert ‘pressure’ on new languages being learned and thus, there is continual pressure that changes the ‘standard’ language being imposed. On the other hand, Gramsci is not just making a technical linguistic point about the degree of success of this strategy. He points out that while, from Manzoni’s position, Florentine is a ‘living’ language enabling its speakers to be creative, expressive and productive, for most of Italy it is more like an ‘artificial’ language imposed from the outside that enables little more than mechanical repetition and acceptance of a foreign conception of the world, and, ultimately, the subordination to a culture and philosophy that is not understood as belonging to the speaker herself.

This view is confirmed by what Gramsci wrote to his family members when in prison. On 26 March 1927, Gramsci sent a letter to his sister, Teresina, concerning her son, Franco:

> I hope that you will let [Franco] speak Sardinian and will not make any trouble for him on that score. It was a mistake, in my opinion, not to allow Edmea [Gramsci’s niece] to speak freely in Sardinian as a little girl. It harmed her intellectual development and put her imagination in a straitjacket. . . . I beg you, from my heart, not to make this mistake and to allow your children to absorb all the Sardinian spirit they wish and to develop spontaneously in the natural environment in which they were born . . .

While Gramsci favours children speaking their local languages, he encourages them to learn other languages and is fully aware of the prestige and cultural politics involved in these questions of which languages children learn to speak. In a letter to his son, Giuliano, Gramsci reflects on his own childhood noting how his classmates had great difficulty with speaking Italian, giving him a

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53. See Ives 2004a, pp. 24–30; Lo Piparo 1979, pp. 67–102; and Timpanaro 1972. This argument has interesting parallels with much of the work being done by socio-linguists concerning ‘varieties of English’ such as Braj Kachru and others, See Kachru 2005.

54. Gramsci 1994, Volume 1, p. 89. While we may want to reject his distinction here between ‘dialect’ and ‘language’ (e.g. Steinberg 1987, p. 199; Phillipson 1992, p. 38–40), Gramsci may also be thinking of the argument made by his professor, Bartoli, that the role of the Sardinian language had been underappreciated in the history of Italian vernaculars. Moreover, Franco Lo Piparo contends persuasively that Gramsci posits an isomorphic relation between national language and dialect and those of city/country and official culture/folklore. Lo Piparo 1979, pp. 179–89.
position of superiority over them. He writes that sometimes better knowledge of Italian makes a student ‘seem to be more intelligent and quick, whereas sometimes this is not so, …’.

It is in Notebook 29 that Gramsci begins to develop the clearest set of concepts that help him theorise the political elements this concern over vernacular languages or dialects and their relations to a common language. The central concepts that he employs are ‘spontaneous’ or ‘immanent grammar’ and ‘normative grammar’. Gramsci uses the phrase ‘subaltern classes’ in a very telling sense when re-defining the traditional concept of ‘normative grammar’ as being made up of ‘reciprocal monitoring, reciprocal teaching and reciprocal “censorship” expressed in such questions as “What did you mean to say?”, “What do you mean?”, “Make yourself clearer” etc’. Here, Gramsci describes a key element in the condition of ‘subalternity’ rather than a method for trying to overcome the power relations between the elite and the subaltern. He writes parenthetically:

[a] peasant who moves to the city ends up conforming to urban speech through the pressure of the city environment. In the country, people try to imitate urban speech; the subaltern classes try to speak like the dominant classes and the intellectuals, etc.

While only in its provisional and unfinished form, Gramsci is contrasting the ‘grammatical conformism’ of those in a new situation, here the peasant who has moved to the city, with those whose situation has not changed, the peasant still in the country. However, he also tries to imitate the dominant classes and intellectuals under very different circumstances. Where the peasant who has migrated to the city seems to succeed in ‘conforming’ to the new environment and speakers, the subaltern classes are not said to ‘conform’ but to ‘try’ to conform and ‘imitate’ – such attempts, he implies, are likely not to be successful, or, if they are successful at an individual level, it will result in the creation of a ‘traditional intellectual’ cut off from her ‘organic’ roots.

While Gramsci is not simply advocating the ‘spontaneous’ or ‘immanent’ grammar of a dialect, which is akin to his notion of ‘common sense’, in that it is fragmented, accepted uncritically and unconscious or seems ‘natural’, he is also not advocating any sort of ‘normative grammar’ where the rules are coherently set out, consistent and non-contradictory. Rather, he is making an argument for a specific method of transforming ‘spontaneous grammar’ into

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57. Gramsci 1985, pp. 180–1, Q29, §2, emphasis added.
'normative grammar' through a conscious and critical interaction among the existing 'spontaneous grammars'. As we saw above with Gramsci's critique of the fragmentary nature of common sense, here too we have his assessment of how fragmentation in language impedes effective political action. But this cannot be rectified through the imposition of a logically coherent, unfragmented, language. The result of such an external imposition actually reinforces parochialism and narrow thinking but also prevents various subaltern social groups – specifically the southern peasantry and the northern working class – from communicating with each other, developing solidarity with their conditions which are different in many ways but ultimately tied to their mutual subordination by the dominant classes and the uneven development of capitalism. Gramsci's solution for fragmentation and the incoherent and contradictory characteristics of language usage in Italy is not a simple adoption of Esperanto or some pragmatic language (such as the dialect of Florence) in which communication can occur. The creation of a truly common language requires the interaction and creative engagement among those who speak the diverse dialects, the elements of which will be transformed into a new language and worldview.

III. Transforming subaltern common sense and language from the bottom up

In Gramsci's writings specifically on Italian language, we find a clear example of his more general argument about fragmentation within common sense and the conditions of subalternity. He is critical of the lack of coherence and the historical process of sedimentation that renders both the common sense of various and diverse subaltern social groups and the vernacular languages they use an impediment to effective political organisation. But this fragmentation cannot be dealt with through the imposition of a coherence based on purely technical logic, abstract reason or Esperanto. Rather, it must be actively grappled with, sifted through, understood and sorted out by the very users of language and holders of 'common sense'. And these processes are not purely linguistic or in the realm of ideas and consciousness, but are always related to human labour and changing lived experiences. This is why it is so crucial that, in Gramsci's view, common sense, folklore, and languages are not homogeneous or static, just as 'the people themselves are not a homogeneous cultural collectivity, but they present numerous and variously combined cultural layers'.58 ‘One must keep in mind’, as he writes,

that in every region, especially in Italy, given the very rich variety of local traditions, there exist groups or small groups characterised by their own ideological or psychological impulses: 'every village has or has had its local saint, hence its own cult and its own chapel'.

In other words, in the Italian context, the heterogeneity of common sense is distinguished by the heterogeneity of Italian culture and the lack of national unity.

Thus, common sense assumes specific qualities among various regions and social groups. In addition, common sense changes and adapts to new elements that are absorbed into common practice. As Gramsci writes in Notebook 1, §65 and later re-writes in Notebook 24, §4:

> Every social stratum has its own ‘common sense’ which is ultimately the most widespread conception of life and morals. Every philosophical current leaves a sedimentation of ‘common sense’: this is the document of its historical reality. Common sense is not something rigid and static; rather, it changes continuously, enriched by scientific notions and philosophical opinions which have entered into common usage. ‘Common sense’ is the folklore of ‘philosophy’ and stands midway between real ‘folklore’ (that is, as it is understood) and the philosophy, the science, the economics of the scholars. ‘Common sense’ creates the folklore of the future, that is a more or less rigidified phase of a certain time and place.

Here, Gramsci conceptualises what Tosel frames as two axes, mentioned above; the reformation of ‘common sense’ and critique of traditional philosophy, as a continuum. But our point remains the same: where so much of Gramscian scholarship has detailed the relation between ‘common sense’ (as the ‘folklore of philosophy’) and science, economics and philosophy of scholars, our focus is directed towards the other end of the spectrum, between ‘real folklore’ and ‘common sense’. The crucial point here is that, although common sense continually changes, it tends not to be progressive, because it uncritically absorbs new elements from the scholarly end of the spectrum. They enter into

59. Gramsci 1992, p. 128, Q1, §43.
60. Gramsci 1992, p. 173, Q1, §65. Gramsci re-writes this section in Q24, §4 – the ‘special notebook’ on ‘Journalism’ – adding ‘good sense’ to ‘common sense’ in the first line. This has clear resonances with his 1918 critique of Esperanto which concludes, ‘[e]ach new social stratum that emerges in history, that organizes itself for the good fight, introduces new currents and new uses into the language and explodes the fixed schemes established by the grammarians for the fortuitous convenience of teaching. . . . New moral and intellectual curiosities goad the spirit and compel it to renew itself, to improve itself, to change the linguistic forms of expression by taking them from foreign languages, by reviving dead forms and by changing meanings and grammatical functions’. Gramsci 1985, p. 31.
common practice, rather than consciously and selectively incorporating specific elements.\(^\text{61}\)

Agreeing in part with Marx and Engels’s famous argument that ‘[t]he ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas’,\(^\text{62}\) Gramsci emphasises that languages and common sense often contain elements of truth but in seemingly contradictory forms with respect to the actual experiences and conditions of the masses. These ‘ruling ideas’ which, as Marx and Engels note, have ‘material force’ were formed from the perspective of the dominant groups, and often the dominant groups of previous periods in history.\(^\text{63}\) Where Marx and Engels do not specify any timeline for the ‘ideas of the ruling class’, Gramsci notes that, for example, ‘[p]revious religions have also had an influence and remain components of common sense to this day, and the same is true of previous forms of present Catholicism…’.\(^\text{64}\) Similarly, Gramsci suggests that elements of modern thought and science enter into folklore, but in this process they are ‘torn from their context, fall into the popular domain and “arranged” within the mosaic of tradition’.\(^\text{65}\) Thus, although the elements of folklore may change, new elements are incorporated within a traditional worldview.

Gramsci suggests that critical consciousness – established through the process of forming historical consciousness – should provide the foundation for a ‘new common sense’ (or what he also calls ‘good sense’), but the process of developing historical consciousness presents a difficult task for subaltern groups. Due to the contradictory nature of the ensemble of social relations and conditions of exploitation and poverty, subaltern groups are not only prohibited an active voice in dominant discourse; they are also excluded from actively participating in dominant institutions, culture, and politics, and, because of their exclusion, they are placed in a difficult position to develop a critical understanding of the nature of the power relations that form their subalternity. Without participation in dominant institutions, culture, politics, and language, subaltern groups achieve a partial understanding of their position in relation to dominant social and political relations. The stress here is on active participation that enables subaltern groups not only to use the language, institutions and to consume or absorb culture but allows subaltern groups to use them creatively, to add to them, and alter them in relation to their experiences. In this sense, Gramsci is worried about the outcome of institutions,

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culture, politics and language being ‘imposed’ from ‘above’ or ‘outside’ in a manner that reinforce feelings of inferiority and passivity in subaltern groups.

Gramsci understands this not as an overall condition, in the sense of Theodor Adorno’s ‘administered society’, but as a matter of degree depending on different conditions of various subaltern groups. The least ‘advanced’ subaltern groups, who have been deprived of institutional political participation, face a more difficult task in developing critical consciousness than a more politically organised subaltern group. Thus, the contradictory nature of common sense is not the product of some sort of intellectual or psychological deficiency on the part of the masses. Rather, the contradictory nature of common sense is largely defined by the contradictory nature of the ensemble of social relations, economic exploitation and the various exclusions they produce and reproduce. But Gramsci does not draw the deterministic conclusion from this logic that common sense can only follow and become critical once economic exploitation has ended or social relations have been transformed. Quite the contrary, his point is that such changes require a critical perspective to be elaborated from within common sense. The development of critical consciousness requires the articulation of a ‘historical consciousness’ that is developed autonomously from imposed principles and dominant cultural values. As Gramsci explains:

\[\text{[s]ince the ensemble of social relations is contradictory, human historical consciousness is contradictory; having said that, the question arises of how this contradictoriness manifests itself. It manifests itself all across the body of society through the existence of the different historical consciousness of various groups; and it manifests itself in individuals as a reflection of these group antinomies. Among subaltern groups, given the lack of historical initiative, the fragmentation is greater; they face a harder struggle to liberate themselves from imposed (rather than freely propounded) principles in order to arrive at an autonomous historical consciousness.}^{66}\]

Gramsci suggests that, in the Italian context, the contradictory nature of common sense, along with the lack of a truly popular national language is a reflection of the contradictory nature of the ensemble of social relations, which were largely produced by the incompleteness of the Risorgimento, the non-national popular aspects of Italian intellectuals, and the cultural influence of the Catholic Church. The nature of the Risorgimento, Catholicism, and the function of Italian intellectuals contributed to a passive culture and fragmented dialects that developed among the people, particularly peasants, who were encouraged to accept their subordinated position as natural. The hierarchical authority of the Church and state – through the mediation of

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intellectuals – politically and ideologically contributed to the subordination of workers and peasants.

This is one of the central elements of Gramsci’s analysis of the Risorgimento as a ‘revolution without revolution’ or a ‘passive revolution’ in that the dominant classes consolidated their power and unified the state without a mass base, without exercising active hegemony among the masses, without promoting a national culture, and without fundamentally altering the previous social relations.67 He considers Manzoni’s attempt to ‘unify’ Italy linguistically as a similarly ‘passive’ attempt to artificially impose a superficial solution without altering the numerous dialects of the would-be Italians. In both the Risorgimento of the nineteenth century and the linguistic situation of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the popular masses were not active in the process and were excluded from participation in the state after the Risorgimento. This was because the dominant classes that organised around the bourgeoisie did not exercise hegemony among the masses through the process of promoting a national or homogeneous conception of life and the world. In the period immediately following the Risorgimento, the peasantry actively revolted against the newly instituted administrators and against the usurpation of property, which was met by government suppression supported by both liberals and conservatives. Gramsci argues that a central reason why the spontaneous peasant revolt could not meet this reactionary response was due to its lack of organisation and, as time went on, its inability to connect to the growing power of the urban proletariat concentrated in the north of Italy.

While the parallels in Italy are at the abstract or metaphorical level, Gramsci seems to relate the unsuccessful spontaneous political struggle of the peasantry to the implicit resistance of them to a ‘standard’ Italian language. In a much more politically charged analysis, Gramsci draws on Ascoli’s theory of the ‘linguistic substratum’ to argue that any such language imposition would not be fully successful and would continually face ‘passive’ resistance that, while not effective in creating linguistic change itself, would render ‘standard’ Italian as an outside force that was never truly adopted by the masses.

Because the Risorgimento and ‘standard Italian’ were not popular movements – but, in the end, actually the juridical suppression of a potential mass movement – they reinforced the non-national popular aspects of Italian culture that actively excluded subaltern social groups from participating in dominant political institutions. For this reason, Gramsci writes that ‘in Italy the liberal-bourgeois always neglected the popular masses’.68 Related to this issue, as Gramsci began

to address in his final essay prior to his arrest, ‘Some Aspects of the Southern Question’, the peasantry lacked and continued to lack its own category of organic intellectuals to provide it with coherence and political direction. Ironically, however, as Gramsci points out in the Prison Notebooks, ‘it is from the peasantry that other social groups draw many of their intellectuals and a high proportion of traditional intellectuals are of peasant origin’, but such intellectuals do not remain organically linked with the peasantry, such as priests, lawyers, and state functionaries.69

The Italian peasantry not only lacked its own category of intellectuals to provide homogeneity and direction, the non-national popular character of Italian culture reinforced the separation of the intellectuals from the masses at large. As Gramsci points out in the ‘special notebook’ on the ‘Problems of Italian National Culture’:

In Italy the term ‘national’ has an ideologically very restricted meaning, and does not in any case coincide with ‘popular’ because in Italy the intellectuals are distant from the people, i.e. from the ‘nation’.70

As we have seen in linguistic terms, ‘national Italian’ was also restricted and was unsuccessful becoming truly ‘national’. Gramsci recounts different phases in Italian history when ‘once again, Italian is a written not a spoken language, a language of scholars, not of the nation’ and this is a central aspect of the increasing ‘split between the people and the intellectuals, between the people and culture’.71

In turn, the popular masses function within a social and political environment they did not create, in a language that they may learn but one that is not their own and is ‘mastered’ only through submission to the authority of the elite. Because of the cultural tradition of Italian intellectuals, the popular masses lack their own category of intellectuals and their own languages to provide coherence and political direction to their activity. Thus, because of the practical separation of intellectuals from the masses, common sense or the philosophy of the masses gravitates around folklore and traditional conceptions the world.

In Gramsci’s view, it is necessary for subaltern groups to produce their own category of organic intellectuals and linguistic innovations as effectively as dominant social groups create their organic intellectuals, in that the intellectuals remain in contact with, or organic to, the social groups’ life experiences so as to provide organisation, direction, and leadership in the movement to achieve

69. Gramsci 1971, p. 6, Q12, §1.
70. Gramsci 1985, p. 208, Q21, §5.
71. Gramsci 1985, pp. 169, 168, Q3, §76.
political power and hegemony. The necessity of the subaltern to develop their own category of organic intellectuals resolves one of the central issues contributing to the condition of subalternity; that is, that the non-national popular character of traditional Italian intellectuals creates a practical disconnection between intellectuals and the people. Gramsci’s well-known discussion of traditional intellectuals includes the crucial linguistic component of this disconnection. Gramsci describes his analysis of ‘the relation between the intellectuals and the people-nation’ as being studied ‘in terms of the language written by the intellectuals and used among them…’. He notes parenthetically that ‘the use of Latin as a learned language is bound up with Catholic cosmopolitanism’. Then, in tracing the history of this relationship, he sets out one version of his famous distinction between organic intellectuals (of the fourteenth-century ruling class) and traditional intellectuals,

it is not a stratum of the population which creates its intellectuals on coming to power (this occurred in the fourteenth century), but a traditionally selected body which assimilates single individuals into its cadres.72

It is largely due to this lack of intellectual connection for subaltern social groups that the level of conscious leadership with the subaltern’s spontaneous political activity does not move beyond common sense.73 The adoption of some ‘artificial’ worldview or language, that may be ‘coherent’ from a logical perspective or ‘beautiful’ from a given aesthetic perspective, is similarly an ineffective medium for going beyond common sense. Thus, the cultivation of organic intellectuals derived from and practically aligned with subaltern groups has the potential to facilitate the direction and coherence of the groups in their political activity which must include creating a new language. However, the development and cultivation of an independent and organic stratum of intellectuals is itself a difficult task. In Gramsci’s words:

…creating a group of independent intellectuals is not an easy thing; it requires a long process, with actions and reactions, coming together and drifting apart and the growth of very numerous and complex new formations. It is the conception of a subaltern social group, deprived of historical initiative, in continuous but disorganic expansion, unable to go beyond a certain qualitative level, which still remains below the level of the possession of the State and of the real exercise of hegemony over the whole of society which alone permits a certain organic equilibrium in the development of the intellectual group.74

Here, Gramsci’s suggestion that the ‘disorganic expansion’ of subaltern groups permits ‘a certain organic equilibrium in the development of the intellectual group’ directly connects to his view of the political party as the ‘collective intellectual’ or ‘modern prince’ that facilitates the rearticulation and unification of subaltern worldviews in a ‘common language’.75

For Gramsci, the party is not a tool to impose an external or transcendental worldview but functions as a practical link between social multiplicity and political unity in which the articulation of a ‘collective consciousness’ is created that has the potential to challenge dominant hegemony. As Gramsci metaphorically explains:

[a] collective consciousness, that is a living organism, cannot be formed until after the multiplicity is unified through the friction of individuals: neither can one say that ‘silence’ is not multiplicity. When an orchestra is preparing for a performance, with each instrument tuning up individually, it gives the impression of the most horrible cacophony; yet, it is such preparations that bring the orchestra to life as a single ‘instrument’.76

In Gramsci’s methodological criteria of subaltern analysis, the development of the political party signifies an initial first step in political transformation.77 The party provides a vehicle for subaltern groups to represent their views and aspirations, yet the crucial moment in the political activity of subaltern groups occurs when they become aware of the fact that their political goals cannot be fulfilled within the present state and that the state must be transformed.78

Posing the question of the state in turn brings the issue of hegemony to the forefront of political struggle. Thus, in addition to the necessity of creating an organic stratum of subaltern intellectuals, developing a mass political movement founded upon critical consciousness requires raising the intellectual level of subaltern groups as a whole and an ever-increasing stratum of the populace, so as to challenge the hegemony and authority of dominant social groups. The struggle to achieve hegemony and political leadership among competing social groups places subaltern groups in the position of an advanced level of self-consciousness and initiative. When the subaltern emerge from their subordinate position and achieve a level of political power, they move from a position of resistance to effective agency. This stage marks the pivotal point in the development of the subaltern in achieving ‘integral autonomy’. In Gramsci’s words,

78. Gramsci 1971, pp. 177–85, Q13, §17.
if yesterday the subaltern element was a thing, today it is no longer a thing but an
historical person, a protagonist; if yesterday it was not responsible, because ‘resisting’
a will external to itself, now it feels itself to be responsible because it is no longer
resisting but an agent, necessarily active and taking the initiative.\(^79\)

In other words, at this point, the subaltern has achieved ‘integral autonomy’
and is no longer subordinate, adopting the language of its rulers, but is active,
speaking, and leading.

**Conclusion**

Gramsci’s analysis of subaltern social groups and language are dominant themes
that appear throughout the *Prison Notebooks*, and Gramsci created ‘special
notebooks’ for each topic toward the end of his prison project. However,
Gramsci directly connected these two overlapping analyses in relatively few of
his notes. Moreover, within the vast literature on Gramsci, his wide-ranging
influence across many disciplines of study and especially the expansive use
of the concept of ‘subalternity’ very little has been done to trace out these
relations. We have attempted to bring into relief the direct connections
between subalternity and language by showing how the concepts overlap with
respect to Gramsci’s analyses of common sense, intellectuals, philosophy, folklore,
and hegemony. Moreover, we have argued that, for Gramsci, fragmentation
of any social group’s ‘common sense’, worldview and language is political
detrimental. However, it cannot be overcome by the imposition of a ‘rational’
or ‘logical’ worldview. Instead, what is required is a deep engagement with the
fragments that make up subaltern historical, social, economic and political
conditions. We have thus attempted to show how Gramsci provides an
alternative both to the celebration of fragmentation fashionable in liberal
multiculturalism and uncritical postmodernism as well as other attempts of
overcoming it through recourse to some external, transcendental or imposed
worldview. In this sense, we hope to have enriched the understanding of
Gramsci’s analysis of the Italian situation and the complex process required in
contemporary contexts for subaltern groups to overcome their subordination.

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\(^79\). Gramsci 1971, p. 337, Q11, §12.
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The *Longue Durée* of the French Bourgeoisie

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Abstract
Beginning with Engels, Marxist historiography viewed the absolute monarchy in France as mediating between the nobility and the emergent capitalist bourgeoisie. More recent Marxist accounts stress that the absolute monarchy reflected the interests of the nobility. Revisionist Marxist historians have taken this perspective to an extreme arguing that, at the height of the Bourbon monarchy in the seventeenth century, a capitalist bourgeoisie did not exist. This paper argues that, in taking such a view, these historians have ignored the ongoing dialectical opposition between the forces of rent and profit in the early-modern period. As a result, they have severed the connection between the *ancien régime* and the Revolution of 1789. Despite being thrown on the defensive by the advance of rent and the crystallisation of the absolutist state, a capitalist bourgeoisie that emerged in sixteenth-century France survived and persevered during the seventeenth century. It resumed the initiative in the succeeding period of the Enlightenment.

Keywords
absolute monarchy, *ancien régime*, bourgeoisie, nobility, profit, rent, Marxist revisionism, primitive accumulation

Marxists in academe sometimes complain about how hard done-by they are by non-Marxist scholars. They gripe that their work is dismissed, marginalised or misinterpreted by mainstream academics. But this can hardly be said to be the case when we look at the current state of historical studies of France in the seventeenth century. At the moment, it seems as if Marxist perspectives are taken very seriously, especially in the English-speaking world. In particular, the works of two Marxist scholars, William Beik and David Parker, have found great resonance among scholars both favourable and unfavourable to Marxism.¹ Likewise, in the study of early-modern England, the work of the avowedly Marxist historian Robert Brenner is held in great esteem. His accounts of the development of capitalism in early-modern England and of the English

¹ Beik 1985; Parker 1996. Beik’s work is extolled, for example, in reviews by Wood 1986 and Ranum 1986 while Parker’s book is highly praised by Rowlands 1999; Lewis 1998.
Revolution have attracted much favourable attention.² Beside their shared commitment to Marxism, all three scholars have in common a similarly sceptical view of ancien régime France. Beik, Brenner and Parker agree that early-modern France was unable to break the fetters of feudalism and absolutism. More significantly, they are unable to discover a capitalist bourgeoisie in France in the early-modern period. As a result, these Marxist scholars – unwittingly or not – have greatly reinforced the currently popular revisionist view that rejects the notion of the French Revolution as a bourgeois and capitalist revolution. The essay which follows does not reject the view of France as being under the thrall of feudalism during the ancien régime. But it does argue that these scholars have over-stated the dominance of feudal relations of production to the point of erasing the bourgeoisie and the dynamic of class struggle. To the contrary, it re-asserts the view that a capitalist bourgeoisie appeared in France in the sixteenth century, persevered in the seventeenth and took the offensive in the eighteenth century leading to the Revolution of 1789.³

The rejection of the classical-Marxist view of seventeenth-century France

Beik takes his point of departure from the well-established fact that seventeenth-century France was, at best, a slow-growth economy. In contrast to the sixteenth century, when agricultural profits were high, Beik notes that the seventeenth century was an age of high rents and oppressive taxation. Under such circumstances, nobles and officers benefited while entrepreneurial activity in town and country was crippled. Money moved out of productive activity toward financial dealings.⁴ According to Beik, in Languedoc ‘a hidden bourgeoisie of dealers in grain and wine, cloth merchants, silk entrepreneurs, and organizers of rural industries made its presence known from time to time, but these were still political small fry whose importance was limited unless they acquired offices in church or state’.⁵ An economically weak bourgeoisie enjoyed a twilight existence, but was largely invisible socially and politically. Under such circumstances, the bourgeoisie, weak as they were, were unable to

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³. Needless to say, the existence of such a capitalist bourgeoisie has to be grasped within the legal and political modalities of the ancien régime. The most sophisticated and historically informed discussion of the place of the bourgeoisie in the ancien régime from a Marxist perspective is in Robin 1970, pp. 18–52.
mount a significant opposition to the rule of privileged nobles and landlords. Meanwhile, co-operating more often than competing with the officials and agents of the absolutising monarchy, the landed ruling class enjoyed a virtual monopoly of power in Languedoc and the rest of France until the death of Louis XIV.

In the first instance, Beik’s view of seventeenth-century France represented a challenge to the viewpoint of Roland Mousnier who, in the early decades of the Cold War, argued for the autonomous existence of the Bourbon state. According to Mousnier, the absolute monarchy was dominated neither by the aristocracy nor the bourgeoisie. Rather, the centralising monarchy enjoyed an independent political position located above the competing social orders. Marxist that he is, Beik argued instead that ‘the story of seventeenth-century absolutism was . . . the story of a restructured feudal society’. The absolute monarchy was an outgrowth of and embodied the perspective of the ruling noble class. Rather than conflicting, as Mousnier would have it, the centralising monarchy and the still locally powerful nobility, more often than not, mutually reinforced one another.

But, in insisting on the class basis of the seventeenth-century monarchy, Beik took his distance from classical-Marxist interpretations of the period. He rejected the view espoused by Engels that the absolute monarchy held the balance between the nobility and the bourgeoisie. Engels had maintained that with the virtual disappearance of serfdom there began a period of petty-commodity production and primitive accumulation signalling the appearance of early capitalism. According to Beik, such a view makes sense with respect to England, but not for France, where the society of landlords and dependent peasants persisted for centuries.

It is from this perspective that Beik then criticised the viewpoint of two Soviet scholars, Boris Porshnev and A.D. Lublinskaya. Porshnev had become known to Western historians as a result of his discovery of the recurrent waves of peasant and urban revolts that marked the first part of the seventeenth century in France. In the course of recounting this history, Porshnev echoed the view of Engels: ‘“French society in the seventeenth century was already profoundly affected by the new distinction among men based upon the opposition between labour and capitalist property which was breaking down the old feudal and corporative barriers”.’ Porshnev regarded the emergent French bourgeoisie as behaving in a contradictory fashion in the seventeenth century. On the one

6. Mousnier 1979, 1984
hand, he saw the bourgeoisie acting as an independent and, at moments, revolutionary class. On the other hand, he recognised that the bourgeoisie at this stage of its development was ultimately captive to the feudal aristocratic system. It was subordinated to this system politically through venality of office, socially by acquiring titles of nobility, and economically through tax farming, involvement in state finance and dependence on mercantilist privileges.

In characteristically dialectical fashion, Porshnev saw this class as caught between these two positions, alternating between submission and revolt. Beik, however, refuses to accept this dialectical perspective. Instead, he insists on the total economic and political subordination of the bourgeoisie. While endorsing Porshnev's recognition of the relative weakness of the bourgeoisie, he rejects the Soviet historian's notion of its economic independence or occasional rebelliousness. He dismisses this view by rhetorically demanding 'where is the capitalistic side of his [Porshnev's] bourgeoisie?'. According to Beik, Porshnev provides little evidence of its economic independence and strength. As to its political force, Beik notes that Porshnev can point only to its revolutionary behaviour during the Fronde.\(^{10}\)

In a similar fashion, Beik gives short shrift to the views of Porshnev's colleague Lublinskaya. According to Beik, Lublinskaya downplayed Porshnev's notion of the revolutionary political or social stance of the bourgeoisie. Yet, if anything, she insisted even more strongly than Porshnev on its independent economic existence. According to Lublinskaya, the royal officials and financiers were feudalised, but there was also a trading and industrial bourgeoisie distinct from them. The latter economically active class needed absolutism to protect and develop its potential for capital accumulation. This indigenous class of merchants and traders was geographically subdivided, split by religion and imperfectly developed. But it was slowly rising without having reached the point where its interests would be incompatible with the feudal régime. Its influence was great enough to push the state towards developments which prepared the way for the rise of capitalism.\(^{11}\)

Beik's view of this is equally dismissive. According to him, the very existence of Lublinskaya's trading and industrial bourgeoisie is open to question. Beik complains that Lublinskaya uses only circumstantial evidence — economic treatises and a few isolated cases — to argue for the importance of a group which is exceedingly hard to find in the sources.\(^{12}\) Like Porshnev, Lublinskaya admits that the seventeenth-century bourgeoisie was subordinated to the

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\(^{10}\) Beik 1985, p. 25.

\(^{11}\) Beik 1995, p. 27.

\(^{12}\) Ibid.
nobility and absolutist state. But Beik will not admit even this much. For him, the bourgeoisie did not exist. On this point, Beik supports himself with the scholarship of another Anglo-Saxon historian, David Parker. In his work on La Rochelle, Parker underlined what he asserted to be the scant evidence for the existence of an independent bourgeoisie in La Rochelle and, indeed, in France.13 Parker reiterates this view in his recent study of seventeenth-century France, Class and State in Ancien Régime France.14 Parker’s new work, it should be said, represents an important and persuasive new synthesis of seventeenth-century French history. At the same time, his book powerfully reinforces Beik’s overall view.

According to Parker, aristocratic control of the state apparatus as well as continuing seigneurial domination over the land ensured noble domination over French society to the end of the ancien régime. As for the bourgeoisie and capitalism, they were crippled by the absence of absolute property rights, by a parasitic and stifling bureaucracy and tax system, as well as by overall aristocratic control. A rural or urban bourgeoisie can hardly be said to have existed. Especially brilliant is Parker’s demonstration of the ongoing ideological dominance of the nobility and its enduring control of the machinery of the state. As for capitalism, Parker compares France and England, asserting that the political and legal basis for capitalism did not exist in the former country.

As a result of his enquiry, Parker reaches conclusions of considerable import. According to him, ‘the conception of bourgeois revolution derived from the Communist Manifesto is significantly modified. This postulated a growth of capitalism inside the womb of feudalism and the birth of a bourgeois class which then seized power from its feudal masters’.15 Based on his study, Parker finds that, compared to seventeenth-century England, it is ‘difficult to identify a bourgeois class in late eighteenth century France’.16 Capitalism and the bourgeoisie were weak in the seventeenth century. The weakness of the bourgeoisie continued to the eve of the French Revolution. Parker’s inescapable conclusion is that the Revolution of 1789 could not have been based on the bourgeoisie. His view thus dovetails with what has come to be called the revisionist view of the French Revolution.

While Beik does not take things so far in this direction, the implications of the work of both historians are far-reaching. It has been a common premise of both liberal and Marxist historians that the history of the ancien régime was marked by the slow rise of a bourgeoisie based on capitalism. Beik and Parker

16. Ibid.
reject the notion of a long historical gestation of the French bourgeoisie within
the tissues of the French absolutist régime. Directly or indirectly, their view
amounts to a discounting of the idea of a nascent bourgeoisie and capitalism
within the *ancien régime*. Indeed, with Beik’s dismissal of any notion of simple
commodity production or primitive accumulation as applicable to France
prior to the seventeenth century, such a notion is explicitly rejected.

The dialectic of rent and profit

Regarding France from the perspective of English development, Brenner’s
views powerfully support those of Beik and Parker. England was the place
where a capitalist breakthrough first occurred. This was the outcome of the
class struggle between lords and peasants which took place in that country at
the end of the Middle Ages. According to Brenner, these conflicts saw the
English landlord class gain control of the greater part of the arable land at the
expense of the subsistence peasantry. Such landlord control made it possible
for them to re-organise agriculture on the basis of large farms rented out
on short-term and competitive leases to enterprising farmers. The latter
increasingly were able or were compelled to exploit displaced peasants as wage-
labour and, by systematic improvement, initiate a process of capital
accumulation which transformed the English economy.

According to Brenner, this breakthrough toward capitalism occurred
uniquely through a change in the social relations of production in the sixteenth-
century English countryside. This emphasis on the rural roots of capitalism is
Brenner’s key insight in the debate on the origins of capitalism. But, in the
course of arguing this point, he has turned France into the foil or negative
element to make the case. According to Brenner, France experienced the same
upsurge of class struggle as England in the late Middle Ages with a quite
different outcome. In the former case, the peasants were able to keep control
of roughly forty-five or fifty per cent of the land as against only twenty, twenty-
five or thirty per cent in England. As a result of the greater share of property
retained by the peasantry, no restructuring of agriculture along English lines
was possible in France. Whatever tendency there was towards capitalism in
sixteenth-century France was aborted. From Brenner’s perspective, the problem
of an absent bourgeoisie in France is not merely a reflection of the dearth

17. The concordance between Brenner’s and Beik’s views is pointed out in Miller 2008,
pp. 8–10.
of manufacturers and traders. It is also, and above all, about the lack of a rural capitalist bourgeoisie. It is the differing allocation of property and the contrasting relations of production which determined the divergent evolution of the two countries in the early-modern period. In the eyes of Brenner, France is seen as the counter-example to England’s success in terms of the early development of capitalism. England is the normative example of capitalist origins. France is the Other.

But, then, as in the case of Beik and Parker, the question arises, what of the French Revolution? The traditional Marxist view of that revolution was that, like the English Revolution, the French Revolution was a bourgeois and capitalist revolution. The Brenner thesis could suggest that, given the non-capitalist evolution of France under the ancien régime, such a notion of a bourgeois and capitalist revolution was, on the face of it, dubious. In a curious way, it should be pointed out that Brenner’s view (based on Marxism) like those of Beik and Parker dove-tailed with the developing scholarly and political trend against the Marxist view of the French Revolution known as French revolutionary revisionism.\(^{20}\) This historiographical current which became ascendant by the 1980s attacked the idea that the Revolution in France could be understood as a bourgeois and capitalist revolution. Among those who denied the capitalist basis of the Revolution was George Comninel, also a self-professed Marxist.\(^{21}\) According to him, the bourgeoisie in France prior to the Revolution was not capitalist because it based itself on rent rather than on profit. Moreover, wage-workers were dependent not on their wages but on their own sources of subsistence.\(^{22}\) This view coincided with Brenner’s notion of the ongoing hold of the French peasantry on the land. Indeed, it is probable that, in assuming this viewpoint, Comninel was substantially influenced by Brenner.\(^{23}\) In the case of the account of capitalist origins by Comninel’s teacher Ellen Meiksins Wood, the influence of Brenner is explicit. As Brenner has established, according to Wood, the origins of capitalism are to be found exclusively in the social relations of production of the English countryside. Under French absolutism, feudal rent dominated to the point that there was no capitalist bourgeoisie. The French Revolution was a bourgeois but not a capitalist revolution.\(^{24}\)

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22. Comninel 1987, pp. 190–1, 200. Comninel does not explain why workers would work for wages if they could assure their own subsistence.
The conception of France as a society ruled by a nobility which exercised its power over the peasantry through the absolutist state thus has gained, if not unanimous acceptance, then serious consideration among leading English-speaking Marxist scholars as well as others. Far be it for me to criticise this conception with which I basically agree. As to the bourgeoisie, although they exaggerate its impotence, Beik and Parker are correct to insist on the ongoing absorption of the upper reaches of the bourgeoisie into the political apparatus of the state. At the same time, some profits from industry and commerce were transformed through commercial privileges, venality of office, tax-gathering, the purchase of *rentes* and ennoblement. Indeed, the liquefaction of peasant surpluses on which the régime depended was based on these quasi-commercial processes.

In the light of this perspective, Beik and Parker refuse to accept Porshnev’s ideas of class struggle. The latter portrayed the bourgeoisie as suspended between a position of subordination and one of opposition to the bourgeoisie. On the contrary, Beik and Parker are at pains to deny the strength and contentiousness of the bourgeoisie. In so doing, they succeed in demonstrating its weakness and largely refuting Porshnev’s conception. But, in rebutting Porshnev, they have gone too far: Beik and Parker have rejected the notion of opposition or conflict between the bourgeois and noble classes. It is this denial of the conception of class conflict between nobility and bourgeoisie in the seventeenth century that this paper questions. It contends that their dismissal of such class conflict deprives seventeenth-century France of a sense of dynamic development. Moreover, it cuts this century off from any real connection with developments which occurred latter and, in particular, the Revolution of 1789. Finally, in so far as it would deny the continued existence of a bourgeoisie in seventeenth-century France, their view is not in accord with the historical evidence. The views of Brenner, Wood and Comninel are likewise not sustained by current research in French history.

*Class war from above*

The starting point of Beik’s analysis of class relations is his view of the French agrarian economy. In this respect, his discussion is mainly dependent on the work of Le Roy Ladurie. Yet, it would seem that he has misconstrued the latter’s overall view. In accord with Le Roy Ladurie, he notes that the sixteenth century had been a great age of agricultural profits. It was an age, to re-iterate Beik that ‘favoured the initiative of enterprising middle-to-large-scale farmers’. In contrast, he underlines that the seventeenth century was an age of increasingly high rents and oppressive taxation. Citing Le Roy Ladurie, Beik
argues that demographic pressure and land hunger played a part in the increase in rents.25 But such increases in rents, we would emphasise, cannot simply be accounted for by the play of the market. As Le Roy Ladurie also points out, in Languedoc as in much of the rest of France, increases in rent were connected to increases in state taxation as proprietors linked rent increases on tenants to tax increases.26 Indeed, the decline of profits and rise of rent must not be understood as merely the inexorable struggle of reified economic concepts. Rather, as Le Roy Ladurie suggests, the respective level of rent and profit should be seen as economic metaphors expressing the outcome of a struggle to impose a new political and social order.

If we follow Beik, rent constituted the only form of rural surplus extraction from the beginning to the end of the seventeenth century. Rural capitalism, from his perspective, is nowhere to be seen. If this were so, we would be dealing with a society of seigneurial power and subsistence farming little different from the twelfth century. In fact, the age of merely feudal rent had long since passed. In accord with Le Roy Ladurie, Beik is certainly correct to conclude that rents were step-by-step driven higher. What he fails to appreciate is the implications of Le Roy Ladurie’s correlation of rents in relation to profits (and wages) through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Le Roy Ladurie’s comparison is rightly premised on the ongoing existence of a class of profit-minded rural capitalists. The rural middle class, he explains to us, ‘play an important role in the seventeenth century under Louis XIII and Mazarin’.27 No doubt, the great majority of French peasants were subsistence farmers or even farm labourers, but, while small in numbers, the capitalist element noted by Le Roy Ladurie and which had originated in the sixteenth century owned or, more typically, rented a disproportionately large part of the arable land which it exploited with the help of its own operating capital and wage-labour.28 Capitalist rent collected from profit-minded peasants thus constituted a substantial, if indeterminately large, element of the rural surplus throughout the period.

Beik’s misreading of Le Roy Ladurie’s dialectical appreciation of the ongoing relationship between rent and profit leads to a fundamental distortion in his appreciation of the seventeenth century. In Beik’s view, the triumph of rent can be dated to the beginning of the seventeenth century. Profit apparently disappeared, and the social and political effacement of the bourgeoisie

followed. Le Roy Ladurie’s account is more evolutionary and dialectical. Where Beik sees a sudden and definitive victory for rent, Le Roy Ladurie offers the perspective of a long drawn-out struggle. According to the latter, the sixteenth century had seen an offensive of profit against rent that went on through most of the century.29 The tendency began to reverse itself in 1580 or 1600. In the Île-de-France, Jean Jacquart dates the reversal to as late as 1620.30 But, at this point, this new direction is only a reversal of a tendency, a counter-offensive or reaction, not yet a triumph. In other words, half or two-thirds of the next century is marked by a long and continuing offensive of rent against profit. The advance of rent was as prolonged an affair as was the preceding offensive of profit. It is only in the reign of Louis XIV that rent and taxes may be said to have overwhelmed profits as a result of this long drawn-out and sustained offensive.31

Beik appears to see class conflict only as overt rebellion from below. With the leading elements of the bourgeoisie having been co-opted into the ruling class, the popular revolts of the period were not class-based uprisings.32 Parker, somewhat paradoxically, insists that such rebellions did have a class basis, albeit based on the hopeless revolts of the craftsmen and peasants.33 He takes this position while arguing as strongly as Beik that there was no bourgeoisie. Yet, if there was little or no class-based challenge from below, the offensive of rent against profit makes it evident that there was a strong and ongoing class offensive from above. It took the form above all of the relentless pressure on profits of increasing rents and taxes.

Beik and Parker take the triumph of rent as an established state of affairs that determined all other facets of the seventeenth century. In truth, the seventeenth century was characterised not by a given condition – the static weight of rent – but, rather, by a process in which rents advanced and profits were progressively eroded. The subtlety of Le Roy Ladurie’s conception of this relationship is expressed in the following passage:

32. Beik puts his viewpoint rather cryptically. Citing Porshnev’s view of the popular revolts, he notes that: ‘I am not convinced that they constituted the primary class struggle in seventeenth-century France’ (Beik, 1985, p. 190). Beik does not say what the primary class struggle was. A class struggle involves a conflict between at least two classes. Having dismissed the economic and political significance of a bourgeoisie, Beik obviously does not believe that they were part of either the primary class struggle or popular revolts. At the same time, it is not clear from his subsequent work on popular revolts in the seventeenth century (Beik 1997) whether or not he regards the peasants and artisans who did participate in popular revolts as members of a class.
The expansion of the sixteenth century was favourable to the profit of enterprise: that of the following [century] prolongs it [profit], but bears rent with it and the surplus value it radiates goes toward the enrichment of the landlord.  

A class of rural capitalists remained in existence, albeit increasingly burdened by the imposition of higher rents. In other words, the class struggle continued, with the initiative coming from above rather than below. Moreover, such an assault did not assume the shape of a violent social confrontation. On the contrary, it took the form of increases in rent to be sure, but also state construction, the increasingly more complex hierarchies of society, a growing sophistication of upper-class manners, and corresponding social and religious disciplining of the lower classes. Despite this offensive, the rural bourgeoisie may be said to have been bowed, but by no means broken, and they emerged from this onslaught with renewed strength in the eighteenth century. It is Le Roy Ladurie himself who takes note of this durability toward the conclusion of his great work: ‘On the whole it is indeed the fermier class, the group of substantial labourers which collapses (in Languedoc) from 1680 (but not forever to be sure)’. 

Whither the French bourgeoisie?

Beik and Parker systematically minimise the existence of the bourgeoisie, questioning its very existence. Engels had postulated a period of petty-commodity production and primitive accumulation as initiating the origins of capitalism. Beik rejects this, maintaining that it makes sense for England but not France. Although there was a decline of servdom, no period of petty-commodity production, let alone primitive accumulation, occurred. In Beik’s view then, there is no evidence of proto-capitalist or capitalist activity in France. Beik makes this claim despite his quite contradictory acknowledgement of Le Roy Ladurie’s view that the sixteenth century was a period in which the initiative in the countryside lay with middle to large-scale profit-seeking farmers.

One wonders what the basis is for his denial of an initial period of petty-commodity production and primitive accumulation. Even Brenner is struck by the parallel between French and English development at this stage. The economic recovery in France from the late-medieval crisis, which began around 1450 and continued in more or less uninterrupted fashion to about

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1520, closely approximates to the Marxist conception of a period dominated by simple-commodity production. In this phase, which was common to Languedoc as well as the rest of France, there was a proliferation of markets and market exchange. Merchants were active, but they did not yet fully dominate the marketplace. Taxes and rents were still relatively low. As a result, small-scale rural and urban producers were an important factor in exchange and enjoyed unprecedented prosperity. The following period from 1520–60 saw the definitive triumph of merchant capitalism focused on Lyons. The financial power and control associated with the import of silk cloth and spices gave the Italian-Lyonnais merchant-bankers a remarkable degree of influence over regional and local markets throughout France. Meanwhile, in the countryside, the possibility of substantial profits prompted the development of agrarian capitalism. From Normandy and the Île-de-France in the north to Languedoc in the south, the tendency was for the peasantry to become increasingly differentiated between a mass of producers dependent on wages and a kind of rural bourgeoisie. Pace Beik, primitive accumulation was an integral and necessary aspect of this process. Certainly, this emergent agrarian capitalism was immature and incomplete. The continued strength of the middle peasantry, the persistence of seigneurial forms of domination and communal rights, the consolidation of the bureaucratic state and a kind of mental inertia or habitus in favour of agricultural routine inhibited this emergent rural capitalism.

Despite fetters on its development, capitalism grew in strength in the countryside during the religious wars. The process of peasant expropriation which had begun in the first part of sixteenth century accelerated. Pillaging, heavy taxation and indebtedness led to a dramatic acceleration of the concentration of land into the hands of wealthy peasants and the urban rich. The partial or complete loss of land experienced by producers, which continued into the seventeenth century, entailed a growing dependence on wage-labour. Summing up this transfer of land from the mass of the peasantry to the rural and urban bourgeoisie on a national level, Jacquart notes that:

the great wave of appropriation of the soil by the bourgeoisie took place between 1530 and 1600. Afterwards there ensued a continuation and consolidation of a hold which has never since been brought into question despite political, economic and social revolutions.
It was the bourgeoisie who most benefitted from the expropriation of part of the peasants’ land, the appropriation of their property and its inclusion in the circuits of commercial exchange. At the end of this process, the peasantry was left with, on average, fifty per cent of the soil and, in some places, with as little as one third.\footnote{Neveux, Jacquart and Le Roy Ladurie 1975, p. 275.} According to Jacquart, ‘one can affirm that from the seventeenth century three-quarters of the French peasantry were not able to exploit enough land to reach let alone to approach what we today call the vital minimum’.\footnote{Jacquart 1990, p. 34.} Cooper concludes that ‘in open field France there was a trend to larger farms and the pauperization and proletarianization of small peasants as marked as anything claimed for England’.\footnote{Cooper 1985, p. 171.} The increased dependence of this expropriated peasantry on wages ensured the availability of abundant supplies of cheap labour for agricultural work. In the wake of these developments, the closing decades of the sixteenth century saw the flowering of an unprecedented interest in agriculture improvement in the form of the introduction of new crops, agricultural implements, irrigation and other methods to increase output. Of 600 works on agricultural improvement published in sixteenth-century Europe, France published 245 as compared to 41 for the Low Countries and a mere 20 for England.\footnote{Heller 1996, pp. 65–84.}

It should be noted that Brenner, along with Beik and Parker, has failed to notice this process of primitive accumulation, social differentiation and growing bourgeois strength in the French countryside in the latter half of the sixteenth century. Brenner placed the emphasis on the class struggle and the distribution of landholding as between landlords and peasants in the late Middle Ages. He was certainly correct to stress the importance of class struggle in France and England at that time. But he overestimated the durability of the victory of the French peasantry at the end of the Middle Ages. By the latter half of the sixteenth century, most of this class in northern France was clearly placed on the defensive by both the nobility and the emerging bourgeoisie. In this context, what proved structurally determinant was the redistribution of property among the commoners themselves, at the expense of the lesser peasants and to the benefit of the bourgeoisie, both urban and rural. Brenner rejects the importance of the process of peasant social differentiation to capitalist origins in the case of English agriculture. Single-mindedly insisting on the importance of class struggle, he rejects the idea that social differentiation
among peasants might have been important to the establishment of capitalist social relations.\footnote{Brenner’s view is criticised in Byres 2006, pp. 17–68.}

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, we can conclude, an agrarian capitalism had partially implanted itself on French soil. This was especially the case in the vast grain lands of the Île-de-France and the northern provinces – capitalism in the Midi was in the process of aborting for the time being.\footnote{Le Roy Ladurie 1966, I, p. 326–8.} Parker discounts the implications for capitalist development of the massive transfer of property that occurred during this period. Given the co-existent progressive and regressive economic tendencies in rural society, the responsibility of the historian is to strike a balance between retarding factors and those elements fostering capitalism. Yet, Parker’s approach is to underline all those factors which inhibited the development of capitalism in agriculture, while minimising those aspects which favoured its growth.\footnote{Parker 1996, pp.58–74.} He insists on the decisive importance of ongoing feudal constraints on the transfer of property and of the absence of an explicit recognition of absolute property rights.\footnote{Parker 1996, pp. 232–3.} Parker would have it that property rights in the sense of an absolute right to property did not exist in the ancien régime. It is the absence of full rights to property, according to Parker, which in part explains the weakness of capitalism in France in comparison to England.\footnote{Parker 1996, pp. 56, 153, 232–3.} Still, it should be pointed out that, in England, no such absolute property rights existed until the Glorious Revolution,\footnote{Norht and Weingast 1989, p. 814; Larkin 1930, p. 52.} yet capitalism had clearly begun to develop there two hundred years earlier. In fact, in sixteenth-century France, feudal rights over the management, sale and acquisition of property were increasingly attenuated. In a practical sense, peasants were more-or-less able to dispose of property as they pleased. The growing influence of Roman law only accentuated these tendencies.\footnote{Ourliac and Gazzaniga 1985, pp. 226–8.}

Parker’s comparison of England and France would make sense if confined to the period 1500–1640, but to insist on the comparison after 1640 is to compare two societies which were essentially incomparable. As a result of the Puritan Revolution and Interregnum, England largely disencumbered itself of an absolutising monarchy and seigneurial nobility. Capitalism could develop relatively unhindered. On the contrary, these elements were reconsolidating themselves in seventeenth-century France and capitalism could only develop in the interstices of the ancien régime. A more

\footnotesize{\begin{itemize}
  \item 45. Brenner’s view is criticised in Byres 2006, pp. 17–68.
  \item 47. Parker 1996, pp.58–74.
  \item 50. Norht and Weingast 1989, p. 814; Larkin 1930, p. 52.
\end{itemize}}
apt comparison would perhaps be between France and Tokugawa Japan, where, in both cases, an incipient capitalism developed dialectically within the pores of a strongly seigneurial régime.\textsuperscript{52}

**Primitive accumulation in sixteenth-century France**

The development of rural capitalism in sixteenth-century France helped to support the activity of a growing commercial and manufacturing class. Merchants and merchant manufacturers headquartered in such cities as Paris, Lyons, Rouen, Amiens, Tours, Nantes, La Rochelle and Bordeaux prospered in the first part of the sixteenth century.\textsuperscript{53} Under their direct or indirect influence, the manufacture of wool, silk, linen and canvas cloth, books, iron and steel and mining ores all forged ahead.\textsuperscript{54} To be sure, the religious wars brought serious demographic decline and economic devastation. The eclipse of the financial and commercial centre of the Kingdom, Lyons, dates from the 1570s. The other great pole of the economy – Paris – suffered during the latter stages of the conflict. At the same time, trade and manufacture prospered in coastal towns like Marseilles, La Rochelle, Saint-Malo and, more unevenly, in Rouen and Amiens.\textsuperscript{55} Industries such as wool, linen and canvas, and iron and steel manufacture appear to have more than held their own. At the same time, new manufactures like glass and crystal, faience, cotton, ribbon, satin and lace appeared.\textsuperscript{56} With the accession of Henri IV, a general demographic and economic recovery began which persisted into the late 1620s.\textsuperscript{57} Major infrastructural programmes, protective tariffs and state financial aid to manufacturers under Henri IV assisted the recovery of commerce and manufacture. Toward the close of the reign of Henri IV, French exports to the Ottoman Empire, especially silk cloth, eclipsed those of the Italians, Dutch or English.\textsuperscript{58} The great cloth manufacturing centre of Amiens saw production reach levels which surpassed those of the preceding century.\textsuperscript{59}

It was in the period of the religious wars that primitive accumulation and the offensive of profit reached their climax. Despite extensive rural devastation, these processes strengthened the middle class. It is precisely in this period, for

\textsuperscript{54} Heller 1996, pp. 8–19.
\textsuperscript{55} Heller 1996, pp. 122–3.
\textsuperscript{56} Heller 2000, pp. 248–51.
\textsuperscript{59} Deyon, 1963, p. 947.
example, that the class of rural capitalists numbering no more than a few hundred families consolidated its control over the Île-de-France.\textsuperscript{60} Many urban bourgeois meanwhile made killings through the buying and, in some cases, resale of rural properties.\textsuperscript{61} In 1602, a petition was drawn up asking the government of Henri IV to re-admit foreign merchants to the Kingdom in order to help rejuvenate the economy following the religious wars. These proposals were rejected by Barthélemy de Laffemas’s Commission du Commerce. The Commission noted that the wars had only devastated the villages and countryside. The towns not only were not depopulated, but were full of money that had accumulated during the wars. The foreigners were only interested in the towns and were hence of little use to France.\textsuperscript{62} We have in this passing comment an important confirmation of the vitality of the middle class at the conclusion of the religious wars and beginning of the seventeenth century. Indeed, the growing strength of the middle class helps to explain its pugnacity. In Languedoc and Dauphiné in the 1570s, the growing assertiveness of the bourgeoisie menaced the nobility and its allies and provoked a seigneurial reaction.\textsuperscript{63} The period of the rural leagues and the 1590s saw a broadening scale of similar revolts. Indeed, the strength and organisation of rural leagues, notably in Dauphiné, Normandy, Brittany and Guyenne, appear to have been based on the growing weight of a rural middle class made up of richer peasants and small-town bourgeoisie.\textsuperscript{64}

The recent work on the rural league by Jean-Marie Constant makes clear the predominantly urban and bourgeois base of this major political and religious movement.\textsuperscript{65} Only a minority of the nobility participated in it and its noble leaders had trouble keeping it under their control. Even more to the point, Constant makes clear that, as important as religion was to the movement and, as anarchic as it later became, it initially did have a coherent political programme. This was embodied especially in the demands of the third estate at the Estates-General of Blois of 1588. These grievances included vehement attacks on the privileged Italian merchants and financiers who were seen as dominating and stifling the initiatives of the indigenous middle class. Beyond these complaints, the third estate went so far as to demand constitutional

\textsuperscript{60} Moriceau 1993, pp. 353–86; Moriceau 1994, pp. 145–341.
\textsuperscript{61} Neveux, Jacquart and Le Roy Ladurie 1975, pp. 273–5.
\textsuperscript{62} Fagniez 1908, p. 10.
\textsuperscript{64} Heller 1991, pp. 111–15, 120–36.
\textsuperscript{65} Constant 1996, pp. 259–312.
limitations on the monarchy. Its politically radical demands made the estates of the nobility and clergy ill at ease.\textsuperscript{66}

The ongoing sale of offices, the elaboration of a mercantilist programme and the exclusion of the Italians from the ranks of the increasingly powerful French financiers appears to have temporarily calmed the aggressiveness of the bourgeoisie under Henri IV. Even so, the end of Henri IV’s reign brought a renewed surge of bourgeois radicalism. The aspirations of the bourgeoisie were embodied in Louis Turquet de Mayerne’s \textit{La monarchie aristodémocrate}.\textsuperscript{67} In this work, Mayerne called for the abolition of the traditional aristocracy as a ruling class and the institution of a constitutional monarchy based on an élite whose power was rooted both in trade and ownership of land.\textsuperscript{68}

The Estates-General of 1614, furthermore, was marked by bitter conflict between the third and second estates.

That same year saw the overthrow of the urban oligarchy of La Rochelle and establishment of a new more democratic commune. In line with his view of the effacement of the bourgeoisie, Parker’s description of this revolt rules out any involvement by substantial elements of the bourgeoisie. For him, this rebellion was an affair of shopkeepers and artisans. There was no participation by substantial merchants.\textsuperscript{69} The authoritative recent history of La Rochelle by Kevin Robbins places Parker’s assessment into question. According to Robbins, ‘Parker mentions the 1614 events only in passing and offers no detailed analysis of the social origins and course of the revolt’.\textsuperscript{70} Robbins, like Parker, concludes that the petty bourgeoisie constituted the mass base of the movement. But the leadership included elements who were engaged in wholesale and overseas trade, some of whom were as rich as or richer than the members of the ruling oligarchy.\textsuperscript{71}

\textbf{The endurance of the bourgeoisie}

This revolt in Huguenot La Rochelle, led in good part by merchants, raises the important matter of the role of Protestants in seventeenth-century France, a matter sorely neglected by Beik and Parker. It was the American economic historian Warren C. Scoville who treated the matter extensively in his work on the economic expulsion of the Huguenots from France published some forty

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{66} Constant 1996, pp. 188–9.
\item \textsuperscript{67} Mayerne 1611.
\item \textsuperscript{68} Mousnier 1955, pp. 1–20.
\item \textsuperscript{69} Parker 1980, pp. 44–5.
\item \textsuperscript{70} Robbins 1997, p. 242.
\item \textsuperscript{71} Robbins 1997, pp. 253–6, 260.
\end{itemize}
years ago. Scoville reached the conclusion that the migration of Huguenots following the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes did not seriously damage the French economy. In so far as the economy suffered, it was mainly because of war and adverse economic trends. Moreover, although some two-hundred thousand Huguenots immigrated, some 600,000 others remained in France. Interesting as Scoville’s conclusions are, it is his study of the place of the Huguenots in the French economy which is of special concern to us. His work includes a remarkable survey of the manufacturing and commercial sector of the seventeenth-century French economy. Among other things, Scoville discovers a substantial manufacturing sector which included several hundred factories involving concentrated manufacture. In many towns and cities, it was a Protestant middle class which dominated this activity. There were, of course, Huguenot artisans, office-holders, nobles and even peasants, especially in the Midi. But what is notable about the Huguenots of the seventeenth century was their over-representation in commerce and manufacturing. These entrepreneurs did not confine their activities to the restricted market of the Midi or the Kingdom of France. In Languedoc and Dauphiné before 1685, such businessmen exported salt, grain, pastel and cloth to Geneva and beyond. Through the port of Marseilles, French and Genevan merchants created an important international network for distributing trans-Atlantic products. Indeed, many of those who exiled themselves, particularly to Geneva after 1685, continued to have close business and religious connections with their commercially-orientated brethren in Lyons and throughout Languedoc and Dauphiné. These relationships with the Huguenot diaspora helped to maintain and expand the connection between the French and the European centres of commerce and increasingly of banking. Indeed, the Huguenots who remained in the Kingdom were to play an important role in the expansion of the French economy under Colbert and in the eighteenth century. Geneva constituted a kind of free-trade zone which animated and, ultimately, transformed the French economy of the late-seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

73. Scoville 1960, pp. 434–47.
75. Scoville 1960, pp. 133–42.
78. These connections in the latter half of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are traced in Chaussinand Nogaret 1970, pp. 32–3, 35; Lüthy 1959, I, p. 44; Piuz and Mottu-Weber 1990, pp. 527, 542, 595.
The Huguenots were by no means the only merchants and manufacturers in seventeenth-century France. But, contrary to Beik and Parker, their existence alongside their Catholic counterparts as an urban middle class can hardly be doubted. In any event, Beik and Parker know, or wish to know, little or nothing of the whole earlier phase of advancing bourgeois power at the beginning of the seventeenth century. It is this neglect which helps them to sustain the audacious claim that this class barely existed and more or less disappeared in the following century. It is true enough that, despite a last upsurge of bourgeois radicalism at the conclusion of the reign of Henri IV’s reign, the offensive of agrarian profit (if not profit itself) appears to have come to an end. A new trend in favour of rent appeared. As we have tried to make clear, this reversal did not occur overnight, was only at its inception during this reign and was part of a long drawn-out process completed only in the reign of Louis XIV. The offensive of rent was an ongoing movement at least as prolonged as the previous offensive of profit.

Nonetheless, it is true that a reversal of trend did set in during Henri IV’s reign signalled by the propensity of profits to decline and rents to rise on the land. As we have suggested, this trend, which deepened in the following reign, was not merely a response to the play of the market and has itself to be explained. Non-economic factors were at least as important as the interaction of supply and demand. A new social and political context emerged which encouraged rent and began to undermine profit. Above all, the alliance between crown and nobility, which had broken down during the religious wars, gradually grew more solid. To be sure, the loyalty of the nobility toward the crown was not unquestioned, especially in the early years of the reign of Louis XIII. But, by means of a combination of coercion, bribery and indulgence, such fidelity was re-established in the period of Richelieu’s ascendancy.79

The context in favour of rent was reinforced by the continuing expansion of venality of office and expansion of the size of the state apparatus. Venality had already reached impressive levels in the reign of Henri III and continued to expand in the reign of his Bourbon successors. The creation and purchase of tens of thousands of offices during this period shifted significant amounts of capital from productive to non-productive economic activity.80 This movement was strengthened by the perfection of the system of financiers which redirected still more capital into the channels of state credit. The complementary expansion of the army to 50,000 men capped the spectacular expansion in the

80. Le Roy Ladurie estimates the number of officers in 1610 at 25,000 and at 46,000 under Colbert (1994, p. 274).
power of the state. The spiritual recovery of the Catholic Church and the containment of the Protestant threat reinforced the social and political order. All of these elements provided a context which made it possible for the state to successfully impose a progressively higher level of taxation. The accretion of state power, in turn, reinforced landlords facilitating the imposition by them of higher rents. At the same time, the expansion of the number of offices and diversion of capital toward the state entailed a massive co-optation of the upper reaches of the bourgeoisie. Growth of state power, reinforcement of the rule of landlords, co-optation of the upper levels of the bourgeoisie constituted a form of political and social reaction or class war from above. It is this which is the principal characteristic of seventeenth-century French history. Naturally, it provoked a response from below in the form of waves of urban and rural popular protests. But these, in comparison with the popular revolts of the sixteenth century, clearly have a defensive character. Contrasting the fiscal revolts of the seventeenth century with the revolts in Guyenne in the 1590s, Le Roy Ladurie makes an interesting observation. He notes the comprehensiveness of the ideological challenge to the existing order in the case of the rebels of Guyenne, including attacks on the divisiveness of the League as well as on the tithe, rent, royal taxes, usury, excessive commercial profits and low wages. He contrasts the ideological ambition of this programme with the narrowed horizons of the popular insurgents of the seventeenth century. The latter reduced their agenda to one of fiscal protest. Clearly, it is a case of diminished expectations based on a sense of reduced strength. The forces of order were more powerful, while the capacities of the insurgents were weaker.

Porshnev tried to show that such upheavals entailed a somewhat schizophrenic attitude on the part of the bourgeoisie, alternating between fidelity to authority and rebellion. Beik and Parker were at pains to deny the latter. In this argument, the two Anglo-Saxon historians were more right than wrong. As a class, the bourgeoisie was clearly in retreat – its most advanced elements were co-opted to the side of the state. But Beik and Parker have overstated their case. Among the mass of subsistence peasants, artisans and labourers who rebelled as a result of higher taxes, there surely were some substantial peasants or merchants who rebelled as a result of a squeeze on profits. Contrary to the view of Parker, this was almost certainly the case with respect to the Ormée of Bordeaux. In any case, too much has been

made of whether or not the bourgeoisie were involved in the seventeenth-century popular revolts. The issue of the existence of class conflict does not stand or fall on this question. The main trend in this respect was one of class warfare from above, of which profit-seeking entrepreneurs among others were the victims, whether they participated in revolts or not.

In the reign of Louis XIV, the fortunes of the enterprising labourers and fermiers reached their low point. High taxes and rents crushed their profits, forcing many into bankruptcy. But some did survive. Among these were the so-called fermiers of the Île-de-France studied by Jean-Marc Moriceau. His path-breaking work follows this class from the time it consolidated itself in the Île-de-France in the late sixteenth century until it assumed power in the course of the French Revolution. In the course of this long trajectory, the latter part of the reign of Louis XIV was clearly the nadir. Some members of this group were weeded out. But its overall survival is what impresses. Family solidarity and the strict rationalisation of operations made it possible for many of them to maintain their profits, while preparing the way for the great prosperity and expansion of their power in the next century. Among notable improvements introduced by such farmers were a successful consolidation of land holdings, a greater degree of specialisation, more intensive manuring and greater traction through improved harnessing of animal draught power. It should be pointed out that these processes of rationalisation and improvement were carried out in response to the relentless compulsion of increasing rents and taxes in a way which is entirely comparable to that experienced by English farmers described by Brenner. Turgot, for example, noted that it was the practice to determine the price of leases of large farms in the region of northern France by competition between capitalist farmers. Recently published works by Guy Lemarchand and Anatoli Ado likewise make clear that the agricultural capitalism of the eighteenth century was rooted in a stratum of rural capitalists which had persevered in the course of the seventeenth century.

In the course of discussing sixteenth-century capitalism, we have noted that flanking the class of rural capitalists a substantial merchant and manufacturing class emerged. Despite adversity, it survived the religious wars and re-emerged with renewed vigour in the reign of Henri IV. Its prosperity seemed to have

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86. Moriceau, 1994, pp. 631–42; Postel-Vinay 1974, pp. 26, 27, 29 stresses the concentration of land-holding in bourgeois hands and the proletarianisation of the marginal peasants in Soissonais in this period.
survived longer than that of rural capitalists being prolonged into the late 1620s. Beik and Parker, as we have seen, have little to say about the fate of this sixteenth- and early-seventeenth-century inheritance. Falling back on the work of Parker on La Rochelle, Beik notes that the latter has been unable to locate a significant commercial and industrial bourgeoisie there or anywhere else in France. In Parker’s work the subsumption of manufacturing by commerce, the parochialism, disunity and feudalisation of the bourgeoisie and finally its integration into the state is stressed. As we have seen, in Languedoc, Beik admits to only a hidden bourgeoisie of small-scale merchants and manufacturers of little economic and political account. This enables him to discount Lublinskaya’s notion of a trading and manufacturing class independent of the financial élite. Indeed, Parker’s discussion of the same group in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is cursory and dismissive. We would have to conclude from them that the commercial and manufacturing base that supported it created by the sixteenth century either never existed or was more or less annihilated in the following century. In the latter case, little or nothing was carried over in the way of trade and manufacturing. Under such circumstances, the continued existence of an independent merchant class seems out of the question.

A quite different view of the fate of the French merchant class is adopted by Jacques Bottin. Bottin admits the tendency of merchants to assimilate to finance and to move toward office and a higher status. Yet Bottin insists on the continued existence of an independent stratum of merchants in the major towns of the Kingdom. According to Bottin, treatment of this group has suffered from a readiness to view them from the perspective of the regime’s mercantilist policy or from the point of view of royal finances. Likewise, they have tended to be seen as a social group in the perpetual process of transition toward banking, office and ennoblement. Yet a lexical analysis of the word ‘merchant’ as used in the first part of the century supports the view of them as a distinctive social element. Thus, retail merchants or merchants engaged in specialised commerce were referred to with more precise designations: wine merchant, wood merchant, merchant draper, épicier. The term ‘merchant’ used without qualification was reserved for merchants engaged in wholesale non-specialised commerce, usually of an international dimension. Frequently, such large-scale trading was combined with an interest in banking. Such

92. Brunelle notes that ‘in reality only a minority of merchants, even in so important and prosperous a city as Rouen, migrated from commerce to the ranks of the officiers’ (1991, p. 163).
entrepreneurs might involve themselves in loans to the king. But their interest in finance cannot be seen as limited to non-economic kinds of investment. In reality, their involvement in banking was intrinsic to their needs as merchants to transfer funds and settle accounts as well as to facilitate the negotiation of commercial bills of exchange.

As to the overall level of commercial activity, Jean-Pierre Poussou concludes his survey of seventeenth-century French trade by stressing the continuities between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He notes:

the gap between the eighteenth and seventeenth centuries was less great than has been often asserted, that the latter prepared the way for the former especially in France thanks to the conclusion of a great reign which was much more dynamic and prosperous than is often thought.93

Approaching these matters from the point of a comparative and in-depth analysis of Protestant and Catholic populations in Montpellier in the seventeenth century, Philip Benedict notes a surprising increase in wealth in the urban population overall across the century, among whom merchants certainly had their part. His study and others, he concludes, offers further evidence that the larger cities of seventeenth-century France may have been more dynamic centres of economic growth and transformation than was previously thought.94

Toward the conclusion of his work, Beik concedes the existence of a considerable textile industry in Languedoc and its success down to 1650. But, faced with this reality, Beik underlines the commercial and manufacturing depression of the next forty years in Languedoc, conceding that recovery occurred after 1690. He concludes by emphasising 'how little impact this mercantile activity had on the power brokers of Languedoc'.95 But this conclusion, however true, has no bearing on the question of the continued existence of a merchant class based on trade and manufacturing, the point insisted on by Lublinskaya. Indeed, it would seem that this merchant class had not only survived through the seventeenth century, but was actually growing stronger as the century drew to a close. The internal market being restricted, external markets offered more attractive possibilities. It was in foreign commerce and export-oriented manufacture rather than in internal trade or agriculture that substantial profits remained to be had.

Beik and Parker depreciate the importance of the survival and ongoing development of capitalism within the interstices of the seventeenth-century absolutist régime. Indeed, the notion that contradictory economic and political processes could be at work within a given social system appears difficult for them to accept. As to state policy, according to them, seventeenth-century mercantilism was simply a revenue-raising device for a state controlled by aristocratic-minded ministers. From the point of view of economic development, it was a failure.\footnote{96. Parker 1996, pp. 28, 29–30, 43.} No doubt there were many failures, as Beik insists.\footnote{97. Beik 1985, pp. 288–91.} We are to understand from Beik’s perspective that, like their Prussian counterparts in the eighteenth century, aristocrats \textit{qua} aristocrats could not comprehend the relationship between economic development and state power. Going in the other direction, Parker even goes so far as to suggest that the institution of the Conseil du Commerce in 1700 reflects the weakness rather than the growing strength of the commercial and manufacturing bourgeoisie.\footnote{98. Parker 1996, p. 262. For a contrary, more positive, view of the economic significance of the creation of this body see Schaeper 1983, pp. 179–80.} But Beik and Parker’s notion that state-inspired economic protectionism, canal construction, administrative rationalisation and New-World colonialism did not also serve the interests of French merchants in the seventeenth century is simply untenable. In this connection, the recent positive re-evaluation of Colbert’s economic initiatives by Le Roy Ladurie serves as an instructive corrective.\footnote{99. Le Roy Ladurie 1996, pp. 169–77; Stein and Stein is particularly insightful on the close connection between private French commercial interests and the state (2000, pp. 109–116).}

Beik does acknowledge that the state’s dependence on the rapaciousness of financiers made it possible to form large pools of capital out of which were constituted the fortunes of some of the major French bankers of the eighteenth century.\footnote{100. Beik 1985, pp. 251–2.} He ignores the significance of these same financiers in Colbert’s programme for the development of manufacturing and overseas commercial expansion.\footnote{101. Chaussinand-Nogaret 1970, pp. 103–4.} A figure such as Dalliez de la Tour, receiver-general of finances of Dauphiné and director of the Company of the Levant, for example, provided a major impetus to the development of the wool cloth, canvas, metallurgical and mining industries in that province. Moreover, the impulse that he provided to these sectors helped to lay the basis for Dauphiné’s industrial progress in the eighteenth century.\footnote{102. Léon 1954, I, pp. 107–8, 118.} Chaussinand-Nogaret concludes that the financiers of the seventeenth century were far from being simply bloodsuckers. While it is true that a part of national revenue was diverted into unproductive activities,
a significant portion was channelled into productive purposes. According to this scholar, in the seventeenth century, the financiers of Languedoc correspond only very imperfectly to the notion of financiers as a corps of office-holders divorced from commerce and manufacture. Overwhelmingly Huguenot, dominant in regional banking, they were fully integrated into the emergent sector of international banking. While perhaps aware of the unintended connection between oppressive taxation and finance-capital, Beik appears oblivious to the important progressive economic consequences of such predatory state finance at the grassroots level of French society. In discussing primitive accumulation during the sixteenth-century religious wars, we noted an increased availability of wage-labour. Throughout the succeeding period (1598–1715) the transfer of land from the peasantry to the urban bourgeoisie engendered by a relentless state fiscalism continued. Inevitably, this deliberate state policy prompted a still greater and irreversible development of wage-labour. The unrelenting fiscalism of the seventeenth-century state was thus a major factor behind this steady process of proletarianisation. This increase in the wage-labour-force is all the more remarkable in the face of the terrible plagues and demographic sluggishness that marked this period. Indeed, the availability of growing pools of cheap wage-labour became a structural feature of the French economy. The further expansion of this wage-earning class in the eighteenth century helps to explain the agricultural, commercial and manufacturing dynamism of that period. Consciously or unconsciously basing themselves on the very Anglo-Saxon notion that state and market are always in conflict with one another, Beik and Parker view the French state of the ancien régime as standing in the way of the development of capitalism. It is very important that this conception be seen as the half-truth that it is.

Conclusion

Based on this review, we can conclude that Beik and Parker’s report of the death of the bourgeoisie in the seventeenth century has clearly been exaggerated. Driven onto the defensive, rural capitalism survived a century-long onslaught of increasing rents and taxes. Commercial and manufacturing capitalism similarly endured a prolonged period of depression through the middle years

of the century. Yet, it did prosper into the 1620s and emerged stronger than ever towards the close of the period. In their insistence on the hegemony of the nobility, Beik and Parker have both thus overshot and undershot the mark. They have overshot it by denying that a bourgeoisie continued to exist in the face of an assertive ruling nobility. They have undershot it in underestimating the degree of upper-class reaction. The construction of the Bourbon state serving the interests of the nobility was not simply a creation of the predominance of rent. It was, in fact, a long-term social and political reaction to the previous century's offensive of profit. Their insistence not merely on the exclusive rule, but on the exclusive existence, of one class not only belies the historical evidence, it cuts seventeenth-century French history off from what came earlier and what later transpired. Finally, it presents a monolithic and immobile view of the century itself.

In insisting on the survival of the bourgeoisie in the seventeenth century, we in part re-assert the classical-Marxist view of the absolute monarchy holding the balance between the nobility and the bourgeoisie. Admittedly, this equilibrium was, in fact, tipped in favour of the nobility. Still, this analysis does restate the traditional liberal and Marxist assumption of a long and continuous development of the French bourgeoisie within the framework of the ancien régime down to the Revolution. However beaten and bruised, the rural and urban bourgeoisie which had emerged in the sixteenth century survived and regained the offensive in the eighteenth century.108

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Capitalism as Religion: Walter Benjamin and Max Weber

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Abstract
Benjamin's fragment 'Capitalism as Religion', written in 1921, was only published several decades after his death. Its aim is to show that capitalism is a cultic religion, without mercy or truce, leading humanity to the 'house of despair'. It is an astonishing document, directly based on Max Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, but – in ways akin to Ernst Bloch or Erich Fromm – transforming Weber's 'value-free' analysis into a ferocious anticapitalist argument, probably inspired by Gustav Landauer's romantic and libertarian socialism. This article analyses Benjamin's fragment and explores its relationship to Weber's thesis, as well as to the tradition of romantic anticapitalism.

Keywords
Benjamin, Bloch, Calvinism, capitalism, cult, despair, Landauer, religion, socialism, Weber

Among the unpublished papers of Walter Benjamin which came out in 1985, in the sixth volume of the *Gesammelte Schriften*,1 the fragment ‘Capitalism as Religion’ is one of the most intriguing and remarkable. Its relevance for the present state of the world is arresting. It comprises only three or four pages, including notes and bibliographical references. Dense, paradoxical, sometimes hermetic, it was not intended for publication and is not easily deciphered. The commentaries that follow are a partial attempt at interpretation, based more on hypotheses than certitudes, and leaving out some shadow areas that remain impenetrable. They may be read in the vein of Biblical or Talmudic exegeses, trying to explore each statement in some detail, and seeking to trace its connections and meanings.

The title of the fragment is directly borrowed from Ernst Bloch’s 1921 *Thomas Münzer as Theologian of the Revolution*, which denounces Calvinism for having ‘completely destroyed Christianity’, replacing it with the elements of a new religion, ‘capitalism as religion [Kapitalismus als religion]’, or the Church of Mammon. We know that Benjamin read this book, because in a letter to Gershom Scholem from 27 November 1921 he told his friend: ‘Recently [Bloch] gave me, during his first visit here, the complete proofs of his “Münzer” and I’ve begun to read it’. This means that the date when the fragment was written is not exactly ‘at the latest in the middle of 1921’, as the editors indicate in a note, but rather ‘at the earliest at the end of 1921’. It should also be noted that Benjamin did not at all share the views of his friend about a Calvinist/Protestant treason of the true spirit of Christianity.

Benjamin’s fragment is clearly inspired by Max Weber’s *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Weber’s book is mentioned twice, once in the body of the text, and then in the bibliographical notes, which include the 1920 edition of the *Gesammelte Aufsätze sur Religionssoziologie*, as well as Ernst Troeltsch’s book, *Die Sozialehren der christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen* (1912), which develops, concerning the origins of capitalism, similar theses as Weber’s. However, as we shall see, Benjamin’s argument goes well beyond Weber, and, above all, it replaces the latter’s ‘value-free [Wertfrei]’ analysis with a passionate anticapitalist attack.

‘One must see capitalism as a religion’: it is with this categorical statement that the fragment opens. This is followed by a reference to Weber’s thesis, which doubles as a critical annotation: ‘To demonstrate the religious structure of capitalism – i.e. to demonstrate that it is not only a formation conditioned by religion, as Weber thinks, but an essentially religious phenomenon – would take us today into the meanders of a boundless universal polemic’. Further on, the same idea appears again, in a somewhat attenuated form, in fact closer to the Weberian argument: ‘Christianity, at the time of the Reformation, did not favour the establishment of capitalism, it transformed itself into capitalism’. This is not so far from the conclusions of *The Protestant Ethic*. What is new is the idea of the properly religious nature of the capitalist system itself: this goes well beyond Weber, even if it relies on many aspects of his analysis.

Both dimensions of Benjamin’s response to Weber are present in his discussion of the main characteristics of the ‘religious structure of capitalism’. Benjamin does not quote Weber in this context, but his presentation is nourished by the ideas and arguments of the German sociologist, giving them, however,
a new meaning, infinitely more critical, more radical – socially, politically and philosophically (and perhaps theologically) – and one in contradiction to the Weberian thesis of secularisation.

The first decisive trait of the capitalist religion is that it is

a purely cultic religion, perhaps the most extremely cultic that ever existed. Within it, nothing has meaning that is not immediately related to the cult; it has no specific dogma or theology. Utilitarianism acquires in it, from this viewpoint, its religious coloration.

In other words, the utilitarian practices of capitalism – capital investment, speculation, financial operations, stock-exchange manipulations, the selling and buying of commodities – have the meaning of a religious cult. Capitalism does not require the acceptance of a creed, a doctrine or a theology. What counts are the actions, which take the form, in terms of their social dynamics, of cult practices. Somewhat in contradiction to his argument about Christianity and the Protestant Reformation, Benjamin compares this capitalist religion with pagan cults, which were also ‘immediately practical’ and without ‘transcendent’ aspirations.

But what is it that permits one to assimilate these economic capitalist practices to a religious ‘cult’? Benjamin does not explain it, but he uses, a few lines later, the word ‘adorer’; we may therefore suppose that, for him, the capitalist cult includes some divinities which are the object of adoration. For instance: ‘Comparison between the images of saints in different religions and the banknotes of different states’. Money, in the form of paper notes, would therefore be the object of a cult similar to the one of saints in ‘ordinary’ religions. It is interesting to note that, in a passage from One-Way Street (1928), Benjamin compares the banknotes with the ‘façade-architecture of Hell [Fassaden-architektur der Hölle]’ which manifests ‘the holy spirit of seriousness’ of capitalism.5 Let us also recall that on the gate – or the façade – of Dante’s hell stands the famous inscription: ‘Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch’entrate’. According to Marx, these were the words inscribed by the capitalist at the entrance of the factory, for the instruction of his workers. As we shall see below, despair is, for Benjamin, the religious state of the world under capitalism.

However, banknotes are only one of the manifestations of a much more essential divinity within the capitalist cultic system: money, the god Mammon, or, according to Benjamin, ‘Pluto… the god of wealth’. In the fragment’s bibliography, a violent and desperate attack on the religious power of money is mentioned: it is to be found in the book Aufruf zum Sozialismus [Call to

5. Benjamin 2001, p. 139.
Socialism], published by the German-Jewish anarchist Gustav Landauer in 1919, just before his murder by the military after the defeat of the revolution in Munich. In the page mentioned in Benjamin’s bibliographical note, Landauer wrote:

Fritz Mauthner (Wörterbuch der Philosophie) showed that the word ‘God’ [Gott] is originally identical with ‘idol’ [Götze], and both mean ‘the melted’ [or the ‘cast’, the ‘moulded’] [Gegossene].

God is an artefact made by humans, which gains a life of its own, attracting to himself the lives of humans, and finally becoming more powerful than humanity.

The only ‘cast’ [Gegossene], the only idol [Götze], the only God [Gott], to whom human beings gave life is money [Geld]. Money is artificial and it is alive, money produces money and more money, money has all the power in the world.

Who does not see, even today, that God is nothing but a spirit begot by human beings, a spirit which became a lively thing [Ding], a monster [Unding], and that it is the meaning [Sinn], which has become meaningless [Unsinn], of our life? Money does not create wealth, it is wealth, it is wealth in itself; there is no other wealth than money.6

Of course, we do not know how far Benjamin shared Landauer’s argument. But we can suppose, at least hypothetically, that this passage, mentioned in the bibliography of Benjamin’s fragment, is an example of what he understood by the ‘cult practices’ of the capitalist religion. From a Marxist viewpoint, money is only one of the manifestations – and not the most important – of capital, but Benjamin was nearer, in 1921, to the romantic and libertarian socialism of Gustav Landauer – or of Georges Sorel – than to Marx and Engels. It was only later, in The Arcades Project [Passagenwerk], that he would use Marxian concepts in order to criticise the fetish-cult of the commodity, and analyse the Parisian arcades or passages as ‘temples of merchant capital’. However, there is also a certain continuity between the 1921 fragment and the great unfinished book from the 1930s. In any case, for the young Benjamin, (gold or paper) money, wealth and commodities are some of the divinities, the idols of the capitalist religion, and their ‘practical’ manipulation in capitalist life constitutes cult phenomena, beyond which ‘nothing has any meaning’.

The second decisive trait of capitalism, which is intimately linked to its concrete cult nature, is that ‘the duration of the cult is permanent’. Capitalism is ‘the celebration of a cult sans trêve et sans merci. There are no “ordinary days”, no days which are not holidays, in the terrible meaning of the deployment of sacred pomp, of the extreme tension which inhabits the adorer’. Once again, Benjamin is probably taking his cue from Weber’s Protestant Ethic, which

emphasises the methodical rules of behaviour imposed by Calvinism/capitalism, the permanent control of conduct, and the ‘religious valuation of professional work in the world – the activity which is implemented without pause, continuously and systematically’.7

Without pause, sans trêve et sans merci: Weber’s idea is absorbed by Benjamin, almost with the same words; not without irony, however, when speaking of the permanent ‘holidays’: in fact, the Puritan capitalists suppressed most of the Catholic holidays, which they considered a form of idleness. Therefore, in the capitalist religion, every day sees the deployment of the ‘sacred pomp’ – i.e. the rituals of stock-exchange or finance – while the adorers follow, with anguish and ‘extreme tension’, the rise and fall of the share values. Capitalist practices do not know any pause, they rule over the life of individuals from morning to night, from spring to winter, from the cradle to the grave. As Burkhardt Lindner notes, Benjamin’s fragment borrows from Weber the conception of capitalism as a dynamic system in global expansion, an iron destiny from which no one seems able to escape.8

Finally, the third characteristic aspect of capitalism as religion is its guilt-producing character: ‘Capitalism is probably the first example of a cult which is not expiatory [entsühnenden] but guilt-producing’. One could ask oneself what would be, in Benjamin eyes, an example of expiatory cult, that is one opposed to the spirit of capitalist religion. Since Christianity is considered by the fragment as inseparable from capitalism, it could perhaps be Judaism, whose main religious holiday is, as is well known, the Yom Kippur, usually translated as ‘the Day of Pardon’, but whose precise meaning is ‘the Day of Expiation’. But this is only a hypothesis, and nothing in the fragment points towards it.

Benjamin continues his condemnation of the capitalist religion with the following argument:

In this way, capitalism is thrown into a monstrous movement. A monstrously guilty consciousness which does not know how to expiate takes possession of the cult, not in order to atone for [i.e. expiate] this guilt, but in order to universalise it, to introduce it forcefully into consciousness, and above all, in order to involve God in this guilt, so that he himself finally has an interest in expiation.

Benjamin mentions, in this context, what he calls ‘the demonic ambiguity of the word Schuld’ – which means, at the same time, ‘debt’ and ‘guilt’.9

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9. According to Burkhardt Lindner, the fragment’s historical perspective is grounded on the
One can find in Max Weber similar arguments, which also play with the connections between economic debt, moral duty and religious guilt: for the Puritan bourgeois, ‘what he spends for his personal aims is stolen from the service of God’s glory’; one therefore becomes at the same time guilty and ‘in debt’ towards God. Moreover, the ‘idea that man has duties toward the possessions which have been entrusted to him and of whom he is only a devoted administrator... weighs over life with all its icy weight. He must... increase them by working without respite’.10 Benjamin’s expression ‘forcefully introduce guilt into consciousness’ is not so far from the Puritan/capitalist practices analysed by Weber.

However, I think that Benjamin’s argument has a broader, and more general, import. It is not only the capitalist who is guilty and ‘indebted’ towards his capital: guilt is universal. The poor are guilty because they failed to make money and became indebted: since economic success is, for Weber’s Calvinist, a sign of election and salvation, the poor are obviously damned. The Schuld is also generalised because it is transmitted, in the capitalist epoch, from generation to generation; according to a passage by Adam Müller – a German romantic-conservative, but strongly anticapitalist, social philosopher of the nineteenth century, quoted by Benjamin in the fragment’s bibliography –

> economic misfortune, which in the past was only borne... by the concerned generation and disappeared with its death, has become, now that all action and behaviour is expressed in gold, a heavier and heavier mass of debts [Schuldmassen] which weighs on the following generation.11

God himself is involved in this generalised guilt: if the poor are guilty and excluded from grace, and if, in capitalism, they are doomed to social exclusion, it is because ‘such is the will of God’, or, according to its equivalent in capitalist religion, the will of the Market. But is it not possible to say, from the viewpoint of the poor and indebted – which is Benjamin’s viewpoint – that it is God who is guilty, and with him, capitalism? In either case, God is intimately associated with the process of universal culpability.

So far, we can clearly make out the Weberian starting point of the fragment, in its analysis of modern capitalism as a religion born out of a transformation of Calvinism. However, there is a passage where Benjamin seems to endow

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capitalism with a trans-historic dimension, which is not shared by Weber – nor by Marx:

Capitalism has developed in the West as a parasite of Christianity – one can demonstrate this not only in relation to Calvinism, but to all the other orthodox currents of Christianity – so that, in the last analysis, the history of Christianity is essentially the history of its parasite, capitalism.

Benjamin does not attempt to argue for this hypothesis, but he quotes in the bibliography a rather obscure book, Der Geist der Bürgerlich-Kapitalistischen Gesellschaft (1914) whose author, a certain Bruno Archibald Fuchs, tries (in vain) to prove, in a polemic against Weber, that the origins of the capitalist world can already be found in the asceticism of the monastic orders and in the Pope’s centralisation of power in the medieval Church.¹²

The result of this ‘monstrous’ process of general capitalist culpability, is the generalisation of despair:

It belongs to the essence of this religious movement which is capitalism to persist until the end, until God becomes completely and definitively guilty, until the world reaches a state of such despair that one can hardly still hope. What is historically unprecedented in capitalism is that its religion is not one of reform but of the ruin of being. Despair spreads until it becomes the religious state of the world, whose salvation one should hope for.

Benjamin adds, speaking of Nietzsche, that we witness the ‘transition of the planet human being, following its absolutely solitary orbit, into the house of despair [Haus der Verzweiflung’.

Why is Nietzsche mentioned in this astonishing diagnosis, with its poetical and astrological overtones? If despair is the radical absence of any hope, it is perfectly represented by the amor fati, ‘the love of fate’ preached by the philosopher with a hammer in Ecce Homo: ‘My formula for human greatness is amor fati, not wanting anything to be different, not forwards, not backwards, not for all eternity. Not just enduring what is necessary … but loving it…’.¹³

Of course, Nietzsche does not speak of capitalism. It is the Nietzschean Max Weber who will acknowledge with resignation – but not necessarily with love – the ineluctable character of capitalism, as the fate of modern times. It is in the last pages of the Protestant Ethic that Weber notes, with pessimistic fatalism, that modern capitalism ‘determines, with overwhelming force, the lifestyle of all individuals born into it – not only those directly concerned with

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economic acquisition’. This constraint is compared to a sort of prison, into which individuals are trapped by the rational system of commodity production: ‘According to Baxter, the concern for material goods should lie upon the shoulders of his saints like “a lightweight mantle that could be thrown off at any time”. But fate transformed this mantle into a iron cage [stahlhartes Gehäuse].’ There are several translations or interpretations for the expression stahlhartes Gehäuse: for some scholars, it is a ‘cell’ (as in a monastery), for others a ‘shell’, like the one carried by the snail on its back. The most plausible hypothesis is, however, that Weber borrowed the image from the ‘iron cage of despair’ invented by the English Puritan poet Bunyan.

Haus der Verzweiflung, Stahlhartes Gehäuse, iron cage of despair: from Weber to Benjamin, we find ourselves in the same semantic field, which tries to describe the merciless logic of the capitalist system. But why does it produce despair? There are several possible answers to this question:

a) First of all because, as we have seen, capitalism, by defining itself as the natural and necessary form of the modern economy, does not admit any different future, any way out, any alternative. Its force is, writes Weber, ‘irresistible’, and it presents itself as an inevitable fate [fatum].

b) The system reduces the vast majority of humanity to ‘damned of the earth’ who cannot hope for divine salvation, since their economic failure is the sign that they are excluded from God’s grace. Guilty for their own fate, they have no hope of redemption. The God of the capitalist religion, money, has no pity for those who have no money…

c) Capitalism is ‘the ruin of being’, it replaces being with having, human qualities with commodified quantities, human relations with monetary ones, moral or cultural values with the only value that counts, money. This argument does not appear in the fragment, but it is extensively developed by the anticapitalist, romantic-socialist authors mentioned in Benjamin’s bibliography: Gustav Landauer and Georges Sorel – as well as, in a conservative variant, Adam Müller. It is interesting that the word used by Benjamin, Zertrümmerung, is similar to the one used in Thesis IX of ‘On the Concept of History’, to describe the ruins produced by Progress: Trümmer.

d) Since humanity’s ‘guilt’ – its indebtedness towards Capital – is permanent and growing, no hope of expiation is permitted. The capitalist constantly needs to grow and expand his capital if he does not wish to be crushed by his

14. Weber 1984, p. 188.
competitors, and the poor must borrow more and more money to pay their debts.

e) According to the religion of Capital, the only salvation consists in the intensification of the system, in capitalist expansion, in the accumulation of more and more commodities; but this ‘remedy’ results only in the aggravation of despair.

These hypotheses are not contradictory or mutually exclusive, but there are no elements in the fragment that would allow one to draw conclusions and settle for one or the other. Benjamin seems, however, to associate despair with the absence of a way out:

Poverty, such as that of vagabond monks, does not offer a spiritual – non-material – way out. A state of affairs that offers such few ways out generates guilt. The ‘worries’ are the index of this guilty consciousness of the lack of a way out. The ‘worries’ originate in the fear that there is no way out, neither a material and individual nor a communitarian one.

The ascetic practices of the monks are not a way out, because they do not question the domination of the capitalist religion. The purely individual escapes are an illusion, and a communitarian, collective or social way out is denied by the system.

However, for Benjamin, a sworn enemy of the capitalist religion, a way out must be found. He briefly examines, or at least mentions, some of the suggestions for ‘exiting capitalism’:

i) A reform of the capitalist religion. This is impossible, because of its complete perversity: ‘One cannot expect expiation, neither from the cult itself, nor from a reform of this religion – since it would be necessary for this reform to ground itself in some definite aspect of this religion – nor in its abjuration’. Abjuration is not a way out, because it is purely individual: it does not prevent the gods of Capital from continuing to impose their domination on society. As far as reform is concerned, here is what Gustav Landauer has to say, in the page next to the one mentioned by Benjamin in the bibliography: ‘The God [Money] has become so powerful and omnipotent, that it cannot be abolished by a simple restructuring, a reform of the mercantile economy [Täuschwirtschaft]’.

ii) Nietzsche and his overman. For Benjamin, far from being an opponent, Nietzsche was

the first to knowingly take the initiative to accomplish the capitalist religion. The thought of the superman displaces the apocalyptic ‘leap’ not in conversion, expiation, purification and contrition, but in an intensification. The superman is the historical man who has arrived without converting himself, who grew by trespassing heavens. Nietzsche inflicted damage to this explosion of heaven provoked by the intensification of the human, who is and remains, from the religious viewpoint (even for Nietzsche), guilty.17

How are we to interpret this rather obscure passage? One possible reading could be the following: the superman only intensifies the *hybris*, the will to power and infinite expansion of the capitalist religion; he does not challenge the guilt and despair of human beings, leaving them to their fate. This is just another attempt by individuals who consider themselves to be exceptional, or by an aristocratic élite, to escape the iron circle of the capitalist religion, but, in fact, it ends up reproducing capitalism’s logic. This is only a hypothesis, and I must confess that this part of Benjamin’s critique of Nietzsche remains quite mysterious to me.

iii) Marx’s socialism: ‘In Marx, capitalism which has not converted itself becomes socialism by interest and compound interest, which are a product of the *Schuld* (see the demonic ambiguity of this word)’. In effect, at this time, Benjamin did not know much about Marx’s work. He is probably taking over Gustav Landauer’s critique of Marxism: according to the anarchist thinker, Marx aims at a sort of *Kapitalsozialismus*, where ‘capitalism brings forward entirely [ganz und gar] socialism out of itself; the socialist mode of production “blooms” [entblüht] out of capitalism’, above all by the centralisation of production and credit.18 But it is not clear why Benjamin refers, in this context, to the concept of *Schuld*, i.e. at the same time ‘debt’ and ‘guilt’. In any case, for him, Marxian socialism remains imprisoned in the categories of capitalist religion, and therefore does not represent a real way out. As we know, Benjamin will radically change his mind in this respect, after reading, in 1924, Georg Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness* (and, of course, meeting the Soviet theatre director/activist Asja Lacis).

iv) Erich Unger and the exit out of capitalism: ‘Overcoming capitalism by *Wanderung*. Unger, *Politik und Metaphysik*, p. 44’.19 By *Wanderung*, Benjamin does not mean excursions in the woods – one of the ordinary meanings of the word – but rather *migration*. The expression used by Erich Unger is *Wanderung der Völker*, the migration of peoples. Here is what he writes on page 44 of the book mentioned by Benjamin:

There is only one logical choice: either traffic without friction, or the migration of peoples. The attack against the ‘capitalist system’ is eternally doomed to failure in the site of its validity. In order to accomplish something against capitalism, it is necessary, before everything else, to leave its sphere of efficacy, because within itself, the system is able to absorb any contrary action.20

The aim is, in the final analysis, to replace civil war by the \textit{Völkerwanderung}. Benjamin had much interest and sympathy for Erich Unger’s ‘metaphysical anarchist’ ideas, favourably mentioning him in his correspondence with Scholem. However, we do not know if he considered this ‘exit out of the capitalist sphere’ as a valid way out. The fragment does not give us any clue.21

\textit{v}) Gustav Landauer’s libertarian socialism, as presented in \textit{Aufruf zum Sozialismus}. In the page next to the one quoted by Benjamin in the fragment, we find the following argument:

Socialism is the return [or conversion] \textit{Umkehr}; socialism is a new beginning; socialism is the restoration of the link \textit{Wiederanschluss} with nature, a re-infusion of the spirit, a re-conquest of the [human] relationship. … Socialists want once more to assemble in communes \textit{Gemeinden}.22

The strange word used by Landauer, \textit{Umkehr}, is exactly the one Benjamin employs to criticise Nietzsche – whose superman refuses ‘conversion, expiation \textit{Umkehr, Sühne}’ and reaches the heavens without conversion \textit{Umkehr}; as well as Marx, whose socialism is nothing but ‘a capitalism that does not convert itself \textit{nicht umkehrende}’. What can be the precise meaning of this curious theological-political terminology? One may suppose that Landauer’s socialism – which requires a sort of ‘conversion’ or ‘return’ to nature, to human relations, to communitarian life – is the escape hatch out of the ‘house of despair’ built by the capitalist religion. Landauer is not far from believing, like Erich Unger, that one has to leave the sphere of capitalist domination in order to create, in the rural areas, socialist communes. But, in his eyes, this programme did not contradict the perspective of a social revolution: soon after the publication of his book, he participated, as People’s Commissar for Education, in the short-lived Munich Conciliar Republic of 1919 – a courageous commitment that would cost him his life.

20. Unger 1989, p. 44.
In an interesting commentary on the concept of *Umkehr* in Benjamin’s fragment, Norbert Bolz has interpreted it as an answer to Weber’s argument concerning capitalism as an inescapable destiny. For Benjamin, *Umkehr* means at the same time interruption of history, *metanoia*, expiation, purification and… revolution.²³ Of course, these are all suppositions, since the fragment itself does not indicate any way out; it only analyses, with horror and obvious hostility, the merciless and ‘monstrous’ logic of capitalist religion.

In Benjamin’s writings from the 1930s, foremost in the *Passagenwerk*, this topic of capitalism as religion will be replaced by the critique of commodity fetishism, and of capital as a mythical structure. One can certainly point to the affinities between both arguments – for instance, the reference to the religious aspects of the capitalist system – but the differences are also evident: the theoretical framework is now clearly a Marxist one.

Weber’s problematic seems also to disappear from the theoretical field developed by the later Benjamin. However, in the theses ‘On the Concept of History’ (1940), we can find a last reference – implicit but easily identifiable – to the Weberian argument. Criticising, in Thesis XI, the cult of industrial labour in German Social Democracy, Benjamin writes: ‘With the German workers, the old protestant work ethic [*protestantische Werkmoral*] celebrated, under a secularised form, its resurrection’.²⁴

Inspired by Weber, but going well beyond his sober sociological analysis, Benjamin’s 1921 fragment belongs to an intellectual constellation that could be designated as the anticapitalist readings of Max Weber. This sort of interpretation must be considered, to a large extent, as a creative ‘misappropriation’: Weber’s attitude towards capitalism did not get beyond a certain ambivalence, a mixture of ‘value-free’ science, pessimism and resignation. Instead, some of his dissident ‘disciples’ will use the arguments of the *Protestant Ethic* in order to develop a virulent anticapitalism, of socialist-romantic inspiration.

The first star in this constellation is Ernst Bloch, who had taken part, in the years 1912–14, in Max Weber’s circle of friends which met every Sunday at the latter’s home in Heidelberg. As we have seen, it was Bloch who ‘invented’, in his 1921 *Thomas Münzer*, the expression ‘capitalism as religion [*Kapitalismus als religion*]’ – a theological disaster whose responsibility he assigns to Calvinism.²⁵ The witness called on to shore up this accusation is none other than… Max Weber. Among Calvin’s followers, says Bloch,

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thanks to the abstract duty to work, production unfolds in a harsh and systematic way, since the ideal of poverty, applied by Calvin only to consumption, contributes to the formation of capital. The obligation of saving is imposed on wealth, conceived as an abstract quantity which is an aim in itself, requiring growth. As Max Weber has brilliantly shown, the capitalist economy in development is totally emancipated, detached, liberated from all the qualms of primitive Christianity, as well as all the relatively Christian aspects of the economic ideology of the Middle Ages.26

Weber’s ‘axiologically neutral’ analysis of the role of Calvinism in the rise of the capitalist spirit becomes, in the eyes of Ernst Bloch – a sui generis Marxist fascinated by Catholicism – a ferocious attack on capitalism and its Protestant origins.

As we saw, Benjamin certainly took inspiration from his friend’s book, without, however, sharing Bloch’s sympathy for the ‘qualms of primitive Christianity’ or the ‘relatively Christian’ moments of medieval Catholicism’s economic ideology. One can also find, in certain passages of Lukács’s History and Class Consciousness, quotations from Weber used as arguments in support of his Marxist critique of capitalist reification. A few years later, the Freudo-Marxist Erich Fromm refers, in an essay from 1932, to Weber and Sombart in order to denounce the responsibility of Calvinism in the destruction of the idea of a right to happiness, typical of precapitalist societies – such as the medieval Catholic one – and its replacement by bourgeois ethical norms: the duty to work, acquire and save.27

Benjamin’s 1921 fragment is one of the striking examples of this strain of ‘inventive’ readings – all by romantic-socialist Jewish-German thinkers – which use Weber’s sociological research, and, in particular, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, as ammunition in order to mount a thorough attack on the capitalist system, its values, its practices and its ‘religion’.28

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28. It would be interesting to compare Benjamin’s ‘Capitalism as Religion’ with the writings of some Latin-American liberation theologians, who – without having the slightest knowledge of the fragment from 1921 – developed, from the 1980s, a radical criticism of capitalism as an idolatrous religion. For instance, according to Hugo Assmann, it is in the implicit theology of the economic paradigm itself, and in daily fetishistic devotional practice, that the capitalist religion reveals itself. The explicitly religious concepts that can be found in the literature of ‘market Christianity’ – for instance, those produced by neoconservative theologians – only have a complementary function. Market theology, from Malthus to the latest World-Bank document, is a ferociously sacrificial theology: it requires from the poor that they offer their lives at the altar of economic idols. See Assmann and Hinkelammert 1989. The analogies (as well as the differences) with Benjamin’s ideas are manifest.
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Adorno on Education or, Can Critical Self-Reflection Prevent the Next Auschwitz?

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Abstract
This article presents Theodor W. Adorno’s concept of education, the basis of which is critical self-reflection. It argues that a close reading of Adorno’s various writings on education yields a theory of critical self-reflection that is not simply introspection but an analysis of the social totality. Beginning with Adorno’s assessment of education within capitalism – which is always a critique of capitalism itself – the article moves through his concept of critical self-reflection, and concludes by reassessing his claim that an education for critical self-reflection offers the strongest barrier to the recurrence of Auschwitz.

Keywords
Theodor W. Adorno, education, critical self-reflection, Holocaust, philosophical reflection, the Frankfurt school

Theodor W. Adorno, in his important essay ‘Education After Auschwitz’, writes: ‘The premier demand upon all education is that Auschwitz not happen again’.¹ By raising the prevention of another Auschwitz to the level of an ideal, Adorno projects a radically new aim for education that intervenes in the increasingly conservative cultural milieu of postwar Germany. Indeed, as Russell Berman claims, Adorno’s discussions of education reveal a ‘radical Adorno’ who deftly demonstrates that ‘even within the context of the “administered society” a certain amount of public cultural engagement appeared possible’.² And, in the words of Henry Pickford, the English translator

¹. Adorno 1998c, p. 191.
². Berman 1983, p. 95. Berman’s introductory comments are in direct reference to the interview ‘Education for Autonomy’; see Adorno and Becker 1983. For other excellent accounts of the Frankfurt School, which are also helpful in clarifying its members intellectual positions as well as their political engagements, see Kellner 1984; Kellner 1989; Wiggershaus 1994; Jay 1996.
of Critical Models – the volume that contains much of the material under consideration here – Adorno’s attention to such matters as education ‘offers a vivid portrait of Adorno in the role of public intellectual, explicating himself ad hoc about what could be considered the practical motive of these essays: to promote the public maturity by bringing reified consciousness to self-awareness’. But the validity of Adorno’s idea of an education against Auschwitz is not confined to his immediate historical context. To the contrary, it still has resonance today as the contemporary moment has seen the return of Auschwitz in such places as Darfur, East Timor, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, the former Yugoslavia, and now Iraq. As history has indeed revealed, the spectre of Auschwitz still haunts late-capitalist society thus making Adorno’s thought on education more important than ever before.

Yet, revisiting Adorno’s thought on education presents something of a problem as it will not be found in any one place but, rather, scattered throughout multiple documents – the most significant being: ‘Taboos on the Teaching Vocation’; the aforementioned ‘Education After Auschwitz’; and ‘Teachers and Philosophy’. However, education is not limited to these places. Indeed, evidence of Adorno’s attention to education can be found throughout his life’s work – for example, it is already in Dialectic of Enlightenment and returns in the posthumous Aesthetic Theory. Moreover, discussions on other

4. Henry Giroux, for example, has recently reengaged Adorno’s ‘Education After Auschwitz’ in response to Abu Ghraib; see Giroux 2004.
5. It is this string of genocides that motivates Giorgio Agamben to see contemporary society as stuck in a perpetual ‘state of emergency’ in which ‘the Camp’ is its dominant spatial organisation. In a provocative reading of Primo Levi, Agamben argues that Nietzsche’s ‘eternal return’ cannot pertain to Auschwitz ‘since in truth it [Auschwitz] has never ceased to take place; it is always already repeating itself’. Agamben 2002, p. 101. Space does not permit further engagement with Agamben’s thought, but suffice it to say, it does not present any difficulty for Adorno as it only turns the imperative to prevent a recurrence of Auschwitz into an imperative to end Auschwitz. On Agamben in relation to Adorno, see Bernstein 2006.
6. Perhaps, the term ‘late capitalism’ needs some explanation. ‘Late capitalism’, which was thoroughly theorised by Ernest Mandel, designates a third ‘long wave’ in the development of capitalism. It is marked by advances in the mechanisation of production and the emergence of the multinational corporation; see Mandel 1983. For more recent work on Mandel, see the symposium in Historical Materialism, 15, 1. But my use of it here is primarily due to the fact that it is the term of choice for Adorno himself. While Adorno, like other members of the Frankfurt school, refers to the post-WWII era as ‘administered society’ and ‘bourgeois’ or ‘affluent society’, he often used the term ‘late capitalism’; see, for example, Adorno 2003a.
7. Adorno 1998g; Adorno 1998c; Adorno 1998h.
8. In the preface to Dialectic of Enlightenment, Horkheimer and Adorno write ‘we had noted for many years that, in the operations of modern science, the major discoveries are paid for with an increasing decline of theoretical education’ (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, p. xiv); and in the ‘Draft Introduction’ of Aesthetic Theory, Adorno writes: ‘A genuine relation between art and
topics present relevant ideas for education – most significantly, the essays ‘Why Still Philosophy’ and ‘Notes on Philosophical Thinking’, which, along with ‘Teachers and Philosophy’, form a sort of triptych on philosophy. Adorno’s concept of education must therefore be reconstructed through an exposition of these various documents. What will emerge from such an exposition is a concept of ‘education for contradiction and resistance’, the centrepiece of which is the teaching of critical self-reflection.

Engagement with education as a problematic is not particularly new or alien to Marxism: one thinks here of the classical works of Paulo Freire, Paul Willis, and Bowles and Gintis; and the more contemporary works of Peter McLaren, Henry Giroux, Robin Small, and Paula Allman, just to name a few. Nor is critical self-reflection as an idea particularly unique. And, to be sure, the claim being made about Adorno’s importance has not to do with the simple fact that he dealt with education or that he used the phrase ‘critical self-reflection’ – though the news that Adorno concerned himself with education might come as a shock for some of his readers, especially in the English language. What is unique in Adorno’s educational thought is his diagnosis: that is, the way he uncovers the conditions that led to Auschwitz still present in the school. Similarly, what is novel in Adorno’s concept of critical self-reflection is its content: in contrast to the introspective connotations the phrase possesses, critical self-reflection is, for Adorno, outwardly-oriented. The practice, in Adorno, never stops at the level of the self or the individual; rather, it becomes an expansive form of thinking that maps the self within the

consciousness’s experience of it would consist in education, which school’s opposition to art as a consumer product as much as it allows the recipient a substantial idea of what an artwork is. Art today, even among those who produce it, is largely cut off from such education’. Adorno 1998j, p. 336.

11. Freire 1970; Bowles and Gintis 1977; Willis 1981; Giroux 1983; Allman 2001; McLaren 2005; Small 2005. However, the presentation of these theorists and their work as a litany should not be construed as evidence that there is a monolithic Marxist position on education. Indeed, there are many important differences and nuances between these theorists and their work, this author included. For a helpful review of the various Marxian positions on education, see Kellner 2006.
12. While the discussion of Adorno and education might be fairly new to the English reader (which is why the focus on the essays that are translated in English), it is fairly well-covered ground in German. See Adorno 1971. See also, for example, Kappner 1984; Gruschka 1995. I am indebted to Roger Behrens for these last two references.
13. Adorno uses the terms ‘education’ and ‘school’ interchangeably. Some theorists will make a distinction between education and schooling, where the former is socially transformative and the latter is socially reproductive; see, for example, Giroux 1983; McLaren 1998. In this essay, I will follow Adorno’s conventions and use the terms interchangeably.
conditions of society as a whole. It is a type of thinking that treats the self as a particular through which the whole is mediated.

The present essay will culminate with this theory of critical self-reflection as outward investigation and conclude with some strategic questions for Adorno’s theory of education. It will begin, however, with his diagnosis of the problem with education in ‘Taboos on the Teaching Vocation’. After identifying the problem with education, focus will be given to the philosophy triptych where Adorno develops the concept of critical self-reflection under the names of ‘philosophical reflection’ and ‘expansive concentration’. Last, the Auschwitz essay will be considered. With the Auschwitz essay, Adorno comes full circle as his profound faith that against Auschwitz ‘education and enlightenment can still manage a little something’, concretises his position in ‘Taboos’ that ‘the key to radical change lies in society and its relationship to the school’, thus leaving it ‘up to the school more than anything else to work against barbarism’.

I.

The prompt for ‘Taboos’, the first of two improvised radio lectures on the topic of paedagogy, is a recruitment crisis occurring in conjunction with an overall decline in the teacher’s social prestige during the Germany of the 1960s. Not only was there a general lack of interest in becoming a teacher but, as if to add insult to injury, the ‘most gifted of the graduates who have passed their Staatsexamen’, showed the ‘strongest resistance to what those exams have qualified them for’, while those who took up teaching posts only did so because ‘[t]hey sense a sort of coercive force to become teachers, to which they submit only as an ultima ratio’. In fact, the aversion to becoming a teacher was so intense that it led Adorno to believe that a genuine taboo had been put on teaching.

As the taboo or psychic ban is Adorno’s central organising concept, it is worth taking a moment to briefly develop it. Freud, in his treatise on the taboo, *Totem and Taboo*, tells us that the taboo is, obviously enough, a prohibition ‘directed against liberty of enjoyment and against freedom of movement and communication’. Prohibiting desire is, however, not the same as annihilating it: the desire for what is prohibited continues but now in the

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15. Adorno 1998c, p. 204.
unconscious. Meanwhile, the tabooed object or act incurs the subject’s ambivalence. ‘He is constantly wishing to perform this act’, and looks on it as his supreme enjoyment, but he must not perform it, ‘and detests it as well’. Adorno finds evidence of this ambivalence towards teaching in many aspects of everyday life; such as, a teacher’s personal ad that assures potential callers that the advertiser is not your ‘typical’ teacher, the resentment toward teaching for having intellectual preoccupations while equally intellectual vocations like law and medicine receive honour, and the tendency to make a status distinction between the school teacher and the university professor.

But the most telling sign, and what Adorno considers ‘to be decisive for the taboos on the teacher’s vocation’, are the epithets in German that refer to the teacher as a disciplinarian, literally, a ‘spanker [Pauker or Steißrommler]’, and in English, like ‘schoolmarm’, that evokes the image of ‘spinsterish, withered, unhappy, dried up schoolteachers’. What these pejorative handles call attention to is the sense that teaching is not so much concerned with student-learning as it is with violently disciplining children, keeping them in line. Of course, the German, much more explicitly than the English, evokes teaching’s most overt and brutal form of discipline, namely, corporal punishment. But this horizon of corporal punishment is both true and false: true, because it reveals the violence involved in teaching; false, because it makes one think that violence is an isolated issue, as if a law prohibiting the practice would liberate teaching permanently. The reason these epithets remain in circulation long after corporal punishment is rubbed out of the books, as if haunting teaching with the images or ghosts of its past, is precisely because violence and discipline are at the very core of teaching’s social function.

That society, since the Enlightenment, has become an increasingly colder and crueller place is, of course, a well-known thesis of Adorno’s. What Adorno

23. Adorno’s use of the word ‘discipline’ in relationship to schools seems to be echoed by the French theorist Michel Foucault who sees schools as instituting a disciplinary form of power, Foucault 1995. However, any affinity is superficial. Space does not permit a full discussion of Adorno and Foucault here, but it must be stated that whereas Foucault sees the school as strategically situated in an epoch-making shift from sovereign power whose mode of control is external threat and violence (the highest expression of which is the ‘spectacle of the scaffold’) to a form of disciplinary power whose mode of control is self-regulation, the creation of docile bodies (the highest expression of which is the panopticon), Adorno sees teaching’s disciplinary function as actual violence. Or, if one wants to put it in Foucauldian terms, Adorno sees the school, disciplinary function as a form of sovereign power.
24. For example, Horkheimer and he famously write: ‘Enlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear
reveals in ‘Taboos’ is that the first encounter with this alienating coldness takes place in the school, even calling the school ‘virtually the prototype of societal alienation per se’. As for the teacher, it is ‘[t]he instrument of this alienation . . . and the negatively affected image of the teacher is the response to it’. Without corporal punishment to remind both students and teachers of teaching’s core authoritarianism, its alienating function, this authoritarianism gets rearticulated in the form of two hierarchical structures, which, Adorno tells us, were played off each other by national socialism. The first is ‘the official hierarchy founded on intellect, achievement, and grades’, and the second is ‘a latent hierarchy, in which physical strength, “being a guy,” and certain practical abilities that are not honoured by the official hierarchy play their role’. Or, to put it another way, the first is the academic hierarchy of the classroom and the second is the social hierarchy of the playground – and it will, of course, be remembered that the experience of ostracisation and victimisation in the latter is as brutal as ‘flunking out’ in the former.

The violence that was once enacted in corporal punishment does not disappear but is merely driven underground, from where it explodes on the school site from time to time, like so many ‘returns of the repressed’. Adorno treats these incidents of violence with the utmost seriousness, even considering a childhood gang of bullies, remembered in Minima Moralia, envoys of fascism.

and installing them as masters. Yet the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity. . . . What human beings seek to learn from nature is how to use it to dominate wholly both it and human beings. Nothing else counts. Ruthless toward itself, the Enlightenment has eradicated the last remnant of its own self-awareness. Only thought which does violence to itself is hard enough to shatter myths’. Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, p. 1, 2.

25. In a discussion on his lecture ‘The Meaning of Working Through the Past’, which predates ‘Taboos’, Adorno makes the same point: ‘For the first time the child is torn away from the protection of the family . . . and comes to feel the coldness of a world with which he or she is not identical’. Adorno 1998b, p. 266.


27. He also makes this point in Minima Moralia: Adorno 2002 p. 45–6.

28. Adorno 1998h, p. 186. Freire also problematises the school’s intellectual hierarchy, even calling it oppressive. However, Freire’s solution of dialectically synthesising the teacher and student opposition into the new terms of teacher-student/student-teacher differs from Adorno’s approach; see Freire 1970.

29. We should note the immense distance that separates Adorno from Hannah Arendt’s famous formula for power and violence. ‘The extreme form of power is All against One, the extreme form of violence is One against All’: Arendt 1969, p. 42. On Arendt’s quantitative definition, the clashes that take place within the lecture hall are not acts of violence but shows of power. Due to spatial constraints, the more lengthy discussion of Arendt and Adorno that is possible cannot be accomplished; rather, it will only be emphasised that, for Adorno, the classroom is underwritten by violence, not power, despite the numbers. For an interesting discussion of Arendt and Adorno, see Villa 2007.
The outbreak of the Third Reich did, it is true, surprise my political judgment, but not my unconscious fear. So closely had all the motifs of permanent catastrophe brushed me, so deeply were the warning signs of the German awakening burned into me, that I recognised them all in the features of Hitler’s dictatorship: and it often seemed to my foolish terror as if the total State had been invented expressly against me, to inflict on me after all those things from which, in my childhood, its primeval form, I had been temporarily dispensed. The five patriots who set upon a single schoolfellow, thrashed him and, when he complained to the teacher, defamed him a traitor to the class – are they not the same as those who tortured prisoners to refute claims by foreigners that prisoners were tortured? They whose hallooing knew no end when the top boy blundered – did they not stand grinning and sheepish round the Jewish detainee, poking fun at his maladroit attempt to hang himself?\(^\text{30}\)

With discipline as its aim and brutality as its method, it is no wonder there was a recruitment crisis! From Adorno’s account, we can certainly understand why the teaching vocation receives, in society, a baleful reputation – but why the taboo? What explains the ambivalence directed at teaching, that is, why does society, on one hand detest it for something it is made to do while, on the other hand, harbouring some envy towards it? The answer is in the question itself: it is because teaching accomplishes what society at large wishes to do openly but cannot.

Thus we have reached the crux of Adorno’s argument: teaching and education’s lamentable condition, as with any social institution, cannot be but a symptom of a sick society. Violence and brutality are at the heart of late-capitalist society itself. This is a point he makes with Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

Everything which is different, from the idea to criminality, is exposed to the force of the collective, which keeps watch from the classroom to the trade union. Yet even the threatening collective is merely a part of the deceptive surface, beneath which are concealed the powers which manipulate the collective as an agent of violence.\(^\text{31}\)

In ‘Taboos’, Adorno sharpens this diagnosis.

Society even now continues to be essentially based on physical power and can impose its regulations when the stakes are real only with physical force; even if this eventuality is so remote in so-called normal life, even now and under the reigning conditions only with the potential of physical violence can it achieve the so-called integration within civilization that should be the task of universal pedagogical doctrine.\(^\text{32}\)

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So, while the teacher may be invested with various unconscious roles, from the flogger, through the drill sergeant, to the executioner, all of which ‘presents the teacher as the physically stronger who beats the weaker’, they, in every case, emanate from late-capitalist society itself.

This puts late-capitalist society or, at least, its liberal-bourgeois form, in a ticklish situation, since ‘the physical violence any society based on domination requires must at all costs not be acknowledged, insofar as the society takes itself to be bourgeois-liberal’. Late-capitalist society under the reigns of bourgeois liberalism must appear to operate on humanistic principles thus cannot acknowledge its violent basis publicly. To cope with this impossible situation, the necessary functions of violence and discipline are delegated to a constituent institution. ‘This physical power is delegated by society and at the same time is disowned by its delegates’. For Adorno, teaching is this institution. And because this teaching does the very thing society wishes it could do openly, it is resented. Resentment expresses envy. A baleful reputation becomes a genuine taboo. Here, teachers are not only called upon to discipline and dominate their students but also to endure public criticism for a job well done.

A gentleman does not deal blows – and thus the disdain for the teacher who does what is necessary and what we know deep down to be evil and what we double deplore because we ourselves are complicit, although we are too good to commit such violence directly.

Teaching suffers so that society does not have to.

II.

Releasing teaching from its taboo requires a different mode of thinking. Adorno, in ‘Philosophy and Teachers’, describes this new form of thinking as philosophical or reflexive and later, in another ‘critical model’, ‘Notes on Philosophical Thinking’, as ‘expansive concentration’. Philosophical reflection or expansive concentration consists in teachers ‘reflecting upon their specialized discipline – that is, in reflecting upon what they are fulfilling – and in reflecting upon themselves transcend the bounds of what they have actually learned’.

35. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
It is this thoughtfulness regarding their work and its connection to the world that makes teachers ‘intellectuals’ instead of ‘merely specialized technicians’. Of course, the word ‘intellectual’ is heavily loaded with elitist connotations, but Adorno warns that any effort to divest teaching of its intellectual quality is deeply ideological as an even more unacceptable anti-intellectualism feeds into authoritarian behaviour and the loss of autonomy. However, all these accusations of elitism can be forestalled by noting that, for Adorno, ‘[w]hether someone is an intellectual or not is manifested’, not in any sense of superiority but, ‘above all in his relationship to his own work and to the societal totality of which it is a part’. In other words, being an intellectual is neither being measurably ‘smarter’ nor being able to lord one’s intellectual prowess over another. Rather, for Adorno, an intellectual is any person who has a contextualised or mediated grasp of their work, that is, an understanding of how their work affects and is affected by larger societal tendencies.

Adorno arrives at this definition of philosophical or reflective thinking by considering what philosophy is in the first place. What is at stake in such a consideration is whether philosophy is essential to the teaching vocation or simply an additional burden, and moreover ‘one many people lack any connection with’. If philosophy is understood as a specialised discipline, an inherited canon of texts, or a system of knowledge, then, it is not at all clear why a teacher should even be expected to have such specialised knowledge. But that idea of philosophy is precisely what Adorno is against. ‘Philosophy fulfils itself only where it is more than a specialty’. In contrast, Adorno suggests that the ‘consciousness of spirit that is philosophy’ means a thinking that moves beyond the terms of the personal by reframing one’s self and one’s work within the broader social context. Adorno reiterates this idea in ‘Why Still Philosophy’, where it now goes by the name of ‘critique’. ‘Critique alone, as the unity of the problem and its arguments, not the adoption of received theses, has laid the foundation for what may be considered the productive unity of the history of philosophy’. On this account, it is completely understandable that teachers be expected to have a grasp of philosophy, for reflective or critical thought must be integral to their work, especially if its taboo is to be lifted.

Adorno further elaborates on this theme of philosophy as a form of reflexive thinking in a third essay, ‘Notes on Philosophical Thinking’, where he now

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42. Adorno 1998g, p. 21.
describes it as ‘expansive concentration’. ‘By gauging its subject matter, and it alone, thinking becomes aware of what within the matter extends beyond what was previously thought and thereby breaks open the fixed purview of the subject matter’.44 Here, he argues that one successfully returns teaching to its place within the social totality not by patching the two together but by heightening or intensifying the focus on teaching itself. The way broader social tendencies impact teaching will come into view if education can ‘immerse itself in the material contents in order to perceive in them, not beyond them, their truth content’.45 The totality appears in the particular.

Adorno’s claim – that teaching must remain an intellectual or philosophical vocation, especially in this era of late capitalism – is an exhortation for teachers to concentrate on themselves more intently, to take their work more seriously, and to be more attentive to their function in society. Therefore, Adorno’s call for education to become aware of the violence in its dual hierarchies in ‘Taboos’ must be articulated with his imperative that teaching be more philosophical in the philosophy triptych. That is to say, releasing teaching from its taboo depends on it retaining, even intensifying, its intellectual status. Of course, the constellation called late capitalism, which benefits from teaching’s taboo, will attempt to discredit, discourage, and combat reflexive thinking.46 So, even though Adorno’s conception of philosophy fits better with the manifest intentions of the Staatsexamen, this exam nevertheless standardises and itemises philosophy into a narrow academic specialism. Another effort to thwart the philosophical quality of teaching is the increased bureaucratisation of teachers’ work. But the greatest source of resistance to expansive concentration, Adorno tells us, comes not from the state but from the teaching candidates themselves. They, in actuality, would prefer that the state exam treat philosophy as a specialised discipline ‘both in order to find their way via well-worn paths and also to normalise the procedure of the examination so that precisely those questions for which the entire examination was first instituted are not posed’.47 What Adorno finds here is ‘in a word, reified consciousness’;48 and ‘[t]he expulsion of thought from logic ratifies in the lecture hall the reification of

44. Adorno 1998f, p. 131.
46. In ‘Education for Autonomy’, Adorno comments: ‘Every serious attempt to assist humanity toward intellectual independence . . . is exposed to considerable resistance; and because everything bad in the world immediately finds advocates who will prove that precisely what one intends is already long since obsolete, no longer relevant, or utopian’. Adorno and Becker 1983, p. 110.
47. Adorno 1998g, p. 25.
48. Ibid.
human beings in factory and office’.49 One of Adorno’s many definitions of reification is ‘standardization’, and it is a sad irony that the reform of public education in the United States goes by that name, as if there is no longer any need to disguise that the reification of the public is the intended goal. The problem of reification reappears in a different form in ‘Education After Auschwitz’, and philosophical concentration is, once again, called upon to undo its effects. Thus reified consciousness and reflective concentration will be the two antipodes which determine whether Auschwitz returns or not.

III.

Auschwitz haunts all of Adorno’s work – from *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, through *Minima Moralia* and *Negative Dialectics*, to *Critical Models*. For Adorno, it is the event that has made living guilty in-itself.

Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems. But it is not wrong to raise the less cultural question whether after Auschwitz you can go on living – especially whether one who escaped by accident, one who by rights should have been killed, may go on living. His mere survival calls for the coldness, the basic principle of bourgeois subjectivity, without which there could have been no Auschwitz; this is the drastic guilt on him who was spared.50

Yet, if guilt, then, a guilt so horrific and disturbing that one must do the unconscionable and prevent it from becoming conscious if one is to go on living. ‘This guilt is irreconcilable with living. And the guilt does not cease to reproduce itself, because not for an instant can it be made fully, presently conscious.’51 Or, as he puts it in *Minima Moralia*, ‘Wrong life cannot be lived rightly’.52

Life after Auschwitz is thus thickened by the moral sense that something must be done so that nothing like it ever happens again. Indeed, this is precisely what Adorno argues, even giving it the lofty status of the Kantian categorical imperative.

A new categorical imperative has been imposed by Hitler upon unfree mankind: to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so

that nothing similar will happen. When we want to find reasons for it, this imperative is as refractory as the given one of Kant was once upon a time.53

In keeping with this spirit, Adorno, in ‘Education After Auschwitz’, issues the same imperative to education: ‘[e]very debate about the ideals of education is trivial and inconsequential compared to this single ideal: never again Auschwitz’.54

Thus, if philosophical concentration remains after Auschwitz, as Adorno clearly believes, judging from the triptych of essays examined above, then it must be a thinking against Auschwitz, against its recurrence. The point of Adorno’s ‘Meditations on Metaphysics’ in *Negative Dialectics*, however, is that philosophy as metaphysical speculation will only achieve this imperative by transforming itself into a material practice – hence, materialism redeems metaphysics. J.M. Bernstein encapsulates the upshot of this transformation well: ‘What the new imperative calls for is a new conception of culture that would entail a singular and massive transformation in the structures of authority governing everyday life, and therefore a new self-understanding of how culture can be formative for us’.55 ‘While it is evident that Adorno means his remarks to urge us toward a deeper respect for our animality, our living being’, Bernstein detects an insufficiency, ‘nowhere in *Negative Dialectics* does he provide the positive terms for such respect; at most, we get a utopian gesture’.56 While this might be true of *Negative Dialectics*, the same cannot be said of ‘Education After Auschwitz’, for there Adorno finds an existing social institution that is viable for the practical working out of this material culture.57 *Negative Dialectics* and ‘Education After Auschwitz’, must therefore be read together.

Adorno speaks of education in two senses – the first is institutional and the second is cultural. ‘When I speak of education after Auschwitz, then, I mean two areas: first children’s education, especially in early childhood; then general enlightenment that provides an intellectual, cultural, and social climate in which a recurrence would no longer be possible, a climate, therefore, in which the motives that led to the horror would become relatively conscious.’58

54. Adorno 1998c, p. 191. In the recent collection of Adorno’s essay, ‘Can One Live after Auschwitz?’, ‘Education After Afuschwitz’ is even reprinted under the heading of a new categorical imperative. See Adorno 2003b.
56. Ibid.
57. Some of Adorno’s proposals that will not be covered in the discussion of the essay are: eschewing the concept of bonds; allowing more engagement with cultural representations of human horror; investigating the dialectic of sport culture; examining the ‘authoritarian personality’; criticising technology; and, perhaps most controversially, closing the cultural gap between town and country, what he calls the ‘debarbarization of the countryside’.
The ‘motives that led to the horror’ run deep: they are coiled in the very consciousnesses of individuals, in the desire to fit in with the crowd, in the coldness of monadic existence, as they struggle simply to survive in the unforgiving conditions of post-Holocaust society. ‘People who blindly slot themselves into the collective’, Adorno writes of the passion to fit in, the so-called ‘manipulative character’, ‘already make themselves into something like inert material, extinguish themselves as self-determined beings’.59 But these people are already cold. Indeed, as Adorno writes, echoing Negative Dialectics, ‘[i]f coldness were not a fundamental trait of anthropology, that is, the constitution of people as they in fact exist in our society . . . then Auschwitz would not have been possible, people would not have accepted it’.60 And, later, he adds: ‘Whoever imagines that as a product of this society he is free of the bourgeois coldness harbors illusions about himself as much as about the world; without such coldness one could not live’.61 Themselves cold, the collectivity is a defensive response aimed against such coldness, ‘a banding together of people completely cold who cannot endure their own coldness and yet cannot change it’.62 A collective built not on shared lived experience but on mere sameness.

One more motive must be added, which does not appear in the ‘Education’ essay – namely, Adorno’s concept of half-education [Halbbildung].63 With the standardisation of education, cultivation disintegrates into half-education; and instead of giving rise to a widening uneducated and uncultured population – which, for Adorno, might have ‘allowed an immediate relation to objects that could be raised to critical consciousness by virtue of its potential for skepticism, wit and irony’64 – it turns out a half-educated population of voracious consumers: ‘[half-education] is spirit overcome by fetishism of commodities’.65 Whereas the uneducated might simply admit their ignorance or naïveté, an admission out of which a genuine desire to learn might grow, the half-educated know a little something and hold that knowledge in high esteem – as the

60. Adorno 1998c, p. 201.
63. While Halbbildung is translated in the English version of Dialectic of Enlightenment as ‘half-education’, the English version of Adorno’s essay ‘Theorie der Halbbildung’ has it as ‘pseudo-culture’. That the German Bildung is untranslatable, and Halbbildung even more so, is well known. Here, I will keep with Jephcott’s conventions and use ‘half-education’. Where I refer to the English translated ‘Theory of Pseudo-Culture’, I will, for continuity’s sake, use ‘half-education’ instead of ‘pseudo-culture’. For a more thorough discussion of the educational implications of Adorno and Bildung, see Thompson 2006.
saying goes, ‘they know enough to be dangerous’. Adorno finds a high example of half-education in those manuals that teach individuals to appreciate so-called ‘classical’ music by instructing them to recognise a sampling of well known symphonic themes. To keep them in the memory, these manuals instruct one to put lyrics to the themes that presumably describe what is being heard. Certainly, any adherent of such a manual will have some sort of grasp of ‘classical’ music, but that grasp does not go beyond the caricature. However, what makes the half-educated readers of these manuals truly dangerous is not a naïve curiosity regarding ‘classical’ music but an arrogant desire to masquerade as possessing absolute knowledge of it, as if being able to ‘name that “classical” tune’ represents knowledge itself. ‘The half-educated . . . unlike the merely uneducated, hypostatize limited knowledge as truth’, and are, on that account, ‘at once intellectually pretentious and barbarically anti-intellectual’.67

Adorno’s concept for all these subjective conditions is reified consciousness, which he describes thus: ‘Above all this is a consciousness blinded to all historical past, all insight into one’s own conditionedness, and posits as absolute what exists contingently’.68 Reification might be accurately pictured in the mind’s eye as the liquidation of individuality in favour of fashion trends and consumable goods, but it manifests more concretely as a mundane refusal to think deeply, a plugging up of one’s ears and a shutting of one’s eyes. Clearly, the reification of consciousness turns the public into unreflective, half-educated, consumers. But how does this situation turn into fascism thus leading to genocide? This dynamic is best observed in moments of economic crisis when anti-intellectualism turns easily into full blown anti-Semitism and bigotry. For, during times of crisis, people will search for the causes of their plight. But the reified, half-educated, mind, which is enthralled by the immediacy of stereotypes and caricatures, will allay its fears by looking for explanations in the Manichean demonisation of the dissimilar and non-identical – for example, the so-called ‘Jewish plot’. Only the ability to self-reflect can counteract the tempting immediacy that feeds the half-educated mind. ‘But today’, Horkheimer and Adorno write, ‘when education itself is withering for economic reasons, unprecedented conditions are created for the paranoia of the masses’.69 Reification and half-education quickly succumb to paranoia and an anti-intellectual cultural milieu turns into outright anti-Semitism and bigotry thus laying the groundwork for physical violence. These

subjective conditions become part of the objective situation of crisis that ushers in fascism and, ultimately, genocide.

Against such motives, Adorno believes, education can do something by providing the very thing reification eviscerates, namely, training in reflexive thinking. To do this, education must first eschew its own dual hierarchy in favour of the programme of philosophical concentration, and then extend it from early childhood education to a material culture. What the ‘Education’ essay adds to the problematic identified in ‘Taboos’ and the programme etched out in the philosophy triptych is the need to turn the self into the very object concentrated upon, to focus on one’s own coldness and manipulability until connections to the social totality come into purview.

One must come to know the mechanisms that render people capable of such deeds, must reveal these mechanisms to them, and strive, by awakening a general awareness of those mechanisms, to prevent people from becoming so again…. Only those who unreflectingly vented their hate and aggression upon them are guilty. One must labor against this lack of reflection, must dissuade people from striking outward without reflecting upon themselves.70

In ‘Education’, the various names for philosophy – from ‘critique’, through ‘reflective’ and ‘intellectual’ thought, to ‘expansive concentration’ – are thus unified in the single phrase ‘critical self-reflection’. And, for Adorno, ‘[t]he only education that has any sense at all’, in the world after Auschwitz, ‘is an education toward critical self-reflection’.71 Adorno’s aim is a critically self-reflexive school and a school that is for a critically self-reflexive culture.

IV.

In light of the richness of Adorno’s thought on education, it is startling that it has not received more attention in English.72 Perhaps, this is the aftermath of Adorno’s scandalous relationship to another education-related event – one that has left an indelible impression upon US education – namely, the radical student movements of the 1960s: the most notorious incident being his calling the police to clear student demonstrators out of his lecture hall. Rolf Wiggershaus’s in-depth history of the Frankfurt School has contributed a

71. Ibid.
72. Of course, Russell Berman’s introduction of Adorno’s interview on education is the exception (Berman 1983). But as wonderful as Berman’s introduction is, it by itself hardly constitutes thorough coverage.
significant amount toward clarifying Adorno’s relationship to the student movements, and as a result, it no longer provides an excuse for the lack of attention his educational thought has received. To the contrary, the 60s’ student movements present a forum for demonstrating Adorno’s thought in action.

In their famous ‘Correspondence on the German Student Movement’, Adorno explains to his Frankfurt colleague, Herbert Marcuse, that when the students demanded that he publicly criticise himself, they were not practising critical self-reflection but, rather, ‘pure Stalinism’.73 For Adorno, critical self-reflection is not a public display, a confession, or a ‘show trial’. ‘I think’, he writes to Marcuse, ‘that clarity about the streak of coldness in one’s self is a matter for self-contemplation’.74 We already know the coldness that Adorno is referring to is already a defensive reaction. But there is an ambiguity here, and Marcuse quickly identifies it.

In light of the terrible situation I am unable to discover the ‘cold streak in one’s self’. If this is ‘self-delusion’, then it must have so penetrated into my flesh and bones that it no longer feels cold. Is it not at least just as possible that precisely the acknowledgement of coldness is itself self-delusion and a ‘defense mechanism’?75

Marcuse’s criticism is twofold: first, if coldness is a defensive acclimation to cold surroundings, then, how does one recognise it in one’s self in the first place? Is it not ‘so penetrated into . . . flesh and bones that it no longer feels cold’? Second, if defence is at issue, then, is not the willingness to acknowledge that one is cold itself a form of defence? Here, Marcuse is drawing on the paradox of resistance that Freud identifies in the psychoanalytic situation: if the patient shows absolutely no resistance to the analytic process, if that patient is completely agreeable to the analyst’s interpretations, then, that patient is, in fact, resisting.76

The first part of Marcuse’s criticism references the concept of mimesis he develops in that sine qua non of critical theory, One Dimensional Man. Setting it up, he explains that the psychoanalytic theory of introjection, whereby the individual subject acclimates and adjusts to surrounding social conditions, is predicated on there being a distinction between outer and inner spheres, an outer space of public life and an inner freedom of private consciousness and

74. Ibid.
75. Adorno and Marcuse 1999, p. 129.
unconsciousness. In the ‘one-dimensional society’ of late capitalism, this distinction no longer holds and the kind of introjection that results is so complete and thorough that words like ‘acclimation’ or ‘adjustment’ are no longer sufficiently descriptive. Marcuse therefore introduces the term ‘mimesis’: ‘[a]n immediate identification of the individual with his society and, through it, with the society as a whole’. 77 Mimesis designates a type of identification that is so thorough and far reaching that there is, in effect, no distinction between society and the individual’s consciousness and unconsciousness. What Marcuse is therefore suggesting to Adorno is that individuals are incapable of looking inside themselves to discover their cold streak because they have mimetically identified with their external conditions. Through mimesis, the individual subject is no longer capable of making critical distinctions between consciousness and society.

Of course, Adorno is no stranger to the kind of argumentation Marcuse presents, but, since their correspondence never returns to the issue of coldness and critical self-reflection, a response is never given. But a guess as to what Adorno’s reply might have been is possible by looking more closely at his discussion of critical self-reflection in ‘Education’. There, it will be noticed that Adorno always raises the issue of critical self-reflection in the context of trying to understand the conditions which give rise to consciousness’s particular formation. Take, for example, the following: ‘In the attempt to prevent the repetition of Auschwitz it seems essential to me first of all to gain some clarity about the conditions under which the manipulative character arises, and then, by altering those conditions, to prevent as far as possible its emergence’. 78 Notice that Adorno wants to understand the manipulative character by attending to ‘the conditions under which the manipulative character arises’. A few paragraphs later, Adorno makes the same emphasis, this time in relation to coldness. ‘If anything can help against coldness as the condition for disaster, then it is the insight into the conditions that determine it and the attempt to combat those conditions, initially in the domain of the individual’. 79 Notice here that it is necessary to gain ‘insight into the conditions that determine’ coldness.

With critical self-reflection, Adorno is less concerned with introspection and self-discovery as he is with reconstructing the material conditions that are formative for the individual monadic subject – hence, its materialism. Adorno’s intention is therefore not that, in critical self-reflection, consciousness finally discovers that it has been reified and that it has become cold, but that it

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77. Marcuse 1964, p. 10.
78. Adorno 1998c, p. 199.
assumes its reification and coldness and takes them as the point of departure for self-reflection. In this way, consciousness’s very weakness – its mimesis with its social conditions – becomes a position of strength as the self, whatever it may be, reveals the truth of the social context itself. Or, as Adorno puts it in ‘Sociology and Psychology’, ‘false consciousness is also true’. Critical self-reflection is thus always already an investigation of the social context. It is through this dynamic that when the self is made the material for philosophical or reflexive concentration, the reality of its conditions ‘breaks open the fixed purview of the subject matter’ and makes itself felt in thought. As this concept is neither speculative nor introspective but investigative, in teaching it, ‘education must transform itself into sociology’.

On this account, Adorno’s point would not have been that Marcuse or the students should discover the cold streak in one’s self, insofar as the question is never ‘if’, but ‘how’; that is, how the ‘terrible’, ‘suffocating and demeaning’ conditions allowed the coldness to form in someone in the first place. If Marcuse understood this, then, presumably he would have been led to the same conclusion regarding the pathos of the student movements, and he would have found the following words as his own: ‘I would have to deny everything that I think and know about the objective tendency if I wanted to believe that the student protest movement in Germany had even the tiniest prospect of effecting a social intervention’. But self-reflection does not terminate here. The next step would be to turn the inefficacy of the student movement into its own ‘moment of truth’ as it reveals the inefficacy of society itself. Once the feebleness of the student protests becomes a symptom of a wider social desperation, the mind becomes suddenly oriented within the antagonistic whole as all the relationships and connections between blocked praxis and societal contradictions come within purview. Then, and only then, does the path toward the realm of possible actions, no matter how minimal and narrow, illuminate. Adorno, indeed, goes in this direction when he speaks to the idea ‘that attempts really to change our world drastically in any particular field are immediately exposed to the overpowering force of the status quo and seem condemned to impotence’, at the conclusion of ‘Education for Autonomy’. Moreover, ‘[w]hoever wants to change things can apparently do so only by making this impotence itself and his own impotence as well into a factor of what he does’. Effecting this reversal is the work of critical

80. Adorno 1968, p. 69.
self-reflection, and it is what Adorno believes education can do to prevent the next Auschwitz.

V.

There is no doubting the accuracy of Adorno’s diagnosis in ‘Taboos’, especially today when school shootings have occurred in such places as Dunblane, Scotland; Littleton, Colorado; Erfurt, Germany; Lancaster County, Pennsylvania; and Blacksburg, Virginia. To be sure, the point is not to compare these school shootings to Auschwitz in any way. Instead, these school shootings reveal, in a horrific way, that violence still lives at the heart of education. Various efforts to prevent the next school shooting have aimed at addressing problems of social isolation, bullying, and the like; but these efforts – as well-intentioned as they are – miss the mark. For Adorno, education will only cease to be violent when both its hierarchies – the intellectual and the social – are dismantled. What such a dismantling amounts to is providing education with an entirely different social function than the one of alienation it currently performs. Adorno believes he has provided the alternative with the imperative to prevent the next Auschwitz.

Thus, in light of Adorno’s reflections, are schools themselves to be blamed for these shootings? That is to ask, since Adorno clearly laid out an alternative ethos for education, is its lack of implementation the fault of school officials? As it will turn out, considering the question of implementation raises serious questions for Adorno, not schools.

As Adorno himself has argued, the imperative to alienate children originates not at the school level but at the social level. Thus to transform this imperative, either society itself would have to issue a new imperative or the school would have to become completely autonomous of society. Both of these scenarii are unlikely, not for any other reason than the fact that society and its institutions exist as a single antagonistic totality. For this reason, the ultimate responsibility for school shootings lies with society as a whole. Since a total transformation of the school already assumes a concomitant transformation of society itself, Adorno’s imperative cannot be isolated to just educators; it must be extended to everyone living in late-capitalist society. The prevention of Auschwitz must be implemented everywhere at once. However, Adorno himself is hesitant to extend his imperative beyond education: for ‘the world’, to him, ‘appears at this moment’, to be a place, ‘where no possibilities for more extensive change can be discerned’. As Adorno sees praxis everywhere in the world blocked, he

concludes ‘it is up to the school more than anything else to work against barbarism’. Yet, if the notion that society is a totality has any sense at all, then, it must follow that society’s impotence applies to the school as well. However, another way of understanding the interpenetration of school and society is possible, one that Adorno does not consider. What Adorno describes as the school’s ‘pathos’, its ‘moral import’; that is, ‘to work directly toward the debarbarization of humanity’, turns out to belong to humanity itself. The prevention of Auschwitz will not be achieved by the school acting alone – in any case, such a deed assumes a nonexistent level of autonomy. The prevention of Auschwitz can only be done if it becomes the project of society as a whole.

Extending what Adorno intends only for education to all of society raises a second question: is critical self-reflection enough? Will gaining clarity about the cold streak in one’s self forestall the next genocide? The problem is that critical self-reflection, even as Adorno understands it, appears to be too defensive a posture. Critical self-reflection is a negative or diagnostic form of thought only. Its function is therefore to uncover and lay bare the wider social contradictions that constitute the self. And, to be sure, Adorno’s focus is on preserving the right to negative thinking. However, preventing the next Auschwitz requires working towards a society in which its preconditions no longer exist. And, while this project requires negative thought to diagnose the ills of existing society, it goes beyond the scope of negativity. It requires actively resolving those ills. The forging of such resolutions is thought’s positive movement. In other words, while Adorno does well to attend to the negative moment of critique, he neglects the positive moment of what Marcuse, in *Eros and Civilisation*, describes as the ‘utopian imagination’. Education after Auschwitz must be unabashedly utopian.

Last, we must consider – without ever taking Adorno or Auschwitz lightly – whether making Auschwitz the focal point actually limits the project of transforming society as a whole. The reason Adorno puts Auschwitz in focus is understandable. In the year ‘Education’ was broadcast over the radio, the ghost of fascism was still haunting the chancellor’s chair as Kurt Georg Kiesinger, a former member of the Nazi party, took that seat under the auspices of an alliance between the Christian Democratic Union, the Christian Social Union, and the Social-Democratic Party. In the year ‘Taboos’ was broadcast,
the National-Democratic Party, the heir to the National-Social Party, won some regional elections. So, when Adorno in ‘Education’, points out ‘the fact that the fundamental structure of society, and thereby its members who have made it so, are the same today as twenty-five years ago’, it is not hyperbole. It is a description of Adorno’s specific historical situation.

Considering the less-than-impressive record of Germany’s de-Nazification, it is understandable that Adorno feels another Auschwitz is imminent and its prevention a most pressing demand. However, Adorno’s claim is that the ‘fundamental structure of society’ has not changed in the twenty-five years since the Holocaust, which cannot be limited to the persistence of certain Nazi elements. This ‘fundamental structure of society’ must also be a reference to the late-capitalist mode of production itself. Adorno himself makes this point in other places. For example, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer identify the characteristic feature of bourgeois society as the liquidation of the individual through the universalisation of equivalence, which is already signalled by Marx as the transformation of living human labour-power into mere exchange-value.

Bourgeois society is ruled by equivalence. It makes dissimilar things comparable by reducing them to abstract quantities. Even for a union boss, to say nothing of a manager, a proletarian is no more than a superfluous specimen, should he catch his notice at all, while the union boss in turn must live in terror of his own liquidation.

If the Marxism of *Dialectic* still remains in doubt, then, Adorno clarifies his position when, in *Minima Moralia*, he ties the cause of this liquidation to the market economy.

It is the signature of our age that no-one, without exception, can now determine his own life within even a moderately comprehensible framework, as was possible earlier in the assessment of market relationships. In principle everyone, however powerful, is an object.

And, finally, he removes all doubt when he names this age of universal commodification ‘late capitalism’. ‘We owe our life to the difference between

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91. For Adorno on the survival of Nazism in postwar Germany, see Adorno 1998e.
93. It seems to me Kellner and Jameson have definitively settled the question of Adorno’s Marxism; see Kellner 1989; Jameson 1990. See also the excellent van Reijen and Bransen 2002.
the economic framework of late capitalism, and its political façade.\textsuperscript{95} Thus, Adorno seems to suggest in these passages that the possibility of an Auschwitz-like event owes itself, ultimately, to the persistence of late capitalism itself.\textsuperscript{96}

It is indeed strange that Adorno does not make this connection in ‘Education’ – again: perhaps, it is due to the immediate historical circumstances. What, in any case, is clear is that the demand ‘never again Auschwitz’ does not convey the extent of transformation at stake. The transformation of society will only become total when capitalism itself has been brought to an end. Thus education after Auschwitz can only be actualised by becoming part of a larger collective struggle against capital. And the name for this collective project to effect the total transformation of society by ending that social power, which ‘comes dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt’,\textsuperscript{97} which ‘makes an accumulation of misery a necessary condition, corresponding to the accumulation of wealth’,\textsuperscript{98} called capital, is ‘class struggle’.

References


\textsuperscript{95} Adorno 2002, p. 112.
\textsuperscript{96} Alan Milchman convincingly works out the precise relationship between late capitalism and the Holocaust; see Milchman 2003.
\textsuperscript{97} Marx 1990, p. 926.
\textsuperscript{98} Marx 1990, p. 799.
Violence


The paradox of Marxism’s relationship to violence is that, although Marxism has made a decisive contribution to understanding ‘the role of violence in history’ – more precisely, to understanding the link between forms of domination and exploitation (primarily capitalism) and the structural modalities of social violence, and the necessity of class struggles and revolutionary processes – and has thereby contributed to defining the conditions and stakes of modern politics, it has nonetheless been fundamentally incapable of thinking (and thus confronting) the tragic connection that associates politics with violence from the inside, in a unity of opposites that is itself supremely ‘violent’. This connection has come to light in different periods in, for example, the work of historians and theorists like Thucydides, Machiavelli or Max Weber, in a way that it has not in Marxism. There are several reasons for this. One is the absolute privilege that Marxist theory assigns to one form of domination (exploitation of labour), with other forms appearing as epiphenomena; this leads Marxist theory to ignore or underestimize the specific contribution that these others forms make to the economy of violence and cruelty. A second reason is the anthropological optimism at the heart of the conception of ‘progress’ defined as the development of the productive forces of humanity, which is the basic postulate of the Marxist conception of the history of social formations. The last reason, finally, is the metaphysics of history as the concrete realisation of the process of ‘negation of the negation’ (or of the alienation and reconciliation of a generic human essence), which transmits to Marxism the theological and philosophical scheme of the conversion of violence into justice.

The co-existence of these two closely interlinked aspects – recognition of extreme forms of social violence and their role, on the one hand; failure to recognise the specifically political problem that they pose, on the other – in the thought of Marx and his successors (albeit with widely varying degrees of intellectual profundity) has not failed to have formidable consequences in the history of the social movements and revolutionary processes that have officially identified with Marxism, and whose leading or dissident forces have sought tools in Marx’s work to ‘master’ them. This co-existence is more palpable than ever in the context of the current phase of globalisation of capitalism and the search for alternative policies that its contradictions inspire. This built-in limitation of Marxism has not impeded striking intellectual attempts from being made in the course of Marxism’s history over the past two centuries to take the measure of violence and describe the stakes involved in it; quite the contrary.

In the following exposition, we will not attempt to give an exhaustive presentation of Marxian and Marxist formulations on the question of violence, but we will try to analyse some of the foremost texts and episodes that illustrate the issue we have raised.

The exposition will be structured in the following way: we will proceed by taking as our starting point a rereading of a text that can be considered the exposition of a ‘classical’ Marxist doctrine on the question of violence; Engels’s posthumous booklet Die Rolle der Gewalt in der Geschichte (1895) [usually translated into English as The Role of Force in History]. Despite
its unfinished character, this text has a degree of coherence and theoretical precision that is much higher than most of the other texts that we will be led to refer to, including in Marx’s own work. It can, therefore, be no accident that it raises some of the basic problems that the Marxist approach poses, and, for this reason, has given rise to several discussions and critiques to which we are still indebted. This has not prevented some readers from seeing it as a simplification, or others as an extension and transformation, of Marx’s formulations.

After having characterised its orientation, therefore, we will have to proceed to a dual displacement. On the one hand, we will be obliged retroactively to return to the most significant conceptions of violence that Marx himself had sketched out in various conjunctures and contexts, and try to comprehend the insoluble problems that they contain; formulations according to the schema of ‘permanent revolution’ on the basis of an ‘activist’ philosophy of praxis (before and after the 1848 revolutions); formulations in the framework or area of the critique of political economy (in this connection, we will see that some very singular implications can be found in the theory of ‘commodity fetishism’); and, finally, dilemmas of ‘proletarian politics’ in the context of clashes with other tendencies of nineteenth-century socialism. On the other hand, inversely, we will have to sketch the trajectory and make a diagnosis of the doctrinal oppositions deployed in post-Engels ‘Marxism’, necessarily (given the scale of the material) in summary fashion.

These oppositions are, of course, inseparable from strategic orientations that played a decisive role in the political history of the last century. They correspond to two major cycles of social movements and events, temporarily out of phase but, in the end, superimposed on each other: the cycle of class struggles and anticapitalist revolutions, and the cycle of anti-imperialist, anticolonial and then postcolonial struggles. Although these cycles in their classical form have today essentially come to an end, a large share of the questions to which they gave rise still manifest themselves in the current historical conjuncture, which we can connect to the fundamental phenomenon of ‘globalisation’. This is why the ‘heresies’ of Marxism that are fuelled, among other things, by divergent positions on the nature and political functions of violence (or, perhaps, even constituted on the basis of a divergence on this point, as can be seen in exemplary fashion in the mutual opposition of Bolshevism and Social Democracy on the issue of violent revolution, proletarian dictatorship and civil war) are very likely to resurface and find inheritors in contemporary debates on crises and alternatives to the ‘world order’ now taking shape, even if not necessarily in the name or language of Marxism. This is, of course, why rereading Marxism’s texts and interpreting its history is important; otherwise, they would have a purely archaeological significance.

Equipped with these three sets of references, we will able, in conclusion, to try to make explicit the problem that seems to us to underlie the whole of this history, a problem that the ‘real catastrophes’ of the twentieth century (in which Marxism was simultaneously the agent and the victim) have brought to a point of no return: not the problem of a choice between reform and revolution, as Marxists have tended to believe, but rather the problem (decisive for them without their realising it) of how to ‘civilise the revolution’ [Zivilisierung der Revolution], which, probably, determines on the other hand the real possibility of ‘civilising politics’ and the state itself. In this sense – starting from a question that we personally consider is not one specific question among others, but rather the constituent question among others, but rather the constituent question of politics – our task is to set out a critique of Marxism on both the theoretical and ethical levels, on which will depend the possibility of making use of Marxism in the future.

1. The Role of Force [Gewalt] in History – The booklet known under the title The Role of Force in History has a complex and revealing history. It was one of Engels’s attempts to extract an autonomous work from the ‘theoretical’ chapters of his Anti-Dühring (1875), which would demonstrate the originality of the materialist
conception of history and its dialectical method and at the same time resolve the problems of doctrine, organisation and strategy of the workers movement, which, from that time, was united under the leadership of 'Marxists' (at least in Germany and, to all intents and purposes, in other countries whose parties would later make up the 'Second International'). But, unlike his booklet *Socialism Utopian and Scientific*, **Engels** never finished the work on the historical role of violence ([Gewalt](#)), which he began working on in about 1887. The text published by **Bernstein** in *Die Neue Zeit* in 1895–6, and then corrected by the Russian editors of Marx's and Engels's works in 1937, only included a part of Engels's initial project. The initial project, as outlined in Engels's notes, was meant to have three parts: first, a reworking of the chapters of *Anti-Dühring* entitled *Gewalttheorie I, II, III*, devoted directly to refuting the conception of violence put forward by Dühring; then a reworking of the earlier chapters (Part I, Chapters 9 and 10) entitled *Moral und Recht / Ewige Wahrheiten – Gleichheit* [Ethics and Law/Eternal Truths – Equality] (ultimately put aside); and, finally, a completely new essay (left incomplete) on the Bismarckian policies that had just culminated by unifying Germany in the form of the Prussian Empire. All this was to be preceded by a preface, of which we have only a rough sketch of the argument. The whole work would thus have given a complete treatment (for which Dühring furnished the pretext) of the question of 'politics' from a Marxist standpoint, both from a theoretical perspective (relationships between superstructures and the economic structure of society) and a practical perspective ('applying' the theory to the issue that immediately determined the characteristics of European politics and radically modified, at least apparently, the prospects for socialist revolution: 'Let us now apply our theory to contemporary German history and its use of force [Gewaltpraxis], its policy of blood and iron. We shall clearly see from this why the policy of blood and iron was bound to be successful for a time and why it was bound to collapse in the end' (*MECW* 26, 453).

This reconstruction of the author's intentions leads us immediately to a remark on language and terminology that is fundamental to our further argument. In German (the language in which Marx, Engels and the first Marxists wrote), the word Gewalt has a more extensive meaning than its 'equivalents' in other European languages: *violence* or *violenza* and *pouvoir, potere, power* (equally suitable to 'translate' Macht or even Herrschaft, depending on the context). Seen in this way, 'from the outside', the term Gewalt thus contains an intrinsic ambiguity: it refers, at the same time, to the negation of law or justice and to their realisation or the assumption of responsibility for them by an institution (generally the state). This ambiguity (which is naturally to be found in other authors) is not necessarily a disadvantage. On the contrary, it signals the existence of a latent dialectic or a 'unity of opposites' that is a constituent element of politics. In a sense, Engels only made this explicit, and this is what we will have to try here to make the reader understand. To do this, we will have to conserve the indeterminacy that the term Gewalt [violence/force] possesses, to all intents and purposes, in every context (for example in the idea of 'revolutionary force/violence' – *revolutionäre Gewalt* – or the 'revolutionary role of force/violence in history' – *revolutionäre Rolle der Gewalt in der Geschichte*), but on the other hand have recourse to a foreign language in order to indicate a stress put on the 'destructive side' of violence (which, after passing through Sorel and his Reflections on Violence, recurs in Germany in Benjamin's essay *Zur Kritik der Gewalt*), or in order to indicate a stress on the institutional or even 'constitutional' side of power (which has tended to prevail in the construction of the single-party states of 'really existing socialism' and the interpretation they made of the notion of 'dictatorship of the proletariat').

Engels's intention also draws our attention to the fundamental importance, in interpreting the theses that would constitute the main reference point for 'Marxism' as well as its critics, of the conjuncture in which they were formulated and assembled: that is, the Gründerperiode of the German Empire from 1875 to
1895. This period, we may note, was also the time in which Nietzsche, a critic of Dürring from a standpoint diametrically opposed to Engels’s, was attempting to define philosophically a ‘grand politics’ that could be an alternative to the Bismarckian institution of the Machtstaat (Beyond Good and Evil and The Genealogy of Morals were published respectively in 1886 and 1887). The period’s end coincided moreover with the publication of Max Weber’s first essays in ‘applied politics’, which were attempting precisely to found a post-Bismarckian idea of a ‘national-social’ state (Der Nationalstaat und die Volkswirtschaftspolitik [The National State and Economic Policy], academic inaugural address, 1895; Zur Gründung einer national-sozialen Partei [Towards the Founding of a National Social Party] (1896)) while taking up several of the themes that Dürring had used for his metaphysical critique (such as the ‘diabolical’ character of power). This is why, just as it is necessary before returning to Marx to have some idea of the results of Engels’s ‘Marxist’ interpretation of his work, we must begin our reading of Engels’s booklet with its political ‘conclusions’.

1.1 Present-day historians (e.g. Winkler, I: 178 et sqq.) still attach the greatest importance to the analysis Engels made of the ‘revolution from above’ (an expression adopted if not coined by Bismarck himself), the means by which the dream of German unification was ‘fulfilled’ at last. This analysis poses several, closely interlinked problems: the problem of Engels’s limited enthusiasm for Bismarckian Realpolitik, the question of the validity of his thesis that the bourgeoisie was politically incapable of acting on its own, and, finally, the problem of the causes of the incomplete unification of Germany.

Engels’s enthusiasm was evoked essentially by the capacity that Bismarck showed in Engels’s eyes to impose a policy on the German bourgeoisie ‘against its will’ that was effective in defending its interests (in particular, Bismarck’s military policy, but also the establishment of universal suffrage). In this sense, Bismarck falls once again under the Bonapartiste model of 1851, though going still further in the direction of throwing idealistic justifications overboard (such as the ‘right of peoples to self-determination’, a principle that Louis-Napoleon championed). In a quasi-Schmittian description of the ‘de facto dictatorships’ [tatsächliche Diktaturen] that allowed Bismarck to cut through the contradictions that the German bourgeoisie, caught between the various ‘historic roads’ capable of leading to the national unity to which it aspired, had gotten bogged down in, Engels closely associates the idea of Realpolitik, which destroyed the moral and juridical ‘self-deceptions [Selbsttäuschungen]’ with which the bourgeoisie’s ‘ideological representatives’ were impregnated, with the idea of ‘revolutionary’ [that is, exceptional or unconstitutional] means in the service of a ‘revolutionary goal’: the formation of a modern state, which dynamist interests and games with statelets [Kleinstaaten] had delayed in Germany for a long time. Engels thus takes up a position opposed to liberal thought in two ways: by describing parliamentary principles as so much ideological mummery expressing historical impotence (at least in a situation in which the ‘problem’ posed by history, the achievement of ‘impossible’ German unity, can only be solved by means of force); and by treating the Prussian militarism that Bismarck incarnated (at least until the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1) as a progressive rather than reactionary force.

But Engels’s enthusiasm has its limits. One might even think that Engels went so far in praising the ‘Iron Chancellor’ precisely in order to make the limits of his enthusiasm visible. By showing the bourgeoisie that it needed a master, as Kant would have said, he is preparing for the collective actor (the proletariat), which will prove to be the master’s master, to take the stage, and demonstrating to the bourgeoisie that politically it amounts to nothing.

(One is reminded of General de Gaulle’s 1945 remark: ‘Between the Communists and us, there is a vacuum.’) He phrases this proposition precisely in terms of force [Gewalt]: there are only two ‘forces’ that truly make history, the state and the people (‘In politics there are only two decisive powers [entscheidende Mächte]: organised state power [Staatsgewalt],...
the army, and the unorganised, elemental power of the popular masses’ (MECW 26, 479)); one of them must inevitably pick up where the other leaves off. This will happen because national imperialism, once it has reached its goal, becomes reactionary, incapable of managing the consequences of its own actions (as seen in Bismarck’s policy of annexations against the will of the populations concerned, and in his police methods domestically), and because from this point on (unlike in 1848) the working class ‘knows what it wants’. The working class will thus be able to turn the same weapons against the state that the state uses to control them. Nevertheless, this correction that Engels made to the historic function of the ‘great man’ (that his very realism will ultimately land him in illusions) does not remove all ambiguity. This can be seen clearly by analysing the two other questions we have mentioned.

Is the political incapacity of the bourgeoisie a structural characteristic of this class, or is it a conjunctural phenomenon linked to the ‘backwardness’ and ‘blockage’ of historical development in Germany? Here, Engels adapts the analyses of Bonapartism in Class Struggles in France and The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte (‘autonomisation’ of the state apparatus and the ‘will’ that embodies it due to the way in which the forces of the contending classes neutralise each other), and runs up against the difficulties that Marx had as well. Engels seems to privilege the thesis of German exceptionalism, the Sonderweg, but this thesis is apt to capsize. In fact the history of the obstacles to German unity is a capsule version of the whole of European history from the Wars of Religion on. By comparison, it is really rather the model of the French Revolution, which the Communist Manifesto privileges, that comes across as an exception that was not susceptible to repetition: it was a singular moment, situated ‘neither too soon nor too late’ for the bourgeoisie to effectively mobilise the proletariat, the ‘popular masses [Volksmassen]’, for a violent overthrow of feudal domination, and thus ‘take power’.

All at once, the very notion of revolution becomes problematic. Is a ‘revolution from above’ a revolution? Is not the term ‘revolution’ irremediably equivocal, precisely to the extent that it embraces references to several kinds of force, which cannot all be included in the same schema of class struggle? We will see presently that this difficulty is equally at the heart of the ‘theoretical’ developments borrowed from the Anti-Dühring. But, here, already it enables us to understand better what kind of obstacles ultimately led Engels to interrupt his work of composition.

Why did this text (like so many of Marx’s texts) remain unfinished? A first hypothesis is that Engels was not entirely able to ‘believe’ his own analysis of the Bismarckian empire, which misses some key aspects. The allusive reference that his sketch makes to ‘social reform shit [Sozialreformschwein]’ is revealing. Even more than Napoleon III, Bismarck invented a model of the co-optation of class struggle, an avatar of the ‘national-social’ state. Any judgement of the chances that either imperialism or the working class had of emerging victorious from their confrontation (to which the Anti-Socialist Laws gave dramatic form) depends on the degree of effectiveness attributed to this invention, which Engels, like most Marxists, manifestly underestimated.

Similarly, the spontaneist description that he proposes here in order to characterise proletarian politics (‘the unorganised, elemental force [Gewalt] of the popular masses’) is logically necessary to mark the turning point constituted by the working class’s entry onto the historical stage as the agent of its own history, but contradictory to the perspectives of building a political party that Engels is in the process of working out. Like Marx a few years earlier, he finds himself caught between anarchist (Bakuninist) and statist- (Lassallean) type formulations, without being genuinely able to maintain a specifically Marxist discourse.

As in earlier theoretical chapters, the ‘direction of history’ supplies the criterion that determines the significance of Gewalt and the conditions in which it can be used: the question is how violence and power play their role in the course of world history, either by ‘accelerating’ it or by trying to ‘block’ it. But this historical direction is itself defined on the
basis of an a priori hierarchy of forms of force. The fact that the ‘solution’ of the national question (and, more generally, the formation of modern bourgeois societies in the form of national states) constitutes a necessary moment in world history is no more than something that is empirically/speculatively postulated. And the idea that modern militarism, by introducing the popular masses [Volksmassen] into the apparatus of state power [Staatsgewalt], creates an ‘eventual’ contradiction that necessarily ends in its overthrow risks being no more than an assertion of what was to be demonstrated.

1.2 Yet Engels’s dialectical construction in the three chapters of his Theory of Force [Gewalttheorie] (MECW 25, 146–70) forms an astonishingly coherent whole. We can characterise it as the ‘turning upside down of the turning upside down’. The conception of force [Gewalt] that Dühring had put forward had two fundamental characteristics. On the one hand, it turned the schema of historical materialism ‘upside down’ by postulating that economic structures, or more precisely relations of appropriation and exploitation, derive from the ‘first-order facts’, the Gewalttaten, that is, the phenomena of subjugation [Knechtung, Unterwerfung] and domination [Herrschaft, Beherrschung] imposed by force – a perspective that put the whole history of social forms and property relations under the heading of injustice. On the other hand, Dühring’s conception traced everything back to a metaphysical category of force [Gewalt], defined in an abstract or ahistorical fashion, but, above all, situated short of oppositions between ‘exploitation of human beings’ and ‘exploitation of nature’, ‘politics’ and ‘economics’ (Dühring speaks of ‘possession by force [Gewalt Eigentum]’). This explains the profoundly Rousseauian tone of his argument, which Engels rightly emphasises. Engels, by contrast, tends to return to the Hegelian conception of a negativeness that ‘overcomes’ or ‘raises up’ [aufhebt] its own destructive power throughout history in order to bring about the realisation of a substantial human community.

Engels’s concern is primarily to bring ‘force’ down from the heaven of metaphysical ideas in order to analyse it as a political phenomenon, included in a history of the transformations of politics. In several different passages, a pure and simple equivalency between the two notions seems to be posited: ‘That was an act of force [Gewalttat], hence a political act [politische Tat]’ (Anti-Dühring, II, 2; MECW 25, 147). The true relation between them is, rather, that one is a subset of the other: politics includes force [Gewalt], but cannot be reduced to it. Or, rather, force is an integral component of any politics, so that it is illusory to imagine an effective political action that does not have recourse to it. One might even say that this element of force always plays a decisive role, whatever the social forces or classes at work, and thus in proletarian politics as well – even if the difficult question must then be posed as to whether a specifically proletarian modality of violent action (distinguishable from war, for example) exists. Yet politics cannot be reduced to force, which, in this sense, is never ‘naked’ or ‘pure’. Not only does it presuppose the economic means necessary to exert it, but it includes as well an element of ‘conceptions [Vorstellungen]’ (bourgeois liberal ideas, or socialism) and ‘institutions [Einrichtungen]’ (parliamentarism and universal suffrage, the army itself).

Here, we see the multiple significations mentioned earlier of the term Gewalt, which Engels takes advantage of to sketch a dialectic internal to the history of politics. In fact, on the one hand, force, reduced to organised violence (and to war, in particular, whether foreign war or civil war), only constitutes part of the system of political instruments; on the other hand, it includes all the effects of power and is overdetermined by other terms that also connote political action. Following a tradition of Saint-Simonian origin, Engels sometimes seems to think that politics has a tendency – taken to its logical conclusion by the socialist movement – to civilise itself, by decreasing the military element and replacing it with an institutional element. But his main line of argument is aimed instead at showing that class struggle, of which politics is only the form taken, tends towards an ultimate, necessarily violent, confrontation between the con-
tending forces (bourgeoisie and proletariat), which is also a confrontation between two antithetical modalities of political violence. Or, more precisely, the argument shows that this confrontation expresses a necessity immanent in economic development [ökonomische Entwicklung], which tends to transcend the forms of exploitation and subjugation [Herrschafts- und Knechtschaftsverhältnisse, an expression derived directly from Hegel].

Engels’s line of argument is dictated by his taking up a logical schema that previously played the central role in the Hegelian dialectic of history: the schema of means (or of ‘human’ material) and historical ends (see Hegel, Reason in History). This schema implies that the actors’ (individuals and above all peoples or ‘collective individuals’) specific actions and intentions can be read at two different levels: in an immediate, conscious way, they appear to be contingent, but, in an indirect (and, albeit unconsciously, decisive) way, they are necessary, at least to the extent that they contribute to the attainment of the end that Spirit [Geist] is working towards in history (that is, its own rationality). But Hegel goes further, and, on this point, is in fact already the theoretician of the ‘role of force in history’: he states that the apparent irrationality of human actions, the use they make of passions, conflict and violence, is in fact the phenomenal, contradictory form in which the objective power of reason manifests itself. This explains the ‘realism’ of Hegel’s politics, which is entirely indissociable from his ‘idealism’. In Engels’s work, the teleology of reason becomes the teleology of the economic development of humanity, going by way of the dissolution of the ‘primitive’ communities and the successive forms of private property before reconstituting a higher community, which capitalist ‘socialisation’ of the productive forces is creating the conditions for. This explains his insistence on the fact that political force (and state force [Staatsgewalt] in particular) is effective/actual [wirksam/wirklich] only to the extent that it is functional from the standpoint of the economic development of society (Engels speaks of the exercise of force’s ‘social function [gesellschaftliche Amtstätigkeit]’, Anti-Dürring, II, 4; MECW 25, 167) and to the extent that it follows the direction of economic development (as was the case with the French Revolution). It also explains his ingenious theory of the inversion of appearances in the political sphere as compared to the underlying economic logic, which allows him to take account of a number of things: how political history and economic history can be ‘out of phase’ with each other; how political ideas, forces and institutions can acquire their own dynamic, autonomous from the fundamental class struggle; and even the incapacity of economically dominant classes to become politically dominant as well (here, we link up with the issue of Bonapartism or Bismarckism, that is, the issue of the defeat of ‘popular revolutions’ or ‘revolutions from below’ and their supersession by the nineteenth-century revolutions from above’). But an inversion of this type can never be anything but transitory; or, better expressed, it must represent the form of its transition towards being put rationally on its feet once more, without which the logic of means and ends would be strictly speaking abolished.

1.3 It would nonetheless be mistaken to believe that Engels could be content to ‘translate’ a Hegelian schema from the language of mind [Geist] to the language of economic development. The specificity of the problems that interpreting the relations between force and class structures (in Marx’s sense) poses obliges him to invent an original line of argument. But, here, the logic of means and ends tends to bifurcate into profoundly different interpretations, each of which gives rise to specific problems. The first interpretation, which emphasises the immediate dependence of all organised violence on its material resources, and therefore on the economic means of production of these resources (technology, level of industrial development, the state’s financial capacities), essentially concerns wars of conquest. It leads, in particular, to sketching out a history of forms of military tactics as a function of revolutions in armament technology. The second interpretation, by contrast, emphasises the social forms of the masses’ incorporation
into the structures of institutional violence, and concerns the incidence of class struggle within the force of the state itself. One could (and this is, probably, what Engels seeks to do) consider the two interpretations as complementary; but it seems more fruitful to us to counterpose them, not only because of their later divergent histories, but also because of the completely different signification that they confer on the notion of ‘economic determination in the last instance’. The first interpretation leads to a technological version of the primacy of economics over politics, which reduces the autonomy of politics further, but it has the advantage of introducing a crucial discussion on the historical parallels between the development of means of production and the development of means of destruction (weapons), or even a dialectic of productive forces and destructive forces in the history of humanity (which Engels resolves in an ‘optimistic’ way by upholding the primacy in the last analysis of the productive forces). The second interpretation is more decisive to determining whether the notion of ‘revolution’ can be applied in the same way to all processes of transition to a new mode of production.

It must be acknowledged that Engels swings back and forth here in an astonishing way between two extremes: after having maintained (in Theory of Force [Gewalttheorie], I) that the process of the bourgeoisie’s economic elimination of feudalism is being repeated in identical fashion in the proletariat’s economic elimination of the bourgeoisie, he then turns (in Theory of Force [Gewalttheorie], II) to analysing the history of the successive forms of the people’s incorporation into modern armies (from the American and French Revolutions up until Prussian militarism) as an unprecedented process of mass political education, which contains in embryo the transformation of the force of the state into ‘the force of the popular masses’ and the revolutionary withering away of the repressive state machine (‘as soon as the mass of the people… will have a will [einen Willen hat]… the machine refuses to work and militarism collapses by the dialectics of its own evolution’; Anti-Dühring, II, 3; MECW 25, 158). In order for the revolution-
tionality into rationality, or the ‘inversion of appearances’ – that, in this way, makes the ‘forcing’ of rationality possible within reality, at the risk of failing to recognise the most unyielding ‘excesses’ (even in the long term).

This must, thus, be the starting point, on the one hand for a re-examination of the extent to which Marx’s analyses can be incorporated without anomalies or contradictions into this dialectical theorisation (which made its popularisation and organised political usage possible), and, on the other hand, for an examination of the way in which the encounter with real history progressively determined the displacement and bursting apart of doctrinaire ‘Marxism’, with all its orthodoxies and heresies, over the course of a century, without for all that making the initial question purely and simply disappear.

2. Marx: historical moments and structures of extreme violence – Engels’s systematisation constantly evokes several of Marx’s formulations (in particular from the Communist Manifesto, which the two friends had written in collaboration with each other). But it depends, above all, on two citations from Capital, which, for this reason, have acquired a particular significance, independent of their context. The first comes from Chapter 24 of Volume I (MECW 35, 582–3) and does not contain any explicit reference to force, but rather to the ‘internal dialectic’ of the transformation of private property based on exchange of equivalents into private property founded on the unpaid appropriation of labour. The other citation comes from Chapter 31 of Volume I, devoted to the ‘so-called primitive accumulation’ (MECW 35, 739); here, Engels displaces Marx’s description of the organised state violence required for the primitive accumulation of capital into a thesis on the revolutionary role of force, which Dühring, and those in general who adopt a moral position on violence, fail to recognise. The passage includes the famous messianic metaphor (which Engels transposes to the feminine gender) of the ‘midwife [Geburtshelferin]’, which later provided a point of departure notably for Hannah Arendt’s critical reading in Between Past and Future: ‘Force is the midwife of every old society pregnant with a new one. It is itself an economic power [Die Gewalt ist der Geburtshelfer jeder alten Gesellschaft, die mit einer neuen schwanger geht. Sie selbst ist eine ökonomische Potenz]’.

In both cases, we are thus faced with a paradox. Engels has ‘reduced’ a twofold distance: the distance that separates the (provisional) Marxian hypothesis of the origin of private property in individual labour from an historical analysis of its real conditions; and the distance that separates the ‘historical exception’ constituted by primitive accumulation from the other exception constituted by revolutionary force ‘from below’ (which Marx, later in Capital, refers to as ‘expropriation of the expropriators’, Capital I, 32; MECW 35, 750). Engels can thus construct a typical ‘line’ of development that coincides with the very movement of the conversion of force in the history of class struggle. But, to discuss the relevance of this line of argument, we must try to take stock of the complexity of the interlocking perspectives on Gewalt in Marx’s work, which certainly cannot all be traced back to a single argument.

For our part, we think that we can distinguish at least three different perspectives, in relation to ‘problems’ posed in different ways. But we also think we are able each time to discern a very strong tension in Marx’s thought between two approaches to comprehending the status and effects of extreme violence. One approach attempts, if not to ‘naturalise’ extreme violence, then at least to incorporate it into a chain of causes and effects and treat it as a process or a dialectical moment of a process of social transformation of which the contending classes are the agents, precisely so as to make intelligible the conditions of ‘real politics [wirkliche Politik]’ (as opposed to moralising or idealised politics). The other approach uncovers in some extreme or excessive forms of violence, which are both structural and conjunctural, both spontaneous and organised, what one might call ‘the reality within politics [das Reale in der Politik]’, that is, the unpredictable or incalculable element that confers a tragic dimension on politics, a dimension that
politics feeds on even as it risks annihilating politics. (This is indicated in the formula that Rosa Luxemburg attributed to Engels in her 1916 Junius Pamphlet: ‘Capitalist society faces a dilemma, either an advance to socialism or a reversion to barbarism’, Junius Pamphlet, 269; GW 4, 62).

These two modes of thought are like two sides of the same coin, parts of the same attempt to give ‘meaning’ to the imbrication of force and social practice. Perhaps the two approaches cannot be reconciled, but neither (at least in Marx’s work) can there be any watertight separation between them. This probably has in the last analysis to do with the ambivalence of the very model of ‘class struggle’ as the essential characteristic and ‘motor’ of the transformation of human societies. This model is indissociable (as Foucault 2003 has recently reminded us) from the generalisation of the social relationships characteristic of the model of war and its ‘utmost use of force [äußersten Anwendung der Gewalt]’ (Clausewitz 102), and meant to translate even the most savage destruction, processes of extermination and enslavement – which ensure, in the words of a French publicist cited by Marx, that ‘capital comes dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt’ (Capital, I, 31; MECW 35, 748) – into the rational logic of conflicts of interest. This involves us in the difficulties of interpretation that Marx’s formula (in French) in his polemic against Proudhon, and generally against the ‘progressive’ conception of history – ‘It is the bad side [le mauvais côté] that produces the movement which makes history, by providing a struggle [en constituant la lutte]’ (Poverty of Philosophy, MECW6, 174) – has always raised.

We can read this formula as a dialectical thesis reaffirming (following Hegel) that the historical process always ends up converting suffering into culture (by carrying out ‘a negation of the negation’). But it can also be read as an indication of the fact that there is no guarantee that history really does ‘move forward’, except perhaps towards horror.

2.1 Significance of Marx’s revolutionary ‘catastrophism’. – The schema that associates the final collapse of capitalism with the emergence – for the first time in history – of a possibility of collective liberation, whose agent is the revolutionary proletariat, is a model of interpretation of the ‘historical tendency’ that can be found in Marx’s work. He applies it both (as in 1848 in the Communist Manifesto) to the imminence of the present and (as in the concluding chapter of Capital, [Volume I], on the ‘expropriation of the expropriators’) to the indefinite future implied by the contradiction between capitalist property and the socialisation of the productive forces, which nonetheless never disappeared from his thought. Nevertheless, it was in the conjuncture of the revolutions of 1848, with the radicalisation that it brought about in the Marxian critique of politics (leading to the ‘first’ concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat), which made its consequences most perceptible. In the wake of an intensification of his concept of social revolution, which accentuated its antinomic characteristics, Marx closely associates the idea of a final crisis that would mean the ‘dissolution’ of bourgeois society with the idea of an ‘alternative’ between the extreme forms of counterrevolutionary violence and the extreme forms of consciousness of the masses, who are determined to ‘take human emancipation to its logical conclusion’. He is then able (even if the term no longer appears explicitly in his terminology) to give a theoretical content and historical referent to the unity of opposites that, in the 1845 Theses on Feuerbach, the philosophical notion of ‘praxis’ designated: a consciousness that arises immediately from contradictory social relations and that, without going through the mediation of ‘ideological’ representations, metamorphoses into collective action capable of changing the world.

Marx’s thought is henceforth dominated on the political level by an ultra-Jacobin conception that, without explicitly addressing the question of Terror, turns the proletariat into the ‘people of the people’, capable of rescuing the demand for liberty, equality and community from its imprisonment in bourgeois limits, and reasserting the full timeliness of the perspective for action that Robespierre
expressed in the watchword, ‘No revolution without revolution’ (speech of 5 November 1792; cf. Labica, 56) – the revolution cannot stop halfway. And, on the economic level, Marx’s thought is dominated by a pessimistic interpretation of Ricardo’s theory, according to which the antagonism between capitalist ‘profit’ and workers’ ‘wages’ leads to the absolute immiseration of the mass of the population, that is, to wages falling below subsistence level. After having described the proletariat’s living conditions (in The Holy Family and The German Ideology) as a ‘self-dissolution’ of bourgeois civil society [bürgerliche Gesellschaft], he arrives in the Communist Manifesto at the conclusion of his analysis of the ‘simplification of class struggle’ and polarisation of society. He concludes that capitalism, unlike earlier modes of production, includes a nihilist dimension: the logic of the bourgeoisie’s mode of exploitation leads it to destroy the living conditions and reproduction of the very people who enable it to live, and thus destroy its own conditions of existence. This catastrophe, whose imminence is shown by industrial crises, was sufficient as a basis for the necessity of a proletarian revolution that could only take the form of a ‘violent overthrow of the bourgeoisie’.

But the bloody (and disappointing) experience of the failure of the 1848 revolutions led Marx (in Class Struggles in France (1850) and The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte (1852)) to give proletarian revolution an even more dramatic form. What determines the general crisis of the capitalist mode of production is not the proletarian revolution directly, as ‘the conquest of democracy’ by the new ruling class, but rather a going to extremes in which revolution and counterrevolution (‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ and ‘dictatorship of the bourgeoisie’) constantly reinforce each other until the moment of their decisive confrontation. This confrontation will be between, on the one hand, the autonomised, swollen ‘state machinery [Staatsmaschinerie]’, which ‘concentrates organised violence’ and which the proletariat must manage to ‘break’, and a process of ‘permanent revolution [Revolution in Permanenz]’, which expresses the proletariat’s capacity to extend direct democracy to the whole of society.

The messianic dimension of this way of representing the revolutionary moment and the ‘praxis’ that must lead to its achievement is obvious. It will reappear periodically in the history of Marxism, particularly each time that the conjuncture lends itself to being seen as a final clash on which the very future of the world and civilisation depends (as in Rosa Luxemburg’s work in 1914–16 when she described the choice between war and revolution), and even in the work of post-Marxists (for example in the form of an alternative, in one kind of contemporary ‘political ecology’, between destruction of the planetary environment and destruction of capitalism). It explains the antinomic character that the idea of revolutionary force takes on here, simultaneously concentrating the destructive powers of the old world and introducing an absolute, creative positivity. But its modality cannot be understood well without also linking it to Marx’s pronouncements about the uncertainty of the combat’s outcome, beginning with the enigmatic phrase in the Communist Manifesto about the possibility of ‘the common ruin of the contending classes’ (MECW 6, 482) and continuing with Marx’s recognition after 1852 of capitalism’s capacity for further development, which will reproduce the same antagonisms on an indefinitely enlarged scale.

2.2 The violence of economics, the economics of violence. – The theme of force [Gewalt], if we look carefully, is so persistent in Capital (particularly in Volume I), that this whole work could be read as a treatise on the structural violence that capitalism inflicts (and as a treatise on the excess of violence inherent in the history of capitalism), described in its subjective and objective dimensions, of which the critique of political economy provides the red thread. This has, first of all, to do with the fact that the exploitation of the workers – the source of accumulable surplus-value [Mehrwert] – seems indissociable in capitalism from its tendency to over-exploitation, which is not content to extract a surplus from labour-power over and above the value necessary to
its own reproduction by taking advantage of the increased productivity that makes the industrial revolution possible, but rather constantly stakes (and endangers) the very conservation of this labour-power, insofar as it is embodied in living individuals. At the end of Chapter 15 (‘Machinery and Modern Industry’), Marx describes the production process as a ‘process of destruction’, and concludes, ‘Capitalist production, therefore, develops technology, and the combining together of various processes into a social whole, only by sapping the original sources of all wealth—the soil and the labourer’ (MECW 35, 507–8).

But, because of its own resistance and a ‘modernity’ of society leading to systematic annihilation of precapitalist ways of life and culture, this destruction of living productive forces necessarily takes extremely violent forms (concerning on the one hand processes that we would today call ethnic cleansing or genocide, and on the other a dismemberment of the human body or of the individual psychic/physical ‘composite’).

In Marx’s eyes, there is no exploitation under capitalism without over-exploitation. This is the lesson of the various comparative arguments devoted to the various ‘methods’ of producing surplus-value, which all have to do with pushing back the limits of overwork, without which capital would fall victim to its own tendency to a falling rate of profit. Let us note the importance of the fact that Marx went in search of this observation, not in the work of economists, but at least indirectly (by the medium of the Factory Reports in the service of English labour) among the workers themselves (Michel Henry, in particular, rightly stresses this point). On the side of ‘production of absolute surplus-value’, we see, for example, an indefinite extension of the working day, women’s work and above all child labour, which leads to various forms of modern slavery and frenetic speculation by capital on the costs of workers’ food, housing and health. On the side of ‘production of relative surplus-value’, we see an intensification of the tempo of work and an accelerated exhaustion of the ‘human instruments’; a division of labour counterposing manual and intellectual ability; repressive factory discipline; and ‘repulsion and attraction of workpeople’ in the industrial revolution, that is, use of forced unemployment as a constraining ‘regulator’ of the value of labour-power. In all these cases, Marx is bent on showing that the different forms of over-exploitation depend on a general condition of violence [Gewaltverhältnis], inherent in capitalism, which he calls collective enslavement [Höritigkeit] of the working class by the capitalist class (MECW 35, 609), which leaves the legally ‘free’ workers nothing but the chance to sell themselves on the conditions laid down by capital. But Marx wants to show as well that each of them includes a specific form of violence, corresponding to an entire phenomenology of suffering (to the point of ‘torture’: MECW 35, 426).

His analysis of over-exploitation results in a dialectic of resistance, of conflict, of interaction between violence and institution. It is surprising that Engels, although, as we have seen, he cited two essential moments of this dialectic, simplified its complexity to the extent he did. This may relate to the fact that, in the last analysis, it does not result in a one-way historical ‘direction’, but, rather, in a multiplicity of possible paths of development, which Marx himself, and, in any event, his successors, found it an enormous chore to choose between.

Some of the arguments in Capital [Volume 1] (supplemented here and there between the first edition in 1867 and the second edition in 1872 thanks to the repeal of the English laws against workers’ combinations) describe the class struggle between capital and the working class, in the first stages of organising itself, over working conditions (and later wage levels etc.). The state intervenes in this struggle (though in an imperfect way, and partially to the benefit of the bourgeoisie, whose long-term interests it defends at the expense of its immediate profits) as the agent of ‘that first conscious and methodical reaction of society against the spontaneously developed form of the process of production’ (MECW 35, 483).

Describing this history as one of a ‘protracted civil war, more or less disassembled, between the capitalist class and the working-class’ (MECW
35, 303), Marx’s analysis culminates here in a proposition in which the multiple meanings of the word Gewalt are fully evident: ‘Between equal rights force [Gewalt] decides’ (MECW 35, 243). The sentence is all the more remarkable inasmuch as it echoes, with slight variations, the sentence that Marx used in 1849 to describe the conflict between the Frankfurt National Assembly and the Prussian monarchy: ‘only power [Gewalt] can decide between two powers [Gewalten]’ (MECW 8, 324). Violence lies at the root of power, which, inversely, is exercised in order to control it. In the revolution, violence [Gewalt] had ‘decided’ between the ‘powers [Gewalten]’; in the social struggle state power [Gewalt] (legislative Staatsgewalt) will ‘decide’ between two forms of violence [Gewalten].

These forms of force can all be situated on one side of the process of normalisation of capitalism’s conditions of functioning (and incorporation of class struggle into the political institutions of bourgeois society). They do not in any way abolish the violence of exploitation, but they restrain its ‘excesses’ and postpone (perhaps indefinitely) the outbreak of a confrontation between the proletariat and the state itself (which, we can imagine, is rendered useless by the growth of the organised political power of the proletariat, if only the bourgeoisie does not ‘put up a fight’).

The dynamic is completely different in the passages devoted to ‘the so-called primitive accumulation’, which, by contrast, concern the relationship between force and capitalism as it was established in the ‘transition period’, prior to any possibility of ‘pacifying’ the social conflict. In opposition to the liberal myth of the origins of capital in individual merchant property, Marx describes in these passages, as we have seen, a ‘process of forcible expropriation of the people’ (MECW 35, 711), necessary to the process of transferring the mass of workers from one form of servitude [Knechtschaft] (MECW 35, 706) to another. The best-known moment in this transition is the practice of ‘enclosures’ in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England. But, in fact, capital employed all legal, pseudo-legal and illegal means (massacres, expulsions, more or less induced famines as in Ireland, colonisation, ‘bloody legislation’ organising the expulsion or imprisonment of vagrants, etc.) coordinated by ‘the power of the state [Staatsgewalt]’ (MECW 35, 726) in order ultimately to get its hands on the means of production and ‘free’ a proletariat without any resources of its own. Here, Gewalt in its multiple meanings does not serve to repress extreme violence through the functioning of state institutions, but, on the contrary, to multiply and intensify violence through the cruel use of state institutions.

Although they thus develop in opposite directions, the different ways in which capital is linked with the historical phenomenon of ‘class warfare’ reflect equally the same fundamental anthropological reality (which Marx had attempted to elucidate in speculative fashion in the chapter of Capital on the ‘fetishism of commodities’): the objectification of human labour-power as a ‘commodity’. This objectification, which the ‘normal’ process of capitalist production presupposes, even though the free worker’s ‘personal’ juridical status masks it, is ultimately impossible; this is why it must be constantly forced, in face of workers’ individual and collective resistance, by means of a more or less transitory complex of terrorist institutions and practices. These practices insert destruction into the sphere of production itself, in a sense far removed from what political economy later called ‘creative destruction’, seeing it as the mainspring of industrial innovation (Schumpeter).

But what can be the outcome of this unstable combination? The Marxist tradition after Marx is profoundly divided on this point, in relation to divergent ‘tactics’ within the workers’ movement. What we will examine here in conclusion are the extensions of Marx’s analysis that highlight the unshakeability of the phenomenon of extreme violence as a structural determination of capitalism, thus making it necessary to pose the question of revolution, not only in terms of seizure of power and transformation of the mode of production, but also in terms of ‘civilisation’. This can be done in different ways.

The path that Rosa Luxemburg illustrated (in her 1913 work The Accumulation of Capital,
in particular Chapters 26–9 on colonisation) consists in showing, starting from Marx's definitions and the contemporary history of imperialism, that violent 'primitive accumulation' does not constitute a transitory phenomenon characteristic of the 'prehistory' of modern capitalism. On the contrary, capitalism needs permanently (for the most part outside the 'central' region where industrialisation took place) to form markets and reserve labour supplies for itself by means of exterminationist violence. The question of the 'law of population', which Marx linked to the cycles of accumulation and to the economic necessity of an 'industrial reserve army', lies at the heart of this problematic. There can be no capitalism without excess population, and no excess population without violence, whose targets are above all non-European peoples. Capitalism is, in this sense, always still 'archaic', or, rather, it presents the entirely modern violence that it imposes on the whole world, which is forced little by little to enter its space of reproduction, as an archaism.

In an astonishing text (Results of the Direct Production Process [Resultate des unmittelbaren Produktionsprozesses. VI. Kapital des Kapitals]), published in 1933 in Moscow and again in 1969, Marx had himself sketched out another path, which left deep traces in the discussions in the years 1960–70, particularly among representatives of Italian 'workerist' Marxism (Quaderni Rossi, Tronti, Negri), on the formation of the 'mass worker' in advanced capitalist society. The hypothesis here is that there is an ultimate stage in the subjection of labour-power to the commodity-form, corresponding to a complete commodification of workers' consumption and a conditioning of their training with a view towards their immediate incorporation into mechanised production, what Marx refers to as 'real subsumption [reale Subsumption]' of labour-power under capital. Marx may have considered this deeply nihilist hypothesis incompatible with revolutionary perspectives for a progressive radicalisation of class struggle in the course of capitalist development; this was perhaps the reason that he ultimately failed to include this chapter (really a section) in the published version of Capital.

The hypothesis does not necessarily lead, let us note, to extenuating violence as a form of 'voluntary servitude'; or, rather, this is only its utopian, bourgeois form. More likely, it corresponded (and corresponds) to a situation of endemic, anarchic or anomie violence (a 'molecular' civil war, Enzensberger would say), which capitalism tries to control by incorporating a multiplicity of apparatuses of control and 'risk management' (in Robert Castells's phrase) into its social-policy toolkit.

2.3 The aporia of 'proletarian revolutionary politics'. – Rereading the analyses in Volume I of Capital on the question of the violence inherent in the development of capitalism as a 'mode of production' and in the evolutionary tendencies that take shape within it enables us to view in another light the question of why Capital was left unfinished, as well as the ambiguities of revolutionary 'strategy' that Marx continually ran up against during the life of the First International and after its dissolution, before and after the bloody episode of the Paris Commune (a new 'solo' and 'swan song' of the European working class, to use Marx's expression in The Eighteenth Brumaire – MECW 11, 193). They both originate in the last analysis in the aporia of the constitution of the working class as a political subject, or of the relationship between the 'subjectification' of the proletariat and the capitalist 'socialisation' of the productive forces. But this relationship itself is profoundly troubled by the phenomenon of extreme violence, which can be considered, depending on circumstances, either as a residual irrationality which the 'normal course' of historical evolution must ultimately put an end to; or, as the element of dialectical negativity that precipitates the overthrow of domination by means of revolution ('accelerating' the course of history); or, finally, as the added factor that risks blocking the 'resolution' of social contradictions or even perverting their modalities from within. (The invention of the category of 'sub-proletariat' or Lumpenproletariat, reduced by impoverishment to a domain where poverty coexists with criminality, is a striking symptom in this respect. We know that Marx never
completely gave up the idea that Louis Napoleon owed the success of his coup d'état to a mobilisation of the Lumpenproletariat, and that Louis Napoleon himself was its political representative). In any event, the notion of a simple division of violence [Gewalt] between the terrain of politics and the terrain of economics (or of ‘society’, structured by economic relationships) cannot be sustained. Violence [Gewalt] circulates, in a way that is fundamentally uncontrollable, between politics and economics.

Perhaps the reason why Capital remained unfinished, after the publication of Volume I in 1867 and its various later editions, is (bearing all historical and biographical circumstances in mind, incidentally) that the process of violent ‘consumption’ of labour-power, whose causes, forms and social effects it describes, does not make it possible to choose in a conclusive way between several possible outcomes. Marx may have preferred to let ‘real’ history settle the issue, and left the exploited masses the task of inventing a ‘strategy’ in which one option would prevail over the others.

Probably in the chapter entitled ‘Historical Tendency of Capitalist Accumulation’, the apparent ‘conclusion’ of the work [Volume I], Marx himself chooses a dialectical route in order to make the ‘leap’ from science to politics. He repeats the catchphrases of 1848, according to which the proletariat is ‘the only revolutionary class’, that is, the subject of history as the history of human emancipation, while basing them now, not on a catastrophist schema, but, rather, on a theory of the ineluctable tendency to the socialisation of production and the constitution of a ‘collective labourer’. This process is supposed to unfold with the necessity of a ‘natural process’, in which the violence at its end, though inevitable, can no longer be compared with the violence at its origin. These are the formulations that orthodoxy has clung to.

But the course of the book had opened up other possibilities, which it would still be possible to take up without abandoning ‘Marxist’ reference points. There is the possibility of a process of reforms, imposed on society by the state under the pressure of increasingly powerful and better organised working-class struggles, which would force capital to ‘civilise’ its methods of exploitation or innovate constantly in order to overcome the resistance of ‘variable capital’. There is the possibility of exporting over-exploitation to the ‘periphery’ of the capitalist mode of production, in a way that perpetuates the effects of ‘primitive accumulation’. (Rosa Luxemburg worked this idea out in great detail, while always imagining that the process would ultimately run up against its limits, ‘because the earth is round’ – whereas one can also imagine intensive dimensions, in the form of ‘colonisation of the life-world’ [Lebenswelt] (in Habermas’s words) or development of the bio-economy, in which human life itself would become a raw material consumed by industry.) Finally, there is the possibility, suggested in the ‘Unpublished Chapter’ and taken up by certain theorists of contemporary ‘mass culture’, of a ‘society of control’ (as Deleuze calls it) accompanied by a coercive normalisation of individual producers, consumers and reproducers: a normalisation of which physical as well as psychic violence would be the means and the permanent material. In these various hypotheses, the proletariat would no longer figure as the predetermined subject of history, and the force that it experiences or exerts would not bring history to a ‘natural’ end. The subjectification of the working class, that is, its transformation into a revolutionary proletariat, would then be a continually receding horizon, an unlikely counter-tendency, or even a miraculous exception to the course of history.

Mentioning these competing, explicit or latent ‘outcomes’ in Marx’s analyses enables us to understand, better than Marx himself and his contemporaries, the reason for the aporias that mar his attempts to define an autonomous ‘proletarian politics’, with its strategy, its institutions, its ‘worldview’ and its own discourse on the transition from class to classless society, as they were deployed after 1870. Marx is caught between the anarchist (Bakuninist) thesis, which demands above all the ‘destruction of (state or party) authority’, and the statist, nationalist (Lassallean) thesis, which sees organising society as ‘legitimate
functions’ of the state (see *The Civil War in France, MECW* 22, 332). He never succeeds in overcoming this symmetry, despite the new definition of the dictatorship of the proletariat drawn from the model of the Paris Commune or Engels’s remarkable efforts to theorise the political function of the ‘masses’ insofar as they cannot be reduced to the abstraction of classes.

All these difficulties crystallise around the question of the formation of a ‘class political party’, seen as neither an element nor a mirror image of the bourgeois state apparatus. They come down to the fact that it is just as difficult to conceive of revolution as a ‘revolution from above’ as it is to conceive of it as a ‘revolution from below’; that is, as a proletarian ‘appropriation’ of a pre-existing force developed by the ruling classes, or a ‘metamorphosis’ of the historical figures of force, or a ‘return of the repressed’: a popular, spontaneous force specific to the masses themselves. Force [*Gewalt*] is undoubtedly not ‘available [*verfügbar*]’ to the proletariat. Always exceeding the proletariat’s ability to control it, whether as violence or as power, far from forming the direct province of its political subjectification, it ‘deconstructs’ (as Derrida would say) the proletariat’s claims to subjecthood.

3. *Marxism and post-Marxism between ‘Gewalt’ and civility.* – By speculating on the crux of revolutionary subjectification, socialisation and force, we have anticipated the lessons that can be drawn from a describing the development of Marxism starting from the work of its founders. These lessons now bring us to sketching out a critique of Marxism in which the aporia of its relationship to the significance and use of force will be the guiding thread. It would of course be desirable for a critique of this kind to be presented as a self-criticism, in which Marxism would find the means to understand its own setbacks and overcome its historical limits, so as to reopen the perspectives of a revolutionary ‘transformation of the world’. Unfortunately, we know that nothing of the kind is about to happen, fundamentally because of the incapacity that Marxism has manifested to analyse the real catastrophes of the twentieth-century history (quite different from the ‘final catastrophe’ of capitalism that Marx prophesied), in which it was both agent and victim: fascism and Nazism, ‘really existing socialism’ and its exterminationist aberrations, the mutation of anti-imperialist struggles into ideological/military dictatorships, the combination of ethnic or religious racism with absolute impoverishment and devastation of the earth’s environment, etc. This means that a critique of Marxism is at the same time an ‘exit’ from its problematic or a relativisation of its point of view. But this in no way means that all the analyses it has put forward or the questions that it has raised are lacking in contemporary significance.

It is appropriate, first of all, to describe the dispersion that occurred during the twentieth century in the field of Marxist discourses and show its linkage with the problem of force and the ‘choices’ that it impelled. Our thesis is that this problem constitutes precisely the red thread of the *split dynamic* that is typical of historical Marxism, making it impossible to attribute a simple ‘position’ to it in political affairs (even though the successive orthodoxies of the Second and Third Internationals tried to give credence to the opposite standpoint). But the splits themselves evidently cannot be explained only on the basis of theoretical choices. They must be traced back in an intrinsic way to practical conjunctures, which appear to us in hindsight as falling under two major cycles of political struggles whose dynamics Marxism attempted to grasp, two cycles that have been superimposed on each other without purely and simply intermingling. The first is the cycle of anticapitalist class struggles whose protagonist has been the working class with its historical organisations (parties, trade unions, associations); the second is the cycle of anti-imperialist struggles whose protagonists have been the working class with its historical organisations (parties, trade unions, associations); the second is the cycle of anti-imperialist struggles whose protagonists have been movement for national independence and/or movements resisting the unequal exchange that is blamed for underdevelopment. In both cases, the discourses that we need to take account of have not always been unanimously recognised as ‘Marxist’, or, in some cases (Sorel, Fanon), have not even identified completely with Marxism. But this
is a secondary issue; it expresses, in fact, the impossibility of unifying the Marxist problematic and thus of marking any hard-and-fast boundaries for it. What matters to us is these discourses’ historical/theoretical relationship with the problems that Marx and Engels raised.

3.1 The anticapitalist cycle and institutional ‘Gewalt’. – The anticapitalist cycle (which has for the most part unfolded in Europe, at least as far as its major innovations go, though of course it has extended over the entire world) began in the trade-union movement and the socialist parties of the Second International. It pivoted around the Great War of 1914–18, the Russian Revolution and the confrontation with fascism between the two World Wars. It concluded, after a long period of immobilisation in the structures of the ‘Cold War’, in the mass revolts of 1968 and subsequent years, when a certain resurgence of the councilist tradition combined with the growth of revolutionary movements and revolts against other forms of ‘power’ or ‘domination’ besides capital (family, school, ‘disciplinary’ institutions in Foucault’s sense and ‘ideological state apparatuses’ in Althusser’s sense).

The habit has taken hold since the debates inside German Social Democracy and the 1917–20 split of classifying the different positions present during the first period in line with the simple formula reform or revolution, with the advocates of a gradual, ‘peaceful’ evolution from capitalism to socialism (the English Fabian Society, Bernstein, Jaurès) on one side and the advocates of an immediate overthrow of capitalism by means of revolutionary violence (Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg, Pannekoek etc.) on the other, with the defenders of Marxist ‘orthodoxy’ (like Kautsky) trying for their part to uphold an intermediate position. From the theoretical point of view that we are putting forward here, it is more interesting to organise the debate directly around the most original positions, in the works of Sorel, Bernstein, Lenin and Gramsci.

Combining Proudhon’s legacy with Marx’s, Sorel attempted to theorise the tactic of the ‘general strike’ that French revolutionary syndicalism had adopted after leaving behind its anarchist phase, in which notably the idea of ‘propaganda of the deed’ or anticapitalist criminality had been widespread. The red thread of his celebrated 1908 work Reflections on Violence is the distinction between two antithetical ‘social powers’, bourgeois institutional force and spontaneous proletarian violence. In light of this distinction, he rereads Marx’s texts that Social Democracy had made canonical, and sifts through the tactics of the contemporary workers’ movement, denouncing in particular the coexistence of revolutionary phraseology and parliamentarist practice in the parties of the Second International. For him, proletarian violence is an extrapolation of the rebellions inherent in the condition of exploited producers, which leads to the mobilising ‘myth’ of the general strike and foreshadows socialism as an association of free men. On a political as well as ethical level, it can be distinguished from the perspective of a civil war between classes organised into opposed ‘camps’, and repudiates the model of Terror or permanent revolution inherited from the Jacobin tradition.

Although Sorel (probably under Nietzsche’s influence) exalts the model of the ‘useless’ (anti-utilitarian), heroic warrior, he makes antimilitarism the touchstone of proletarian morality. But what complicates his position (and at least partly explains how both a revolutionary tradition and Mussolini’s fascists could make use of his work) is precisely this category of ‘myth’, whose philosophical foundations he borrows from Bergson’s theories of intuition and life force [élan vital], and which he counterposes to both the abstract ‘utopias’ of the socialist movement and the ‘magic’ of the state. Referring to both an ideal totality of social struggles and an affective capacity for mass mobilisation, his ‘myth’ seems destined in practice to a perpetual fuite en avant. This is probably why Sorel soon felt obliged to divide the notion of ‘general strike’ into two forms, one authentically proletarian, the other perverted by its political co-optation (a stratagem that is also to be found in Benjamin’s work) – though this would not prevent him from throwing his lot in with the most mutually antagonistic parties himself.
Bernstein, whose 1899 book *The Preconditions of Socialism* set off the ‘revisionist’ controversy, was also an acerbic critic of Social Democracy’s institutional ‘double language’. Contrary to a tenacious legend, he was not at all an ‘opportunist’ in the French sense, an exclusive champion of the parliamentary road and of political alliances with ‘bourgeois’ parties. In 1905, he joined Rosa Luxemburg in defending the ‘mass strike’. But he sought to draw a demarcation line within the revolutionary tradition (including in Marx’s and Engels’s work) between two radically dissimilar traditions: an archaic tradition, an expression of the survival of utopia within Marxism itself, which tried ‘dialectically’ to combine the image of a capitalist collapse [Zusammenbruch] with the terrorist tactic of the seizure of power (transmitted by way of Blanqui, the probable inventor of the expression ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’); and a genuinely modern tradition, which tried to link socialisation of the economy to democratisation of society by generalising associative and federative forms of self-management [Selbstverwaltung]. (‘Democracy is both means and end. It is a weapon in the struggle for socialism, and it is the form in which socialism will be realised’, *Preconditions of Socialism*, 142; *Voraussetzungen*, 154). This explains his famous formula declaring that what is usually termed the final goal of socialism is nothing to me, the movement is everything (*Preconditions of Socialism*, 190), closely linked to a critique of the ‘accelerating’, ‘creative’ function that part of the Marxist tradition attributes to force.

Earlier, Marxists had, from time to time, assigned force [Gewalt] a purely negative role in contemporary society, but nowadays an exaggeration in the opposite direction is in evidence; force is given what amounts to a creative omnipotence, and an emphasis on political action [Tätigkeit] seems virtually the quintessence of ‘scientific socialism’ – or even ‘scientific communism’, to use the expression as ‘improved’ by a new fashion, not exactly with any advantage to its logic. (*Preconditions of Socialism*, 203; *Voraussetzungen*, 212–13).

This also explains his rehabilitation of law, or more accurately of citizenship (whose German name, Bürgertum, refers to the history of civil and political liberties; this is why Bernstein criticises the tendency to substitute the expression ‘civil society’ – ‘bourgeois society [bürgerliche Gesellschaft]’ – for the expression ‘capitalist society [kapitalistische Gesellschaft]’). He thought that citizenship was increasingly indissociable from forms of economic democracy, not in the form of an egalitarian organisation of work – utopian in his eyes – but, rather, in the form of trade-union representation in the management of firms and the growth of consumer co-operatives (in other words, a regulation of the ‘free market’). It explains, finally, Bernstein’s emphasis on the necessity of educating the working class, which it must set itself to in order to become capable of taking on ‘responsibility [Verantwortlichkeit]’ for society as a whole.

This brings us to Lenin’s position. Through the two Russian Revolutions of 1905 and 1917 and then the Civil War, Lenin never stopped trying to grasp the relationship between anticapitalist social transformation and the political transformation of the autocratic régime. His approach has often been reproached with ‘voluntarism’. But its force is not due only to his conception of a party of ‘professional revolutionaries’ (which as early as *What Is to Be Done?* in 1902 goes together with the idea of the proletariat’s mission of joining together the emancipatory aspirations of all classes of society), nor to his elaboration (on the basis of the whole international debate of the years 1910–14: Hobson, Hilferding, Luxemburg, Bukharin, etc.) of a theory of imperialism that leads to seeing the revolutionary conjuncture as a boomerang effect of capitalism’s global contradictions and the violent forms that its expansion inevitably assumes. It is due more profoundly to his original treatment of the relationship between force and the temporality of politics, which can be illustrated both with his conception of ‘transforming the imperialist war into a revolutionary civil war’
in 1914–17 and with his reformulation of the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ at the time of ‘war communism’ and the NEP. His famous 1917 pamphlet State and Revolution, in which he rereads all of Marx’s and Engels’s texts on the transition from capitalism to communism in order to justify insurrection and define the goal of the seizure of power as the destruction of the state machine, is located in time right between the two. It has a clearly more scholastic character than other works like his 1915 Collapse of the Second International, his 1917 April Theses or his 1920 ‘Left-Wing’ Communism: An Infantine Disorder.

The slogan of transforming the imperialist war into a revolution was not Lenin’s purely individual idea. On the contrary, after the failure of the European socialist movement’s attempts to prevent the World War, the idea was shared by the different left-wing factions resisting the politics of patriotic unity in their various countries, which defined their common platform at the conferences in Zimmerwald (1915) and Kienthal (1916). But, while most left-wing leaders and theorists saw the slogan as an injunction, accompanied by a feeling of living through an apocalyptic moment of ‘choice’ between salvation and damnation – either revolution will reverse the course of events, or the war will reduce civilisation to ruins – Lenin reasoned in the opposite direction. He treated the war as an overdetermined historical process whose nature would necessarily be gradually modified, and which at the ‘opportune moment’ would make room for an intervention combining the ‘objective’ conditions with the ‘subjective’ conditions of revolution.

Lenin provided a philosophical foundation for this standpoint by rereading conjointly the works of Hegel (mainly his Logic) and Clausewitz (On War), as can be seen in the Philosophical Notebooks that he wrote during the same period (provided one does not expurgate them, as their Soviet publishers did). His reading led him to surprising applications of Clausewitz’s dictum that ‘war is the continuation of politics by other means’. The extreme violence of the process of mutual extermination of peoples set in motion by their respective governments is presented in Lenin’s analysis under the heading of the subjective factor, which must gradually induce the masses to turn against their governments and bring about a resurgence of class politics at the expense of patriotism in the soldiers’ state of mind. At the same time, Lenin subjects the historical incidence of the national question to analyses that lead to the idea that every revolutionary process is an ‘uneven’ combination of heterogeneous factors, whose conflict engenders a specific duration and determines conjunctures of concentration and dispersion of contradictions, of strengthening and weakening of state power. By this route, Lenin introduces a new idea into Marxism: neither the ‘conversion’ of force into historical rationality, nor its use (or rejection) as a revolutionary ‘means’, but rather a genuine politics of violence aiming at its transformation.

A related issue can be found at the heart of Lenin’s theoretical conceptions after the October Revolution. He worked them out in the midst of incessant (national and international) polemics in the fraught conditions of exercising power, waiting for and observing the defeat of the world revolution, and clashes among revolutionary currents. In reality, they do not contain any final synthesis (Stalin would take on the task of synthesis, in his own way). As we have argued elsewhere, (‘Dictature du prolétariat’, in Dictionnaire critique du marxisme), Lenin in fact invented a third concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat (following Marx’s concept of 1848–52 and Marx’s and Engels’s of 1872–5). The necessity of insurrection is part of Lenin’s concept, naturally, but he relates it very specifically to the changing conditions of the revolutionary process, which cannot be the subject of a ‘decision’. (Even in State and Revolution, where he writes, ‘The necessity of systematically imbuing the masses with this and precisely this view of violent revolution lies at the root of the entire theory of Marx and Engels’ (LCW 25, 405), Lenin finds a way to remind his readers that the forms of the seizure of power depend on circumstances.) On the other hand, the necessity of insurrection is only a prelude to a dialectic specific to the ‘transition period’,
which requires a clear distinction between the question of power and the question of the state apparatus. Here again, the issue is how to define a political practice in conditions of violence, which, in a sense, turn political practice against itself (just as the state must be turned against its traditional function so as to become a state that is no longer a state in the proper sense of the word). The distinction between power and apparatus comes from Marx, but, from now on, it serves to help comprehend the uneven development of the revolutionary process: for the proletariat, exercising power (through the intermediary of its representatives) does not in any way mean controlling the state apparatus, and still less controlling the effects of using an administrative and political machine that the ruling classes ‘built’ in order to block the masses’ access to political practice.

From this point on, the alternative of ‘bourgeois dictatorship’ or ‘proletarian dictatorship’ takes on another meaning. It implies that the bourgeois ‘dictatorship’ can be reproduced inside the revolutionary process, not just starting from the resistance of the revolution’s adversaries, but starting as well from its own political institutions. This requires a specific sort of (class) struggle, until the time when the conditions for the ‘withering away of the state’ foretold by the theoreticians of socialism are finally in place. In relation to the issue of violence, however, this idea proves to be particularly ambiguous, as historical experiences of ‘socialist revolutions’ on the Leninist model have repeatedly illustrated. It evokes the idea of an intensification of class struggle during the period of the dictatorship of the proletariat, which Lenin frequently described as a ‘relentless life-and-death struggle between two classes, two worlds, two historical epochs’ (‘A Publicist’s Notes’, 1920; *LCW* 30; 355), as well as a prolonged undertaking in which the proletariat does its apprenticeship in direct democracy and economic management (symbolised by the initiative of ‘communist subbotniks’: see ‘A Great Beginning’, 1919; *LCW* 29, 409–34). In principle, the party has the task of resolving this tension or carrying out the synthesis between the contradictory ‘tasks’ of the communist revolution, but Lenin’s works are silent about how this is supposed to be accomplished. History has shown that tends to happen instead is that the contradictions reproduce themselves within the party itself, and that no ideological purity can immunise it against its own internal violence.

In the following period, Gramsci’s thought, in which we today see a desperate effort to overcome the effects of Stalinised Bolshevism on the Communist movement and thus hoist it to the level necessary to confront fascism, can be considered an attempt at a synthesis of elements from these three traditions. Starting from the inspiring and tragic experience of the revolution of the Turin factory councils and from a voluntarist philosophy influenced by Sorel, this Communist leader, prisoner and martyr, whom the Comintern had abandoned to his fate, had undertaken to rethink all the elements of the Marxist and Leninist problematic while returning to a concept of politics of a Machiavellian type. In this way, he sought to take up ideally *both* a standpoint *from above* (defending the necessity of a revolutionary party that would function like a ‘modern prince’, as both a collective intellectual and strategist) and a standpoint *from below* (defending the necessity of an ‘intellectual and moral reform’ that would enable the masses to become the agents of their own history and leave behind the ‘subaltern’ condition to which capitalism confines them by raising themselves to a ‘hegemonic’ position). Here, we only keep hold of the following idea from his conception of revolution as a ‘war of movement’ that prepares *within capitalism itself* the conditions for proletarian power: in the last analysis, not only is there never a ‘pure’ revolution, but also any revolution that is active as a ‘praxis’ of transformation of social relations is an alternative that the ruled invent in face of a ‘passive revolution’, that is, a strategy of the rulers to perpetuate their domination by adapting to new historical conditions. (The classic example is the postrevolutionary construction of a French nation; and the question posed at the time Gramsci was writing was whether US ‘Fordism’, with its project of ‘rationalisation of the nation’s demographic composition’, should be interpreted in the
same way.) On this account, although Gramsci does not ignore violence \([\text{Gewalt}]\), he is less a theorist of violence than of ‘forces \([\text{Kräfte}]\)’ and ‘relationships of forces \([\text{Kräfteverhältnisse}]\)’, which cultural processes are as much part of as violence \([\text{Gewalt}]\) is, and which always necessitate analysing state structures in a relationship of reciprocal determination with the organisation of civil society.

These theoretical paths mapped out during the first half of the twentieth century in a time of war and revolution essentially remained the reference points of an enlarged Marxism, resisting a dogmatic ice age, until the upheaval of 1968. At that point, a new ‘great debate’ began about the forms and functions of revolutionary violence (including terrorist forms, in the case of the Italian Red Brigades and German Red Army Fraction). The most interesting debate theoretically was probably the divergence that opened up within Italian ‘workerism \([\text{operaismo}]\)’, which had profoundly renewed analysis of the political dimension of conflicts in the modern factory and of the labour force’s refusal to submit to ‘capitalist planning’ (or the ‘socialised workers’ refusal to let themselves be reduced to the status of ‘mass workers’). This problematic relaunched the discussion of the relationship among forms of power (above all the ‘state-form’, understood on a model derived from the Marxian analysis of the ‘commodity-form’) and processes of political subjectification. But while Mario Tronti, under the influence of his reading of Carl Schmitt, defended the notion of ‘the autonomy of the political’, observing that any form of organisation of capitalist labour presupposes state action, and asked how political antagonism is established when the state is no longer a state of the classical liberal type but rather a state of the Keynesian ‘interventionist’ type or the Christian-Democratic ‘consensual’ type, Antonio Negri, by contrast, started from the thesis of a structural crisis of the ‘planter-state’. Negri saw the autonomy of the state as a fictional mediation of social conflicts that conceals the generalisation of repressive practices. Under the rubric ‘workers’ autonomy’, he theorised a permanent insurrection of the collective worker against the dictates of capital, which he argued aimed at recomposing labour while at the same time destroying any ‘institutional mediation’.

It would be even more interesting to compare these theorisations systematically with the conception of ‘power’ that Michel Foucault began to develop at the same time, in particular in *Discipline and Punish* (1975). Marx’s analyses in *Capital* concerning capitalist violence, inasmuch as it aims to transform the worker’s body into a production tool, are incorporated in Foucault’s work in the more general framework of ‘disciplinary’ mechanisms of domination in modern societies, and – taking the work of Frankfurt-school researchers like Rusche and Kirchheimer in a different direction – of a theory of the ‘strategic’ function that the use of revolts and illegality has in the functioning of the state. In this way, the anthropological foundations of the Marxist theorisation of class struggles and economic and political force are, in a certain sense, put in question. Marxist historians such as E. H. Carr had taken the risk of questioning the boundary between political violence (‘revolt’) and criminal violence (‘delinquency’) only in dealing with precapitalist societies, but not in dealing with ‘developed’ forms of class struggles – such was the power of the taboo inherited from the debates with anarchism.

4. The anti-imperialist cycle and the ‘really existing catastrophes’. – In a text written in 1959, ‘The Meaning of Working through the Past \([\text{Was bedeutet: Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit}]\)’, Adorno posed the problem of the ‘survival’ of National Socialism in Germany as a psychic structure rooted in the objectivity of a certain economic order and in the defence mechanisms that the fear of historic catastrophes elicits.

One wants to break free of the past: rightly, because nothing at all can live in its shadow, and because there will be no end to the terror as long as guilt and violence are repaid with guilt and violence; wrongly, because the past that one would like to evade is still very much alive. National
Socialism lives on, and even today we still do not know whether it is merely the ghost of what was so monstrous that it lingers on after its own death, or whether it has not died at all, whether the willingness to commit the unspeakable survives in people as well as in the conditions that enclose them. (89–90.)

The text goes on to combine two types of approach to this structure of 'terror', which is capable of perpetuating itself beyond the conditions in which it emerged and of being an obstacle to any democratisation of politics. The text is, on the one hand, a critique of social alienation, inspired by the Marxian problematic of 'commodity fetishism', extended since Lukács’s work to the entire process of reification (or desubjectification) of society: 'Using the language of philosophy, one indeed could say that the people's alienation from democracy reflects the self-alienation of society' (93). On the other hand, it is a recourse to Freudian ego psychology (as in Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego and Civilisation and Its Discontents) that had already been set in motion in 1950 in Studies in the Authoritarian Personality: 'Authoritarian personalities are however altogether misunderstood when they are construed from the vantage point of a particular political-economic ideology; the well-known oscillations of millions of voters before 1933 between the National Socialist and Communist parties is no accident from the social-psychological perspective either. [...] Authoritarian personalities identify themselves with real-existing power per se, prior to any particular contents' (94). These two explanatory factors are subsequently joined together in a single matrix of subjection to the force of circumstances (or, to borrow La Boétie's celebrated expression, 'voluntary servitude'):

The economic order, and to a great extent also the economic organization modelled upon it, now as then renders the majority of people dependent upon conditions beyond their control and thus maintains them in a state of political immaturity. If they want to live, then no other avenue remains but to adapt. [...] The necessity of such adaptation, of identification with the given, the status quo, with power as such, creates the potential for totalitarianism. (98–9.)

The same terms are invoked in The Dialectic of Enlightenment in an attempt to approximate the 'elements of anti-Semitism': a 'false social order', in which individual subjectivity as such is repressed, spontaneously engenders a 'will to destruction' or a hatred that becomes inseparable from the organisation of production, which it defines as 'natural'. This hatred is then integrated into a compensatory portrayal of the Volksgemeinschaft and projected on historically existing groups that incarnate for modern (European) civilisation 'the other' in its midst. This hatred is thus also very much self-destructive.

One could, of course, discuss each of the elements of this analysis, and, above all, the nature of their interconnection, the explanation of whose mysteries [Auroren] requires no less than an entire metaphysics. Two thrusts of Adorno's discourse seem particularly noteworthy. On the one hand, he calls the irreversible fact that has turned our view of politics upside-down (including, and perhaps most particularly, the phenomena that the Marxist tradition as an expression of the workers' movement had developed) a (both real and symbolic) 'catastrophe'. On the other hand, he does not hesitate, as his argument unfolds, to couple the threat associated with the spectre of Nazism with the threat that national-liberation movements may embody, to the extent that they too base themselves on glorification of the 'folk community':

Today the fascist wish-image unquestionably blends with the nationalism of the so-called underdeveloped countries, which now, however, are instead called 'developing countries'. Already during the war the slogans about Western plutocracies and pro-
letarian nations expressed sympathy with those who felt shortchanged in the imperialist competition and also wanted a place at the table. [...] Nationalism today is both obsolete and up-to-date. [...] But nationalism is up-to-date in so far as the traditional and psychologically supremely invested idea of the nation, which still expresses the community of interests within the international economy, alone has sufficient force to mobilize hundreds of millions of people for goals they cannot immediately identify as their own. [...] Only in an age in which it was already toppling has nationalism become completely sadistic and destructive. (97–8.)

We do not think that these formulations can be interpreted as expressions of contempt for Third-World liberation struggles. Rather, they take a critical look at how extremes can meet at a time when, at least in Europe, the discovery of anti-imperialist struggles, as well as the possibility of viewing their global significance in an enlarged Marxist framework (prepared by classical theories of imperialism) had contributed for many revolutionaries and ‘left-wing’ activists to hiding the elements of antinomy inherent in very idea of a politics of violence.

4.1 The first point that strikes us as important is that while the intensive theoretical work that liberation struggles gave rise to before and after the Second World War admittedely widened the field of application of reflections on force considerably, by giving them a more and more central place in political thought (with the same justification as the theory of ‘development’), it did not fundamentally modify the definition of this category. One might even think that it returned to the same dichotomy between the institutional and spontaneous aspects of force that so many efforts of post-Engels Marxist theoreticians (particularly in Lenin’s work and above all Gramsci’s) were directed against. In a situation characterised by massive forms of absolute impoverishment and harsh (colonial or semi-colonial) political domination, arisen in a civilisation suffused with racism towards non-European humanity, which had for centuries not hesitated in the end to resort to extermination, the various currents each tried in their own ways to take note of the fact that violence is not truly a choice but rather a constraint. The only possibility available seemed to be to rearrange it and reinvent its modalities. There was only one apparent exception in this respect: the politics of ‘non-violence’ carried out by Gandhi, to which we will return.

On the one hand we have thus theories of revolutionary armed struggle, such as ‘people’s war’ (Mao in China) or ‘guerrilla war’ (Castro and Che Guevara in Latin America). Their mutual opposition gave rise at the time to intense ideological debates, with different and clashing conceptions of the link between vanguard and masses, the primacy of the political (meaning ideological) factor and the military factor, nationalism and internationalism. There can be no doubt that these debates defined an era in military thought, putting in question in particular the distinctions between war and revolution that had been the foundation of the classic definitions of politics (as can also be seen in the reception they got in Carl Schmitt’s counterrevolutionary essay The Theory of the Partisan). But it is all the more striking to note that, whatever the subtlety of the class analyses that they give rise to (clearer in Mao’s work than in Guevara’s or Régis Debray’s), they are always conceived according to a strategic model, in which the only actors are the appurtenances of ‘forces’ and ‘masses’ shifting in space and over time. This is probably why they have an intrinsic need to compensate for their objectivism by referring to complementary ideal states, particularly eschatological prospects of the coming of the ‘new man’ once the process of liberation is accomplished.

Faced with this objectivism, we have the extreme subjectivism of a discourse like Frantz Fanon’s (whose amplification by Sartre in the form of a sort of exorcism of extreme colonial
violence ensured its lasting, universal repercussions). Here, the subject is no longer force as organised power or force, but force as an ‘absolute praxis’ that itself, immediately, effects the spiritual liberation of the colonised at the same time that it turns the accumulated capacity for terror against the coloniser:

At the level of individuals, violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect. [...] When the people have taken violent part in the national liberation they will allow no one to set themselves up as ‘liberators’. [...] Yesterday they were completely irresponsible; today they mean to understand everything and make all decisions. Illuminated by violence, the consciousness of the people rebels against any pacification. From now on the demagogues, the opportunists, and the magicians have a difficult task. The action [praxis] which has thrown them into a hand-to-hand struggle confers upon the masses a voracious taste for the concrete. (Fanon 94–5.)

This great gap has in fact never been bridged. This may be what has intellectually disarmed anti-imperialist movements in face of counter-revolutionary strategies – and, in the last analysis, in face of their own authoritarian and totalitarian lapses as well.

4.2 By comparison, one could say that more theoretical creativity, if not political effectiveness, has been apparent in the discourses of crisis that tried throughout the fascist period in Europe to interpret ‘negatively’ the genesis of extreme violence and its capacity to wipe out the space for politics (including by turning revolutionary identities upside-down), by combining Marxist analytical categories with Nietzschean theses on ‘cruelty’ or Freudian theses on thanatos (the death drive) and its role in collective identification (as we have already seen in Adorno’s work). The theorists who developed these discourses resolutely refused to conceive of class struggles within the confines of a progressive, productivist anthropological horizon, as the classical Marxists had. We would say that this was the case with Wilhelm Reich’s attempts in The Mass Psychology of Fascism (1933), Georges Bataille in ‘The Psychological Structure of Fascism’ (1933–4), and Walter Benjamin in the whole formed by his 1921 essay ‘Zur Kritik der Gewalt’ (‘Towards a Critique of Violence’) and his 1940 ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ – with all the differences that distinguish these works from each other.

Reich – despite the dubiousness of his sometimes raving naturalist biologism – points insistently at Marxism’s blind point (the ‘irrational’ libidinal structure of mass gatherings and movements that are responsible for ‘making their own history’) as well as the parallel blind spots of Freudianism, which ought to make it possible to comprehend the trans-individual material of politics (denial of the state’s repressive function linked to forms of the patriarchal family). Almost a half-century later, Deleuze and Guattari would take this as their starting point in Anti-Oedipus and, above all, in A Thousand Plateaus (1980).

Bataille describes the state, not just as an apparatus of power in the service of specific class interests, but as an institution that tends to shelter the ‘homogeneous part’ of society centred on productive utility from the boomerang effect of its ‘heterogeneous part’, that is, from the inassimilable forces which bring together the opposed figures of the sacred and disgust, as well as the forms of individual or collective violence that serve as the erotic foundation of sovereignty and more generally of mastery. He suggests that Mussolini’s and Hitler’s fascist formations were not able to mobilise the oppressed masses without bringing the heterogeneous element of social life back to the foreground, and redirecting it against victims banished from society. Bataille also dares to suggest that the proletariat or people can only triumph over fascism if they mobilise the same elements (returning, in a certain way, to the Marxian conception of the
Lumpenproletariat, but, in contrast to the original conception, in order to value it positively.

Benjamin, finally, in his youthful work (explicitly influenced by Sorel) shows that any institutional (legal) force takes the form of a monopoly and consequently of an excess of power, which points as required to its own targets in society by setting the boundaries of legality and illegality. He then contrasts it with the extra-legal and therefore revolutionary figure of ‘divine violence’, which refounds the institution while destroying it, but which is inherently divisible into state violence and redemptive violence. This formulation is close to the one that Bataille would arrive at later (the two of them have the reference to ‘sovereignty’ in common), except insofar as it presents the ambiguity of extreme violence as an aporia and not as a solution.

Much later, after living through the experience of fascism and encountering Marxism, in the 1940 ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ that put an end to his unfinished work, Benjamin portrays Spartacism as the heir of the Blanquist tradition that joins ‘hatred’ of the exploiters with the ‘spirit of sacrifice’ (Thesis 12). But, above all, he draws an absolute demarcation line between the violence of the rulers and the violence of the ruled, the ‘generations of the downtrodden’, whose unlikely triumph through liberatory violence – comparable to the arrival of a messiah – gives meaning to the century-old accumulation of rubble and opens up the possibility of a different kind of history.

All these formulations undeniably have a partly mythical (or mystical) character. But they also share the way in which they point towards the existence of another scene (to speak like Freud) in which, in a sense, ‘behind the back’ of class struggles and relationships and forces and even more of ‘class consciousness’, a conjunction or metamorphosis of forms of objective violence (structurally implicated in mechanisms of domination and exploitation) into subjective violence (or even ultra-subjective violence, resulting from identification and fascination with an imaginary, collective ‘omnipotence’) takes place. An idea of this kind, even if expressed in a speculative way, has the advantage of ruling out as a matter of principle any possibility of thinking of history as a ‘conversion’ of violence, let alone any possibility of mastering violence without a boomerang effect on those who use it, whether they are the powers of the state or those of the revolution.

4.3 Criticising the illusion of a tactical or historical mastery of violence (in opposition to all the Marxist theoreticians, with the possible exception of some of Rosa Luxemburg’s remarks on the Russian Revolution – see Schriften zur Theorie, 180 et sqq.), without for all that believing in the possibility of eliminating it or doing without it, thus does not necessarily mean eliminating the question of a politics of violence. On the contrary, it means relaunching a politics of violence on a different basis. Neither does it mean making history anew. But it may mean re-opening debates that have been evaded or closed too rapidly. To mention only one such debate, which we think is fundamental: one of the great ‘missed appointments’ in the history of Marxism seems to have been an encounter between the Leninist politics of the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ and the politics of ‘non-violence’ and ‘civil disobedience’ theorised and practised by Gandhi in India – the other great form of revolutionary practice in the twentieth century (with results that were equally decisive and, in the long term, equally problematic). For Gandhian non-violence is not (or rather not only) an ethics, but primarily a politics, with its own conception of the social conflict between oppressors and oppressed and its own way of gradually turning around the relationship of forces by initiating a ‘conversion of means and ends’ (see Bondu rant and Chandra (1988), the only great Marxist-trained author to have ventured in this direction).

This fictional history never took place. But it could take place in people’s minds in the twenty-first century, as they face the development of a global economy of violence and the concomitant crisis of representation and sovereignty. It has the advantage of drawing our attention, not only to the necessity of civilising the state, but also to the necessity of
civilising the revolution. The latter is no easier than the former, but it is a precondition to recovering a Marxist theoretical heritage that has progressively discovered its multiplicity at the same time that it has discovered its fragility.

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Translated by Peter Drucker

Anarchism, anarcho-syndicalism, arbitrariness, Bonapartism, civil war, class struggles, coercion, Cold War, coup d’état, crime, criminality, despotic socialism, despotism of capital, destruction, destructive forces, dictatorship of the proletariat, end of history, extermination, extremism, final solution, Fanonism, Fidelism, French Revolution, Gandhianism, general strike, genocide, just war, Gewaltstaat, Gramscianism, guerrilla, Guevarism, holocaust, injustice, Jacobinism, Leninism, left radicalism, liberation, Machiavel-
Another kind of Gewalt: Beyond Law
Re-Reading Walter Benjamin

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Abstract
This article is the first in a series of discussions of the essay ‘Violence’ by Balibar from the Historical-Critical Dictionary of Marxism, published in this issue of Historical Materialism. The article revisits Walter Benjamin’s reflection on the concept of violence, attempting to rethink its semantics in the tension between right and justice. After examining the continuum of juridical violence in relation to the logic of the modern state, it attempts to delineate the possibility of another type of violence: a violence that is not a means in order to attain an end, but which finds in itself the criterion of its own justice. Research into this kind of violence has been a particularly urgent and complex problem in modern politics which, together with the foreclosure of justice, has rendered unthinkable qualitatively different types of Gewalt, types that lie beyond the sterile opposition between violence and non-violence. Rethinking the question of justice means that, in a conflict, however violent it might be, a non-teleological criterion is possible, starting with the extent to which some part of the struggle can be defined as just.

Keywords
violence, justice, right, law, state of exception

The German term Gewalt, whose meaning includes simultaneously both potestas and violentia,1 is not easily translated into other European languages. Balibar makes sure to underline this semantic ambivalence:

In German […] the word Gewalt has a more extensive meaning than its ‘equivalents’ in other European languages: violence or violenza and pouvoir, potere, power (equally suitable to ‘translate’ Macht or even Herrschaft, depending on the context). Seen in this way, ‘from the outside’, the term Gewalt thus contains an intrinsic ambiguity: it refers at the same time to the negation of law or justice and to their realisation or the assumption of responsibility for them by an institution (generally the state). This ambiguity […] is not necessarily a disadvantage. On

the contrary, it signals the existence of a latent dialectic or a ‘unity of opposites’
that is a constituent element of politics.

Dividing Gewalt into ‘power’ and ‘violence’, one must not think of two sides
of violence, the institutional and the anti-institutional, because much
apparently extralegal violence ends up written into the institutional record.
Furthermore, a great deal of state violence, which is denounced as illegitimate,
is of rather vital importance for maintaining the state machinery. In this
ambivalence is hidden the violent character of law, that violence that founds
the state and preserves it.

The problem that directly concerns the ambiguity of Gewalt is transposed
to another plane: the question to be posed should not solely regard the nature
of that ambivalence, but rather the possibility of thinking and practising
another kind of Gewalt beyond that of law and the state. The question is
important. As Balibar reminds us, Engels also had to deal with it when,
analysing Bismarck’s policies and the Revolution von Oben [revolution from
above], he found himself faced with the ‘irremediably equivocal’ character of
the term revolution which presaged ‘a reference to various types of Gewalt’.
This is an ambiguity not to be submerged, but, rather, fruitfully exploited in
order to pose ‘the difficult question of knowing whether a specifically
proletarian model of violent action exists’. The crucial problem, posed by
Balibar in terms of a ‘type of Gewalt beyond Gewalt’, regards the practicality
of Gewalt that transcends the false dichotomy between violence and non-
violence, beyond a metaphysical conception of Gewalt as absolute evil. The
‘question of a violence of a different kind [die Frage nach andern Arten der
Gewalt]’: this is the revolutionary question posed by Walter Benjamin in an
extremely dense essay of 1921.\(^2\)

If it is possible to respond in the affirmative to this question, then the
antinomy violence and non-violence dissolves, because such a dualism assumes
the existence of only one kind of Gewalt. The politics of non-violence does not
use force, not even to get beyond the horizon of Gewalt, but, rather, takes for
granted the existence of only one type of violence, even where it seeks to
abolish it. Moreover, the non-violent actor affirms his own refusal of violence
by placing it under the protective umbrella of state Gewalt.

\(^2\) Benjamin 1921. Benjamin’s text was conceived as part of a work entitled Politik, subdivided
into two parts: the first titled ‘Der wahre Politiker’, of which the review by Paul Scheerbart is all
that remains, and the second, entitled ‘Die wahre Politik’, in turn divided into two chapters,
a) ‘Der Abbau der Gewalt’ and b) ‘Teleologie ohne Endzweck’. The first chapter is included
in ‘Zur Kritik der Gewalt’, while the second can be traced throughout the dense Theologisch–
politisches Fragment. On the genesis of Benjamin’s writings on Gewalt, see Folkers 1975,
Only if we grasp the true nature of state Gewalt is it possible to pose the question of a different kind of violence. This Gewalt of a different kind is not the force that decides in a conflict between two equal rights, but, rather, that which is able to interrupt a permanent state of exception [Ausnahmezustand]. It is the same as that which, in Marxian terms, is delineated as a perennial ‘civil war’ between the capitalist class and the working class to decide the length of the normal working day.³ The Gewalt that seeks to determine the level of wages does not lead to civil war, but can, at most, achieve a provisional compromise; a compromise that, by its nature, is marked by violence. The compromise is never desired as such, but comes to be accepted, and as such contains within itself a coercive moment: it hides the intention to take up again as soon as it becomes possible the goal that it was necessary to give up. Compromise politics can be a ‘peaceful struggle’ [friedlicher Kampf],⁴ but does not eliminate violence; on the contrary, it reproduces it. A compromise can momentarily suspend the struggle, but constitutes in any case only a truce in the continuum of violence.

If the compromise that arises from a conflict between equal rights is recorded in the register of violence, it is for good reason that, where a compromise is not possible, only Gewalt decides:

The capitalist maintains his rights as a purchaser [behauptet sein Recht als Käufer] when he tries to make the working day as long as possible, and, where possible, to make two working days out of one. On the other hand, the peculiar nature of the commodity sold implies a limit to its consumption by the purchaser, and the worker maintains his right as a seller [behauptet sein Recht als Verkäufer] when he wishes to reduce the working day to a particular normal length. There is here therefore an antinomy, of right and against right, both equally bearing the seal of the law of exchange. Between equal rights, force decides [Recht wider Recht, beide gleichmäßig durch das Gesetz des Warenaustausches besiegt. Zwischen gleichen Rechten entscheidet die Gewalt]. Hence, in the history of capitalist production, the establishment of a norm for the working day presents itself as a struggle over the limits of that day, a struggle between collective capital, i.e., the class of capitalists, and collective labour, i.e., the working class.⁵

Marx was very clear that these rights are equally stamped by the laws of commodity exchange and that the struggle between these equal rights is completely inscribed within the ‘history of capitalist production’. There is no

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³. ‘The establishment of a normal working day is therefore the product of a protracted and more or less concealed civil war [Bürgerkrieg] between the capitalist class and the working class’. Marx 1977, p. 412–13 (Chapter 10, Section 7).
⁵. Marx 1977, p. 344 (Chapter 10, Section 1).
escaping this historicity stemming from struggle between these equal rights. A 'fair wage' does not exist, as fair can be used to describe only the breaking of the wage relation, and therefore of the continuum of civil war between the classes. Between the two sides in struggle there can exist only a reciprocal overpowering, but no recognition of any authentic community of interests between them. Any compromise is marked by violence: the simple manifestation of that which both parties are forced to accept against their will. This is the problem of Gewalt posed by Marx, and, in the twentieth century, by the Wobblies (IWW), who in their founding document wrote, 'Instead of the conservative motto, “A fair day’s wage for a fair day's work”, we must inscribe on our banner the revolutionary watchword, “Abolition of the wage system”’. The conception of a true break with the continuum of juridical violence was revived starting with a tradition of thought that, against Carl Schmitt, sought to understand the exception as a rule: from Benjamin, to Korsch, to Marx.

1. The Gewalt of law and of the state

The genesis of the modern state is, according to the expression of Burkhardt, characterised by a vast process of ‘systematisation [Systematisierung]’ of Gewalt. The pathogenesis of the modern state is marked by the struggle of the state for a monopoly of power; in order to be able to affirm itself as an accomplished fact, the state had to eliminate every counter-power and the entire complex of Stände and corporate bodies that, with their rights and their particular auctoritates, constituted the political nervous system of the social fabric.

The monopoly of violence/power that is born with the modern idea that the sovereign people is the only legitimate political subject able to act politically through its representatives, gives way to the foreclosure of justice. Hobbes wrote that ‘no law can be unjust’, that, in fact, ‘the law is made by the sovereign power, and all that is done by such power is warranted and owned by every one of the people; and that which every man will have so, no man can say is unjust’. Through its representatives, who are authorised by the people to act in their name, it is the people themselves who act, and it is not possible to think that the people would act unjustly toward themselves. The question of

6. Benjamin 1940, VIII.
8. The term ‘foreclosure’ is a translation of the French legal term ‘forclusion’, which really means ‘preclusion’. ‘Foreclosure’, in its Lacanian usage to which I here refer, means exclusion [Ausstoßung] of an element outside of the symbolic field, and therefore has a more radical sense than the Freudian ‘removal [Verwerfung]’ which remains within the symbolic field.
justice is thereby eliminated, and as Hobbes writes, ‘no law can be unjust’. To pose the question of justice within this conceptual constellation means to consider the possibility of the impossible, to ‘puncture’ this constellation in order to uncover new political possibilities.

The birth of the modern state is accompanied by the total razing of every extra-statist power and by the radical expropriation of every residue of violence from the hands of the individual. In fact, if the sole political subject is the people, who as the sovereign retain a monopoly of power, individuals become not only expropriated of all political power, but also become politically insignificant. They are equals because all are equally insignificant from the political point of view. Benjamin points out that, characteristic of modern law, ‘so far as the individual as legal subject is concerned, is the tendency to deny the natural ends of such individuals in all those cases in which such ends could, in a given situation, be usefully pursued by violence’.10 This systematic rationalisation and organisation of Gewalt coincides with its reduction to means: only as means can it be justified, either as state violence that preserves law [rechtserhaltende Gewalt] and defends it from possible violations, or as that violence, including the constituent violence of revolutionaries, that ends up creating new law [rechtsetzende Gewalt]. With the neutralisation of any recourse to divine or transcendent ends, such as those posed by the premodern discourse on bellum justum, there remains only a mechanics of force in which the strongest is also right.11

The nature of the modern state emerges clearly in the praxis of the police. Here, the distinction between a power/violence that imposes law [rechtsetzende Gewalt] and one that defends it [rechtserhaltende Gewalt] is suppressed: the police imposes law in the act itself in which it preserves it, intervening in precisely those cases ‘where no clear legal situation exists’.12 Not only in extreme cases, in which domestic order and public security are really threatened, but in every intervention in which the police violates the law in order to preserve it: when, for example, the police exceed the speed limit to stop the driver of an automobile guilty of having exceeded it, or when they intervene violently to break up a demonstration. This suspension and violation of the law is the normal practice of police action: only by its own violation can the law be maintained. There is no stable border between Gewalt and law, and the police illustrates this confusion in a paradigmatic way.

This delineates a situation in which it becomes impossible to decide which is the exception and which the rule, as both are inescapably intertwined in a

police net. It was such a net that Benjamin had the opportunity to observe at work in the bloody Social-Democratic repression of Noske against the Spartakist revolt in January 1919 and against the communist rising in the Ruhr in the Spring of 1920. But the criticism of police praxis without the criticism of the political form that makes that spectral praxis possible would leave the job half-done. And the political form in which the greatest imaginable degeneration of Gewalt is possible is democracy. Benjamin comments:

And though the police, may, in particulars, appear the same everywhere, it cannot finally be denied that in absolute monarchy, where they represent the power of a ruler in which the legislative and executive supremacy are united, their spirit is less devastating than in democracies, where their existence, elevated by no such relation, bears witness to the greatest conceivable degeneration of violence [die denkbar größte Entartung der Gewalt].

The embarrassment of Derrida when commenting on this passage is extremely instructive. Derrida is unable to see the decisive passage, namely, that which carries the critique of violence over into the critique of democracy. To save democracy, he is forced to speak of a degenerative form of democracy, of its distance from some model of democracy which has yet to be built, or revived, while, for Benjamin, it is instead democracy itself which makes possible the greatest degeneration of Gewalt. Overturning Benjamin’s reasoning, Derrida writes that if, in absolute monarchies, police violence appears as what it is and according to its own nature, in democracies their own principle is negated by such violence, which appears as what should not be. The scandal would, in other words, consist of a police violence that, in democracies, should not manifest itself. One must here respond that police violence does not corrupt the democratic principle, as Derrida thinks, but, rather, expresses its most intimate essence. Police violence appears in its ‘spectral presence’ especially in modern representative democracy, for only there can it truly pervade everything. Its presence is ‘spectral [gespenstisch]’, ‘elusive’, ‘diffused into every locale’, because it does not recognise any distinction between public and private spheres. Inasmuch as it is legitimated by popular sovereignty, in the name of which it acts, it encounters no obstacles, but only a mass of individuals, private because deprived of any Gewalt.

The problem cannot be resolved by recourse to some constitutional architecture capable of guaranteeing the distinction between legislative power.

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and executive power, already a conceptually problematic distinction when the principle of popular sovereignty began to be affirmed, and today obviously in crisis empirically as well. Only the democratic police retains an immanent power in their own hands: they act in the name of the people, and therefore everything that they do is an expression of the popular will in the name of which they act. What is done, inasmuch as an expression of the popular will, cannot be claimed to be unjust. In case the objection had to be made that the police should not act illegally, an exception is always ready, a superior requirement of natural law: public security, or a terrorist warning, to legitimate the illegal police act. The question not only concerns daily cases of abuse of power, but all those cases in which the police systematically violates the norm, such as when they violate the secrecy of private life, or basic civil rights in the name of a real or presumed emergency. The same lack of distinction between norm and exception, summed up by Benjamin in the formula ‘emergency situation [Ausnahmezustand]’ as a rule [Regel], constitutes not only an anti-Schmittian polemic but also the perspective through which to view National Socialism: not as an episode or a parenthesis in the normal course of liberal democracy, but completely internal to the continuum of law and of modern representative democracy. It is the category of ‘totalitarianism’ that is to be thrown out with disdain, because the political forms attributed to it are in reality completely sealed within our political conceptuality. On this point, Slavoj Žižek points out that it is not an accident that the highest point of

15. It is right under everyone’s eyes that the praxis of governmental legislation, through decree-laws, has become the rule. As such, Agamben has stressed that ‘the democratic principle of separation of powers has today diminished, and the executive power has in fact absorbed, at least in part, the legislative power’. Agamben 2003, p. 28. One must, however, observe that what today appears as the diminishing of the separation of powers is none other than the expression of the crisis of that distinction, a crisis that accompanies the birth of the modern state itself. In other words, that crisis that consists not of something that has come about only today, but rather as the continuum of a crisis that is part and parcel of the modern state.

16. Agamben again observes that the Fascist and Nazi régimes left intact the pre-existing constitutions, attaching to ‘the legal constitution a second structure, often not legally formalized, that could exist alongside the other thanks to the state of exception’. In this sense, Agamben comments further, ‘the dry opposition democracy/dictatorship is outdated for analyzing the governmental paradigms dominant today’. Agamben 2003, p. 63.


18. For a perspective opposed to that presented here, see Makropoulos 1989, pp. 36 et sqq. More recently, on the Benjamin-Schmitt relationship, see Rumpf 1997, in particular on the theme of the state of exception, see. pp. 28 et sqq; on various ways of interpreting the state of exception in Schmitt and Benjamin, see Heil 1996, pp. 158–9. For further analysis see also Bredekamp 1998, pp. 901–16, which emphasises, as expressing an explicit divergence from Schmitt, the element of duration.
Stalinist terror came about soon after the Constitution was approved in 1936, which was supposed to signal officially the end of the state of emergency and the return to normality, and which named as the political subject of the state not longer the workers, but the People. From that moment enemies and opponents are no longer class enemies in a conflict that rends the social fabric, because, with the concept of the People in force, conflict is neutralised and society is homogenised. The opponent, real or imagined, is now the monster that wants to tear up the social fabric and as such must be extirpated.

To imagine that the police will always act within the limits prescribed by law means not understanding the essence of modern policing. The ‘assertion that the ends of police violence [Polizeigewalt] are always identical or even connected to those of general law is entirely untrue’. The police intervenes, legally, wherever the state is unable to guarantee, through the legal order, the empirical ends it desires to attain. If the police acts legally, its ends are legitimated by its praxis; if instead it acts illegally, its Gewalt and its illegal means are legitimated by the ends. The space of this intervention can be constantly reopened ‘for security reasons [der Sicherheit wegen]’ and in all those cases in which there is no clearly defined legal situation [klare Rechtslage]; the exception becomes a constituent part of police intervention, inasmuch as, in police praxis, exceptions and norms are based on an indivisible nexus. In democracy, this intermixing becomes structural.

To expect a control function to be exercised by the legal system means, once again, to trust in a presumed separation of powers, or better, in the limits that power is supposed to impose on itself. The function of the modern legal system is to impede the granting of the use of Gewalt by individuals, concentrating all force in the hands of the state. The fear of a Gewalt that threatens social order under a form of vendetta, has resulted in making frauds punishable: the reasons for this have nothing to do with moral order, but, instead, are due to the fear that the defrauded person might resort to violence. It is the monopoly of state Gewalt that is put in question every time an individual engages in Gewalt. And that happens every time an individual decides to ‘take justice into her own hands’. It suffices merely to pronounce this phrase, because whoever pronounces it acquires an ambiguous aura, at the very edges of legality. The entire modern legal system, as Girard observes, is nothing other than the rationalisation of the vendetta, an efficient technique for preventing violence: it is supposed to distance society from the threat of violence. In this sense, it is the rationalisation of sacrifice, force that is capable of breaking the spiral of violence and focusing

in the person of the victim the widespread germs of dissent. It is for this reason that falsehood is punished: not for love of truth, but for fear of the violence that fraud might unleash in the defrauded party.

It is in the logic of state Gewalt to suppress any external violence, including that which gave birth to the state. This process leads to a decay of law, until new forces, previously oppressed, ‘triumph over the hitherto lawmaking violence’. But it is a falsely revolutionary outcome.

The law governing their oscillation rests on the circumstance that all law-preserving violence [rechtserhaltende Gewalt], in its duration, indirectly weakens the lawmaking violence [rechtsetzende Gewalt] it represents, by suppressing hostile counterviolence [die Unterdrückung der feindlichen Gegengewalten].

The Gewalt that preserves law weakens it by the repression of every external Gegengewalt, even that lawmaking violence that it represents, until new Gewalten triumph and ‘found a new law, destined in its turn to decay’. This is the philosophy of history of Gewalten that, in realising just ends, suppress in a revolutionary way the preceding power and give way to a new legal order in which the new Gewalt will find justification. The problem posed by Benjamin is how to put an end to this cycle. The revolutionary question consists in breaking this cycle [Durchbrechung]. The revolution, taken seriously, must be understood as the breaking of the violent continuum of law. That means severing the relationship between means and ends: it is not the ends that, if realised, must justify the means employed, but, rather, the means themselves that must contain within themselves an intrinsic criteria of their own justness.

The state monopoly of Gewalt and the radical expropriation of Gewalt from the hands of the individual can lead to the idea that the exercise of extra-statist Gewalt means the re-appropriation of Gewalt by the individual, as an act in itself subversive and anti-statist. This illusion does not derive from a mistaken evaluation of the relation of forces, but from a lack of understanding of the nature of the Gewalt that one wants to fight against. In order to preserve the monopoly of Gewalt, the state must employ a whole series of mechanisms for disciplining and controlling potentially deviant behaviours. This is because these can reactivate new spirals of vendettas in the social, and therefore a cycle of violence and counter-violence.

The problem raised by Benjamin does not regard merely a breakdown of law [Rechtsbruch], as could happen in a revolution, in war, or even in ‘the

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23. Ibid.
figure of the “great” criminal [des “großen” Verbrechers]. The latter, inasmuch as it is an artifice of a violation of the law, frequently enjoys the ‘secret admiration of the public’, ‘the sympathy of the masses against the law’. This sympathy derives from the fact that in the Verbrecher something subversive manifests itself, namely the use of a Gewalt beyond that of the state monopoly. But this Gewalt, although it constitutes a break with the law, is still within the legal framework. The violence that only counterposes itself to the violence of the state still shares with it the essence.

The emphasis placed on counter-power and multitudes that can keep open the conflictual constituent horizon of power is completely inscribed within the statist horizon. It is a useful realism to bring to light the polemical dimension of the political, against neutralising tendencies. But this is very little. Violent practices, withdrawal or disobedience to the law can produce new law or democratise the existing one, but do so by reactivating the rechtsetzende Gewalt. They do not constitute any break with the violent continuum of law, and, where they counter-pose themselves to the existing law, they only succeed in reinforcing it. “The meaning of every violence is that it founds new law. It is not the negation of law, as is believed by those attracted to its subversion act, but on the contrary is its foundation”. These words, written in the same years as the Critique of Violence, were the product of the same crisis of law. One finds in them a resonance of Benjamin’s theses. If violence, even that which is apparently the most subversive, only manages to renew the law, making it into ‘new law’, the revolutionary question of how to change the existing bad elements can no longer be posed in quantitative terms, as an escalation of opposition, but must necessarily pass through the theory and practice of another kind of Gewalt capable of going beyond the dual nature of the state: ‘Constitutional State’ and the ‘Repressive State’. It is only in this sense that one must rectify the comment of Rosenzweig: not ‘every violence’ founds new law, because of the challenge posed by Benjamin regarding how thinkable and practical another kind of Gewalt would be.

2. Another kind of Gewalt: the possibility of the impossible

Modern positive law presupposes the monopoly of Gewalt: it is for this reason that it condemns the existence of an extra-statist Gewalt, not because of the ends to which it could lead. Benjamin writes that this can give us an idea of

24. Benjamin 1921, p. 239
25. The works of Negri 1999 and Hardt and Negri 2004 go in this direction.
just how dangerous Gewalt is to the law, by looking at those situations where it ‘raises a serious threat’, and where ‘it is still allowed to demonstrate in accordance with the existing legal order’: namely in the class struggle [Klassenkampf].\(^{27}\) Benjamin is thinking here of the right to strike conceded to the workers; a right that the state must concede when it is unable to avoid doing so, when conflicts become dangerous to the legal order itself. In the class struggle, the organised working class [organisierte Arbeiterchaft] is, apart from the state that exercises the jus ad bellum, ‘the only legal subject entitled to exercise violence’.\(^{28}\) Even if, in the case of strikes, the state can recognise that right not as a ‘right to violence [Recht auf Gewalt]’, but, rather, as a right of non-action and of withdrawal from the violence of the employer. But this is only the point of view of the state. From the point of view of the working class, one must instead start with the recognition that it, as a class, is the ‘only legal subject’ apart from the state, ‘entitled to exercise violence’. The case of the right to strike is emblematic: it is only as a concession that the state concedes the right to exercise violence outside of its own monopoly. Such a concession, which is, in reality, reconcilable with the desire to neutralise every form of extra-statist violence, constitutes a moment of decay in the legal sphere. The right to strike contradicts the interests of the state; if it concedes it, it does so only to slow down and to put off ‘violent actions the state is afraid to oppose. Did not the workers previously resort at once to sabotage and set fire to factories?’\(^{29}\) It is this violence that, through the regulated concession of the right to strike, the state seeks to exorcise, in order to avoid having to clash with it. The particular violence of the organised working class succeeds, therefore, in taking away a Recht auf Gewalt from the state that, inasmuch as it can found and modify legal relations, is similar to the Gewalt that arises from war: in struggle, as in war, new relations follow that are recognised by new law. It is necessary, however, to emphasise that the case of the right to violence of the working class constitutes an anomaly in the logic of the state: contrary to the tendency of the state to monopolise all Gewalt and to produce private, atomised individuals, the working class presents itself in front of the state as a collective subject endowed with a right to exercise violence. This side, in continuous tension with the long war of the state against collective rights, allows us to think a different kind of Gewalt.

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27. Benjamin 1921, p. 239–40.
28. Benjamin 1921, p. 239.
29. Benjamin 1921, p. 245.
The Spartacus League expressed the awareness of working for ‘liberation in the name of defeated generations’. Contrary to the Social-Democratic conception of progress, even in a ‘scandalous’ manner for Social Democracy, the Spartacus League, linking itself to the name of the ancient leader of the slave insurrection, and with that at the failed attempts at liberation, broke the vicious cycle of progress. The action of the Spartacists corresponded to an ‘eternalization of the moment’, in the precise sense in which Rosenzweig spoke. They were the authors of a final act, they did not act for the future, but to redeem past generations of the oppressed. The temporality that they broke up was that which dominates over the oppressed.

‘During the first fifteen days of January 1919 at Berlin, the experience of time changed’. It was the comprehension of events that broke the historic continuum, the preliminary overthrow of the point of view of historicism. If one must take into account what might happen tomorrow, there would never be any revolt. Indeed, the more reprehensible actions of revolt would never occur. The revolt, its value, does not consist in preparing for the day after tomorrow, but in sustaining ‘the expected epiphany (together with the defeat of today)’. Revolt is distinct from revolution; or, at least, from a certain way of understanding revolution.

That which primarily distinguishes revolt from revolution is a different sense of time [...]. One can say that revolt suspends historic time and unexpectedly replaces it with a time in which everything is valued for itself, independently of its consequences and of the complex of transitoriness and perenniality of which history consists. The revolution instead falls completely and deliberately in historic time.

Precisely because in revolt one acts once and for all, the fruit of the action is contained in the action itself, not in any tomorrow that must be achieved. The revolt is the heart of revolution only if we understand the latter not in historicist terms – that is, not as a praxis accomplished to achieve a superior end – but as the action that breaks a determined historical temporality; as the

30. Benjamin 1940, XII. ‘The revolt of 1919 became a moment of universal struggle, that lasted millennia – and not just a moment of internal German postwar politics, as it is often presented’: Löwy 2001.
31. Rosenzweig 1981, II, 3. Rosenzweig writes that the idea of progress ‘is against nothing so much as it is against the possibility that the “meta-ideal” can and must be achieved already in the next moment, if not indeed in this very moment’.
33. Jesi 2000, p. 84.
action that does not promise to achieve a new world, but which is already articulated through new forms of social relationships.

In trying to shed light on the specifically proletarian modality of violent action, Benjamin seeks to identify the nature of violence that is unleashed in a strike, a violence that is not reducible to a simple means for gaining higher wages, because if this were the case ‘it could fulfil its end as predatory violence [raubende Gewalt]’ 36 The problem is not to seek a revolutionary end to justify the revolutionary means of the Gewalt (this would be equally valid for Bismarck’s Revolution von Oben); instead, the issue is how to break the relationship between ends [Zweck] and means [Mittel], to conceive of the class struggle as a breaking with the relations of domination between the capitalist as the personification of capital and the working class. ‘As regards class struggles [Klassenkämpfe], in them strikes must under certain conditions be seen as pure means [reines Mittel].’ 37 Reines Mittel is that which is not a means to an end, that which breaks with the relationship Zweck-Mittel; hence the difficulty.

Reading Sorel’s Réflexions sur la violence, 38 Benjamin distinguishes between the political general strike [politischer Generalstreik] and the proletarian general strike [proletarischer Generalstreik]. Sorel presents the grève générale prolétarienne in terms of the ‘indifference to the material profits of conquest by affirming that it proposes to suppress the state’. 39 Parallel to the distinction between political strike and proletarian strike, Sorel also noted the need to distinguish between two types of violence, which he called on the one hand ‘force’, which tends to impose a certain social order in which a minority rules, and, on the other, ‘violence’, which tends instead to destroy that order. 40 This difference concerns not only the two types of strike, but also the conflict between the two social classes, between ‘bourgeois’ force and ‘proletarian violence’, 41 the latter of which only is capable of bringing about a ‘rupture’ of the economic relations.

In relation to Gewalt, these forms of strike are antitheses. Despite averting the need to distinguish between force, which tends toward authority, and violence, which infringes on authority, Sorel is unable to pose the question of

37. Benjamin 1921, p. 245.
38. Sorel 1961, p. 167. This is a text that Benjamin read in the 1920s and would use often in the period in which he wrote on the critique of violence. On Benjamin’s reading of Sorel, see Kambas 1992, p. 250–70. On the different readings of Sorel by Schmitt and Benjamin, see Müller, p. 459–73. On the differing ways of reading and using Sorel, Müller writes that ‘Schmitt represented the very position that Benjamin attacked’ (p. 471).
another type of Gewalt. It is in working on this distinction that Benjamin advances, going so far as to define the political general strike as a skirmish within the state, the passing of power from one set of hands to another; from one privileged class to another. The act that takes over the state does not in fact break up the legal machine, but rather reinforces it, evoking the original violence that creates law to impose it anew. If the goal of political action is the taking of state power, it will in fact be the new conquering power that will legitimise the revolutionary violence that brought it to the conquest of power. The means are in this way justified by the justice of the ends, in a perfect repetition of the logic of the founding of the state.

The proletarian general strike is instead the event that poses ‘the question of a violence of another kind [die Frage nach andern Arten der Gewalt]’. The destruction of state power [Vernichtung der Staatsgewalt] carried out by the proletarian general strike is not an end [Zweck], but is the praxis of the proletariat. The destruction of state power is not an end to accomplish, but rather the end of the violent temporality of law. The political praxis by the proletariat shows indifference to ‘material gain through conquest’ and to every type of reform.

If the political general strike, inasmuch as it is a form of stopping work, ‘is violent, since it causes only an external modification of labour conditions, the second – the proletarian general strike –, as a pure means, is non-violent [als ein reines Mittel gewaltlos]. It is a question of thinking about class conflict as gewaltlos. Clearly this does not mean non-violence tout court; the very withdrawal from the field of violence is still within its field, because it still takes state Gewalt as the only practicable form. It is therefore incapable of the necessary task of thinking differently in order to pose the question of another kind of Gewalt. If class conflict can be defined as non-violent [gewaltlos], it is such only with respect to the violence of law and only ‘under certain conditions’ that must be specified. This opens up the ‘possibility of the impossible’: the practicality of another kind of Gewalt beyond the antinomy of violence and non-violence. The violence of the proletarian general strike breaks the wage relation, breaks the Zweck-Mittel-Relation and the state mechanism. Work cannot be resumed as something partially modified or more fairly distributed, but only as ‘wholly transformed [gänzlich veränderte]’. Gewalt intervenes in ethical relations [sittliche Verhältnisse], it attacks them substantially in light of

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42. Benjamin 1921, p. 246.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid.
45. This is how Adorno referred to Benjamin: Adorno 1976, p. 301.
46. Benjamin 1921, p. 246.
new relations, which do not wait to become accomplished, but are already entirely present in the *Jetztzeit* of the proletarian strike. The problem, which here it is possible only to note, regards a form of praxis that goes beyond the *Zweck-Mittel-Relation*: thinking and practising a revolution that is already, in every moment, the expression of qualitatively alternative relations, and not a means for accomplishing an end.

Rethinking the question of justice means that in a conflict, however violent it might be, a non-teleological criterion is possible starting with the extent to which some part of the struggle can be defined as just. This was possible in a context, such as the Middle Ages, where the *jus resistentiae* took the form, not of destruction for the creation of a new order, but of the restoration of an order unjustly violated. The attempt to recuperate *jus resistentiae* as a safeguard of life forms and communitarian relations, not yet to be accomplished, but already present in practice, does not resolve the problem.\(^{47}\) Even if one protests not with an eye toward the ‘future of which they sing’ but of the persistence of that which was outlined yesterday, one can still not appeal to any ‘preserving violence’ if one does not apply intrinsic criteria of justice to the new order. Lacking such criteria, even that violence is abandoned to its destined outcome, inasmuch as the criteria of justice coincide with those of force. The new order, not yet to be accomplished, but already present in practice, is not a sufficient criterion for reopening the question of justice: in the struggle between two orders that are presumed just, the criteria for justice once again become those of force.

Only by delineating an asymmetry between the class of capitalists and the class of proletarians is it possible to overcome this impasse. This is the asymmetry that Marx indicates in the injustice suffered by the proletariat: not a particular injustice [*besondres Unrecht*], but absolute injustice [*das Unrecht schlechthin*].\(^{48}\) It cannot be accounted for within the capitalist order because it relates to the very physical and spiritual existence of the proletariat. Benjamin grasped this asymmetry in his ‘Theses on the Concept of History’ and rearticulated it in two modes of temporality: homogenous and empty time (that is, the continuum of the historiography of the winners), and the discontinuous time of the historiography of the historical materialist. The points of view of the two classes are also asymmetrical: oppressed and oppressor do not see the same past. What is placed in question is no longer the objectivity of historiography, but its truth. This is measured not in terms of objectivity, but by means of its capacity to produce the image of injustice; an image capable of

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\(^{47}\) See Virno 1994, pp. 109–110.

producing the force for destroying the destined violence that assigns individuals
to a determinate class. Justice, here, is concerned with the disorder of an order
that assigns to somebody the position of the proletariat; not, as is often said
today, with the inclusion of the part of those who have no part, but with the
breaking of the law that assigns roles, the same law that structures the order.

Inasmuch as the revolution is inscribed in a homogeneous and empty time,
inasmuch as it wants to change ‘in historical time a political, social, and
economic situation and elaborate its own tactical and strategic plans, constantly
considering in historical time the relations between cause and effect, in the
longest possible perspective’, it is inscribed within the legal sphere and its
temporality. It accomplishes nothing except to perpetuate the dialectical
alternation between a Gewalt that imposes law and one that preserves it. If the
continuum of law is permanence of the state of exception as an alternation
between rechtserhaltende Gewalt and rechtsetzende Gewalt, the true break can
only be that which is able to break the violent continuum of law. It is possible
to call just only such a break. This should furnish it with an intrinsic criterion
for the justice of praxis that is not justified based upon the ends that it must
accomplish. This philosophy of history of law can produce the justification of
the most disastrous violence: that of fascism as well as that of Stalinism. Both
were forms of state violence. The question of a violence of another kind poses
itself not as a matter of legitimate or illegitimate violence for the achievement
of pre-determined ends, but as a matter of violence that is not a means vis-à-vis
the ends.

We must rethink the Benjaminian question according to which the ‘justice
is the ethical side of the struggle [Gerechtigkeit ist die ethische Seite des
Kampfes]’. Partisanship as a condition for truth and justice is possible only if
we begin to think in situations. This is the task posed by Marx: in the conflict
between the capitalist class and the working class for determining the length
of the working day there is no fair solution: where equal rights conflict,
vioence decides [zwischen gleichen Rechten entscheidet die Gewalt]. The
determination of the ‘just’ length of the working day or of the ‘just’ wage rests
within the context of choices imposed by the laws of the market. Here, it is
only possible to compromise, or else to escalate the violence.

‘The true politician’ – the part not written in the Benjaminian book on
Politik – is the one who knows how to realise the possibility of the impossible,
the radical dislocation and exit from the field of options and choices imposed in a situation. In this sense, the true politician knows how to seize the truth of a situation. This is not a simple opening of the possibilities contained in a situation, but is the possibility of disclosing the infinity of possibilities that go beyond the horizon of possible options.

The true politician is not the person who reactivates the conflict in a situation – conflict always remains the basis of politics – but is, instead, the person who shows the exit route from the situation as a possible one. In this sense, Lenin was a true politician. As Balibar also notes,

Lenin was indeed the only one […] to pose the question of the transformation of a situation of extreme violence and destruction of the democratic forms of civil society by means of collective action, by means of an initiative of the organised masses. In other words, he was the only one not to regard violence as a fatality and to search, starting from the experience itself, for the paths towards an action on the causes and decision centres of extreme violence.53

It was Lenin who, confronted with the war, affirmed the necessity of turning ‘the imperialist war into a revolutionary civil war’, who seized in the war, with the armed workers, the occasion for going beyond the blind path of choosing between war and peace. And it was also Lenin in What Is to Be Done?, in polemics with the defenders of freedom of criticism, when faced with a generic demand for freedom, who posed the revolutionary question: freedom to do what? Lenin thus went beyond the supposed neutrality of the concept of freedom, because he was not ready to leave to the capitalists the freedom to exploit the working class nor to the rulers the freedom to massacre soldiers in war. In this spirit, in affirming the partial character of truth, in order to overcome the limits of the field of options in which we are otherwise constrained to make choices, we must go beyond the antinomy of violence and non-violence.

Translated by Steven Colatrella

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Interventions

The Fallacies of ‘New Dialectics’ and Value-Form Theory

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Abstract
Chris Arthur’s approach aims at a systematic re-ordering of Marx’s categories. This article argues that his approach is actually a different ordering of different categories that are positioned within a specific theoretical whole, a Hegelian re-interpretation of Marx and especially of abstract labour, which distances itself from Marx. While the debate has focused mainly on the philosophical aspects of Arthur’s work, its economic features have not been the object of a systematic analysis. Yet, a full assessment of the ‘New Dialectics’ should include explicitly a systematic internal critique of its economic dimensions. The aim of this article is to assess the internal consistency of the economic ramifications of the ‘New Dialectics’. The focus is on the notions of abstract labour, concrete labour, and exploitation. Arthur’s faithfulness to Marx, or correspondence to Marx’s quotations, is not the criterion used to assess the ‘New Dialectics’. Rather, the criterion is whether it (a) discovers logical inconsistencies in Capital and (b) is itself free from inconsistencies. The answer is negative in both cases.

Keywords
abstract labour, value-form theory, dialectics

1. Introduction

Chris Arthur’s The New Dialectics and Marx’s ‘Capital’, has been at the centre of a lively controversy, most recently in Historical Materialism. The debate has focused mainly on the philosophical aspects of Arthur’s work. Yet, a full assessment of his ‘new dialectics’ should include explicitly a systematic internal critique of its economic dimensions. The aim of this article is then to assess the internal consistency of the economic ramifications of the new dialectics.

In the Introduction, the author states:

1. I thank Michael Heinrich, Patrick Murray and the Editorial Board of Historical Materialism for their comments. The usual caveat applies.
The new interest in Hegel is largely unconcerned with recovering the grand narrative of Hegel’s philosophy of history and relating it to historical materialism: rather it is focused on Hegel’s Logic and how this fits the method of Marx’s Capital. The point is usually put by saying the effort is to construct a systematic dialectic in order to articulate the relations of a given social order, namely capitalism, as opposed to an historical dialectics studying the rise and fall of social systems.2

The theoretical justification is found in a ‘striking homology between the structure of Hegel’s Logic and Marx’s Capital’.3 Arthur stresses, rightly in my opinion, that Marx left the outcome of his dialectical method ‘in the shape of Capital’.4 But Marx stressed in Capital that he had distanced himself from Hegel’s dialectics. Thus, it would have seemed reasonable to extract Marx’s method from Capital (and other writings) rather than ‘appropriating Hegel’s logic’.5 The proof of the validity of the outcome would have been both its logical consistency with Marx’s results and its fruitfulness for the further development of those results. But this is not the road taken by Arthur.

For the author, his ‘research programme demonstrates its fruitfulness only in its success in exhibiting the systematic ordering of categories’.6 This sounds as if it were just a matter of a different ordering of the same (of Marx’s) concepts. But Arthur’s work is a different ordering of different economic concepts which are positioned within a specific theoretical whole, his value-form theory. The link between new dialectics and value-form theory is the Hegelian reinterpretation of Marx’s concept of abstract labour. Arthur quotes Hegel to the effect that the Spirit ‘is not an essence that is already finished and complete before its manifestation, keeping itself aloof behind its host of appearances, but an essence which is truly actual only through the specific forms of its necessary self-manifestation’.7 And, Arthur adds, ‘I would say the same of value’.8 Just as Spirit actualises itself only through its forms of manifestation, value comes to be only through exchange and money rather than existing as abstract labour, as in Marx, already in production, before exchange. Value, then, becomes an empty form. For Marx, too, value is a (social) form but it is

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8. Ibid.
not empty, it is the form of its substance, abstract labour. As Kincaid remarks "The category of "pure empty form" has no effective presence in Capital".9

The author, then, distances explicitly himself from Marx. In his reply to critics, Arthur states 'Now I understand... that it only causes confusion to cite passages from Marx. In the future, I will present my own views in my own way'.10 Thus, Arthur’s fidelity to Marx or correspondence to Marx’s quotations will not be the criterion used to assess the validity of new dialectics or its internal consistency. Rather, the criterion will be whether the new dialectic (a) discovers logical inconsistencies in Capital and (b) is itself free from these inconsistencies. The focus will be on the notions of abstract labour, concrete labour, and exploitation.

My assessment and critique of Arthur (and, briefly, in sub-section 2.3 below, of other value-form authors) entails a short reference to the notion of dialectics which will guide the rest of this article. Marx makes extensive use of three principles that are the co-ordinates of his method of social research. All phenomena are always (1) both realised and potential, (2) both determinant and determined, and (3) subject to constant movement and change. It follows that social reality, seen from the perspective of dialectics, is a temporal flow of determining and determined contradictory phenomena continuously emerging from a potential state to become realised and going back to a potential state. The dialectical relation between phenomena is then their reciprocal interaction seen from this perspective. The dialectical method of social research inquires into a social phenomenon’s origin, present state and further development, i.e. into (a) the past dialectical relation with other phenomena through which it has emerged from a previous potential state to become a realised phenomenon with its own potential contradictory content, thus possibly superseding its previous realised form; (b) its present dialectical relation with other contradictory social phenomena, some of which are determined by it and some other are its determinants, some potential and some realised; and (c) its further development (change) due to the future realisation of its potentials as realised conditions of its reproduction or supersession. An example of (a) is the development in Capital, Volume I of the expanded value-form from the simple value-form and of the money value-form from the expanded value-form. The expanded and money value-forms were potentially present in the simple value-form and this is why they could be developed from the latter. The formers’ realisation was the latter’s supersession.11

9. Kincaid 2005, p. 103. For a rejection of ‘attempts to make Hegel’s Logic the model for’ a reconstruction of Marx’s method, see Callinicos 2005.
2. Abstract labour

For Marx, abstract labour is the substance of value and is the expenditure of human energy irrespective of, abstracting from, the concrete, specific forms it takes (concrete labours). Value is thus contained in the commodity before it realises itself as exchange-value, i.e. before the commodity is sold. Arthur rejects this approach and thus Marx's labour theory of value. 'My position is quite different from that of the orthodox tradition, which sees labour creating something positive, namely value, then expropriated'. 12 The author submits two critiques.

2.1. Arthur's first critique

The first objection is that concrete labour cannot be reduced to abstract labour. Arthur quotes the following passage from the Grundrisse: 13

This economic relation... [of production, G.C.] develops more purely and adequately in proportion as labour loses all the characteristics of art; as its particular skill becomes something more and more abstract and irrelevant, and as it becomes more and more a purely abstract activity, ... a merely physical activity, activity pure and simple, regardless of its form.

Marx’s argument is clear: inasmuch as capitalism develops ‘as a particular mode of production’, labour ‘becomes more and more a purely abstract activity... a merely physical activity, activity pure and simple, regardless of its form’. In other words, labour as a purely physical activity regardless of its specific forms, i.e. abstract labour, emerges with the emergence of capitalism and asserts itself as capitalism becomes the dominant mode of production. Arthur misreads this quotation as if Marx were dealing with the process of deskilling of concrete labours and as if this were to culminate in abstract labour. But this is simply mistaken. Abstract labour emerges because general exchangeability requires a rod upon which to base exchange ratios. For these ratios, the specific features of commodities and thus the skills needed to produce them are irrelevant. 14 If Arthur’s interpretation were correct, Marx would have made a ‘conceptual mistake’ because deskilling, no matter how extreme, cannot cancel all concrete qualities so that de-skilled labour ‘can never be abstract as such’. 15 But it is Arthur who makes a conceptual mistake.

14. I disregard, of course, the greater value produced by skilled labour-power.
15. Arthur, 2004b, p. 44.
by attributing to Marx the view that concrete labour can be reduced to abstract labour. Marx could not be clearer: ‘As use values, commodities are, above all, of different qualities but as exchange values they are merely different quantities, and consequently do not contain an atom of use value.’ The rejection of Marx’s notion of abstract labour on these grounds is thus unwarranted.

2.2. Arthur’s second critique

Let us consider now Arthur’s second critique, that abstract labour lacks direct empirical evidence:

the natural body of the commodity under this description [i.e. as a use-value, G.C.] is clearly a substance present to inspection. To speak of ‘value’ as a substance, by contrast, could be taken as highly objectionable. From the time of Samuel Bailey’s attack on Ricardo, such a view has been rejected (other than by Marx) in favour of an account in which there is no value substance, and insofar as it appears as a property of commodities, something they ‘have’, this has been analysed as a purely relational property identical with ‘value in exchange’ and accordingly labile.

For Arthur, then, the notion of value as a substance ‘could be taken as highly objectionable’ because value is not subject to inspection, because it is not empirically visible during production, before it appears as exchange-value in its money-form. However, aside from the fact that existence does not require observability, it can be shown that value as a substance, or the substance of value, namely abstract labour expended during production, can be observed and therefore exists before exchange. The proof goes as follows.

If it can be shown that a material, physiological and undifferentiated substance can be observed to be expended during production, it is also shown that abstract labour is an observable material substance. Due to the principle of the conservation of energy and given that value is abstract labour under capitalism, it follows that that substance coagulates in the product and becomes its embodied value. Thus, what is needed is the proof that abstract labour is an observable expenditure of physiological and undifferentiated human energy.

The following proof cannot be explicitly found in Marx (it draws upon medical knowledge not available to him). However, it is inherent in and consistent with his work. The process essential for our purposes is the human metabolism. The analysis of the human metabolism shows that people, irrespective of their differences, produce the same undifferentiated type of

energy and thus consume the same undifferentiated type of energy, no matter which specific activities they engage into.\(^{18}\) This is consonant with Marx’s ‘physiological’, ‘material’ expenditure of undifferentiated human energy. As Marx says: ‘all labour is an expenditure of human labour-power, in the physiological sense, and it is in this quality of being equal, or abstract, human labour that it forms the value of commodities’.\(^{19}\) Abstract labour is a ‘purely abstract activity… a merely formal activity, or, what is the same, a merely material [stofflich] activity, activity pure and simple’.\(^{20}\) This is exactly what human metabolism is.\(^{21}\) The observation of the expenditure of calories during production is the observation of abstract labour. If one wanted to, one could measure a labourer’s physical fatigue or the consumption of calories while at the same time observing her producing a specific use-value, i.e. engaging in concrete labour. This is what is commonly done in sport when the expenditure of calories is measured when one is running, swimming, etc. Denial of the existence of the material substance of value (abstract labour) is simply incompatible with modern medical science.

The expenditure of undifferentiated human energy is common not only to all people but also to all people in all societies. In this sense, it is trans-epochal. Nevertheless, its discovery as a trans-epochal phenomenon is socially determined and its practical significance (as abstract labour and thus as the substance of value) is socially specific.\(^{22}\) The reason is that, in a society in which the different products of labour (use-values) must be exchanged, there must be a feature common to all different concrete labours. This is abstract labour. Notice that emphasis on calories as one of the possible measures of the expenditure of undifferentiated human energy is not meant to replace time as a measure of value. The human metabolism and the expenditure of

\(^{18}\) The human metabolism is a two-stage process. In the anabolic phase, human energy is produced in the form of calories and ATP (Adenosine 5’-triphosphate) and stored. There are, of course, differences between the organs and functions of different individuals but these differences do not affect the general, common way in which we all produce energy in the above mentioned form. This is followed by the catabolic phase, the use of the stored energy. This use or expenditure cannot but be the consumption of the same type of energy (calories and ATP).

\(^{19}\) Marx, 1976a, p. 137.

\(^{20}\) Marx 1973, p. 297, emphasis in the original.

\(^{21}\) The expenditure of human energy is observed and measured by referring to the basic metabolic rate, i.e. the amount of energy or calories the body of an average individual sitting and at rest burns to maintain itself in its resting state.

\(^{22}\) It is perhaps not by chance that studies on the human metabolism started in the seventeenth century. ‘The first controlled experiments in human metabolism were published by Santorio Santorio in 1614 in his book Ars de statica medecina that made him famous throughout Europe. He describes his long series of experiments in which he weighed himself in a chair suspended from a steelyard balance… before and after eating, sleeping, working, sex, fasting, depriving from drinking, and excreting’ (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metabolism>).
undifferentiated human energy (calories) are mentioned here to rebut the view that abstract labour is not a material, physiological substance (or that it cannot be shown to be such).

The physiological and material expenditure of undifferentiated human energy does not imply that this material expenditure excludes the production of knowledge and thus human consciousness. The expenditure of material undifferentiated human energy encompasses the *working of the whole human body*, i.e. it comprises the physiological expenditure due to the working of the human brain as well. The material expenditure of human energy is not equivalent to ‘manual’ labour or to any other such concept that excludes ‘brain work’. I know of no passage where Marx holds a notion of a machine-like type of a material expenditure of undifferentiated human energy as if it excluded the working of the brain and thus the production of knowledge. And this is certainly not the thesis of this article. Abstract labour can be expended both in the production of material objects and in the production of knowledge. To clarify this point, let me deal summarily with one aspect of Marxist epistemology.²³

Given that the production of knowledge is the expenditure of human energy which, as the human metabolism shows, is a material activity, the distinction between material and mental activities uses an incorrect terminology. The basic distinction should be between *objective and mental transformations*. These are, respectively, the transformations of the reality outside us and of our conceptualisation of that transformed reality, or knowledge. Objective and mental transformations are the two constituent elements of labour in general. This is an analytical distinction. In reality, these two types of transformation take always place contemporaneously and presuppose each other. The necessary combination of objective and mental transformations results into *objective (usually called material) and mental labour*: if objective transformations are determinant, labour is objective; if mental transformations are determinant, labour is mental.²⁴ Both objective and mental labour are expenditures of differentiated human energy (needed to produce the specificity of the products) and, at the same time, expenditures of undifferentiated human energy (e.g. calories). As expenditures of undifferentiated human energy, they are material processes. *Abstract labour is material whether it transforms objective reality or knowledge*. Seen through the eyes of our epoch, the expenditure of differentiated and of undifferentiated human energy are, respectively, concrete and abstract labour. It follows that (1) if abstract labour under capitalist production

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²³. I submit such a theory of knowledge production in Carchedi 2005.
²⁴. For the notion of determination, see Carchedi 1991, Appendix and Carchedi 2008a, 2008b.
relations produces value, value is produced both by objective and by mental labour and (2) abstract labour is not the equivalent of objective labour: abstract labour is a basic component of both objective and mental labour. The objection that the materiality of abstract labour would imply the reduction of humans to unthinking machines is just another manifestation of the underdevelopment of Marxian epistemology.

As far as the expenditure of undifferentiated human energy is concerned, there is no difference between general and capitalist abstract labour. Far from being a ‘metaphor’, abstract labour in all modes of production is a real abstraction, in the sense that it is a notion abstracted from a real process, the undifferentiated expenditure of human energy. The difference is in the social content. General, or trans-epochal, abstract labour is not the same as the specifically capitalist abstract labour. It becomes capitalist abstract labour (both objective and mental) only within a specific social setting, under capitalist production relations.

An analogy can be drawn with the way Marx conceptualises the laws of movement. They are ‘the same under all modes of production’ and thus ‘cannot be done away with. What can change in historically different circumstances is only the form in which these laws assert themselves’.

Their historical and social specificity does not deny their transhistorical existence but it is this specificity, their being social forms of ahistorical elements common to all modes of production, that makes of these phenomena essential elements for a social system’s reproduction, so that their supersession is a necessary condition for the supersession of the system. It is in this sense that these specific social forms of natural laws acquire the force of social laws, of laws of movement of socio-economic systems. For example, the wealth produced in any society must be distributed for that society to reproduce itself. Under capitalism, wealth is produced as value and surplus-value in the form of money. The distribution of wealth is thus the distribution of labour’s product between labour and capital, as wages and profits. Similarly, it can be said that the expenditure of undifferentiated human energy is ‘the same under all modes of production’ and ‘cannot be done away with’, yet it is its historical and social specificity that counts.

It has been said above that value is abstract labour under capitalism. This is a convenient short-cut. In reality, the relation between the two categories is more articulated and depends upon time.

(1) If the production process has been started but is not yet finished, the labourers are performing abstract labour and are thus creating the commodity’s

value embodied. However, that abstract labour is not yet value; more precisely, it is value in forming, it is potential, embodied, value because the commodity itself, not being finished, is being created and thus only potential.

(2) If the production process is completed and thus the commodity is finished (but not yet sold), the abstract labour which has gone into it becomes the value contained or embodied in it, it is its individual value whose material substance is undifferentiated human energy, abstract labour. Since a commodity must be sold in order to realise its value, its individual value is also its potentially realised value, given that the value realised is quantitatively different from the value contained in that commodity.27

(3) If and when the commodity is sold, the value embodied, or individual, or potential value becomes actually realised value whose substance is the individual value.

(4) Since commodities are produced in order to be sold for money, the actually realised value becomes itself a substance that takes necessarily the form of value, the monetary form. Money is the form of existence of the value realised and thus of the (quantitatively modified) value contained and thus of capitalist abstract labour.

Thus, value does have a material substance, abstract labour. The proof above is perfectly consonant with Marx’s textual evidence. Yet Arthur holds that Marx held contradictory views. Arthur mentions the following quotation from Marx: ‘not an atom of matter enters into the objectivity of commodities as values’. This quotation has been read as if it indicated that Marx contradicts himself, that abstract labour is not the conceptualisation of the material substance of a social process. But this is not the case. What Marx says is that not an atom of the matter of use-values enters into the objectivity of commodities as values. In fact, the text continues ‘in this it [the objectivity of commodities as values, G.C.] is the direct opposite of the coarsely sensuous objectivity of commodities as physical objects [i.e. as use-values, G.C.]’. And, further: ‘we may twist and turn a single commodity [as a use-value, G.C.] as we wish; it remains impossible to grasp it as a thing possessing value’. And, finally, ‘as exchange-values [commodities, G.C.] are merely different quantities, and consequently do not contain an atom of use-value’.28

Let us read Marx’s text further:

If, however, we bear in mind that the value of the commodities has a purely social reality, and that they acquire this reality only insofar as they are expressions or

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27. Realised value is usually referred to as social value (also by Marx), as opposed to individual value. Since value has always a social content, individual value is here set against realised value.
embodiments of one identical social substance, viz., human labour, it follows as a matter of course, that value can only manifest itself in the social relation of commodity to commodity.²⁹

This passage has been read as if Marx, by stressing the purely social character of value, denied the materiality of abstract labour and thus of value. But this is not what Marx says. Given his emphasis on the materiality of abstract labour, as re-iterated by the reference to ‘embodiment’, the purely social nature of abstract labour cannot refer to its having no material reality but to the fact that abstract labour is capitalist abstract labour, labour that has been expended under capitalist production and thus exchange relations and that, given this social nature of that material reality, must become realised only through exchange. As mentioned above, value is the specific social dimension of a material reality. It is neither only physical nor only social, it is both.

2.3. Two other value-form theorists

Even though this article focuses on Arthur’s work, it should be mentioned that there are different angles from which value-form theory denies materiality to abstract labour.³⁰ Here, I shall focus on two contemporary important value-form theorists who deserve special attention because of the specificity of their arguments and because of the many valid points they make, and which I share, in spite of our differences.³¹

Murray’s position is, in many ways, close to mine. I share with this author a range of concepts relating more or less directly to the question of the (im)materiality of abstract labour, such as the rejection of the thesis of the neutrality of the forces of production,³² of the view that, for Marx, value was only a natural substance,³³ and of what he calls the ‘Rubin dilemma’ i.e. ‘that it is not possible to reconcile a physiological concept of abstract labour with the historical character of the value it creates’.³⁴ I also agree with Murray that ‘Marx’s theory of value is nothing but his theory of the distinctive social form of wealth and labor in capitalism’,³⁵ that Marx’s notion of value is purely social (but, for me, in the sense specified above); that Capital begins with ‘commodity

³⁰. As Likitkijsomboon 1995 notes, there are different value-form theories. However, they all deny materiality to abstract labour. In this sense, it is warranted to speak of ‘value-form theory’.
³¹. There are other authors who should be discussed but this is not possible within the present limits of space.
³². Murray 2000, p. 28.
capital and surplus-value producing capital';36 that the commodity is the right starting point for Marx’s Capital,37 and that ‘value is not fully actualised in production but rather requires that the commodity be sold’ (in the sense, for me, that the value contained is a quantity that must realise itself through exchange, as a modified quantity).

Moreover, Murray distinguishes among (a) the general concept of labour, which concerns ‘the essential features of any actual act of human labour’;38 (b) the general concept of abstract labour, which is the ‘pure expenditure of human energies’;39 and (c) the concept of ‘practically abstract’ labour i.e. a historically-specific abstract labour, the only type of value-producing labour under capitalism. Categories (b) and (c) correspond broadly with my categories of transhistorical abstract labour (both objective and mental) and of capitalist abstract labour respectively. However, there is a fundamental difference. For Murray, general abstract labour is ‘nothing actual’.40

To treat commodities as if they ‘embodied’ abstract labour is to reify a distinction of reason; it is to treat an analytical abstraction as if it picked out some actual, natural or natural-like property of a product.41

Murray’s general abstract labour, then, lacks materiality and is not contained in the commodity before exchange. What, then, is exactly abstract labour for the author?

As Murray puts it in a private communication, ‘My abstract labor does lack materiality… value is an objective property of the commodity… but this objectivity is “a purely social reality” and immaterial’. However, ‘there must be potential value or else there would be nothing to be validated or realised in exchange’. This potential value is concrete value that must be validated as abstract labour through exchange: ‘to have value-producing labor, the social validation of concrete labor must involve a social practice (exchange in the market) that actually treats concrete labor as abstract’. In short, abstract labour is the specific capitalist social dimension (production for sale) of concrete labour. This position is in no way attributable to Marx, to his view of ‘the two-fold nature of the process of production itself – which, on the one hand, is a social process for producing use-values, on the other, a process for creating surplus

37. Murray 2000, p. 62. As Likitkijsomboon 1995, p. 82, points out, one must start from the commodity in order to understand money.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid.
41. Murray 2000, p. 58.
The social nature of the production of use-values is not their being produced for exchange but their being produced (1) by the non-owners of the means of production who, under developed capitalism, are not the individual but the collective labourer, i.e. the whole of the labourers producing a use-value through the articulation of the different tasks needed for the production of that use-value; (2) for the capitalist who, under developed capitalism, is the appropriator of surplus-value extracted by a complex bureaucracy of many individuals each performing a different aspect of the work of exploitation, what Marx calls the work of control and surveillance. Of course, those use-values must be sold, but this only realises what is potentially present in them, their use for the purchasers:

> The use-value of a commodity does not serve its end, does not begin to function until the commodity enters the sphere of consumption. So long as it is in the hands of the producer, it exists only in potential form.43

In short, for Marx, both use-values and value exist before, but must be validated (realised) through exchange. For Murray, and more generally for value-form theory, use-values are validated as value through exchange.

But, aside from conformity with Marx, it seems to me that Murray’s position is internally contradictory. If concrete labour is created in production (a point we all agree on) and if abstract labour is created by concrete labour under capitalist production relations (something which, for Murray, means principally that use-values are produced for exchange), then abstract labour is both material (because the substance of abstract labour, use-values, is material) and embodied (as concrete labour) in the commodity before exchange, contrary to Murray’s stated position. Murray could accept these conclusions and give up his view that abstract labour is immaterial and that it does not exist before exchange. But, then, what would be gained by replacing a notion of materiality inconsistent with Marx’s value theory with one that is perfectly consistent with it?

The second important value-theory author to be briefly discussed here is Michael Heinrich. This author builds his argument without any reference to Hegelian dialectics. This author is to be commended because of his rejection of an equilibrium approach44 and because of his insistence that production

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42. Marx 1967a, pp. 331–2.
43. Marx 1967b, p. 279.
44. ‘Marx tries to show that… in capitalist economies we find an inherent instability, which does not come from the outside but is in the basic structures of capitalism itself’. Heinrich 2004a, p. 89.
and realisation form a unity, a whole. Heinrich, too, is critical of Marx. His starting point is that the notions of value, value-form and money are ambivalent. More specifically, supposedly one can find in Capital elements of two distinct approaches to value. The substantialist theory of value focuses on the value of ‘the single commodity’ and the labour contained in it. This value is socially determined only inasmuch as it is socially-necessary labour. ’But [in the substantialist approach, G.C.] value seems to have nothing to do with other commodities, it exists as a kind of independent substance inside the single commodity’. ‘Combined with this substantialist view on value’, there is a naturalist view of abstract labour, a notion of abstract labour in the physiological sense. Heinrich submits that this substantialist/naturalist approach does not break with classical political economy. Such a break requires a non-substantialist theory of value and an anti-naturalist determination of abstract labour. From this perspective, ‘value is not only depending on a social substance, it depends on a substance which cannot exist in a single thing and which is not determined by production alone’. It follows that ‘value only can exist, when we have an independent and general form of value – money’.

It is true that commodities are not produced in isolation. But it is precisely because of this that capitalist abstract labour and value exist in a single commodity (before exchange). A single commodity is a fraction of the whole. If the whole has a certain characteristic, so does a part of it, given that both are the product of the same undifferentiated human labour under the same capitalist production relations. Money is the necessary form of existence of capitalist abstract labour and value.

What is missing not only in Heinrich but in all participants in the value debate (both amongst the value-form thinkers and others) is Marx’s dialectical view of social reality, the view of social reality as a temporal flow of contradictory phenomena changing from determining to being determined and vice versa and continuously emerging from a potential state to become realised and going back to a potential state. What is missing is the view of social phenomena as both realised and potential, as both determinant and determined, and as subject to constant movement and change. The confusion arising from the lack of these distinctions is exemplified by the statement that value cannot exist in a single thing and is not determined by production alone. While it is true that production and distribution (circulation) form a whole, it is production that is determinant vis-à-vis distribution because only what is produced can determine what is distributed and because the social, class, content of production determines the social, class, content of distribution. It

is, in this sense, that production and distribution form a unity, a contradictory unity in determination. It follows that individual value does exist in a single commodity but only in a potential state, as a potentially realised value before realisation and thus before its value contained is redistributed through and at the moment of sale. The phantom-like actualisation of value as in value-form theory is nothing more than its redistribution through exchange. It is the quantitatively realised value by each commodity that is determined by both production and distribution in their contradictory relation. As for money, Heinrich holds that ‘In the traditional Marxist view, the main thing was to show that the value of a commodity is dependent on the amount of labour embodied. Money only counts as means of circulation.’ This ‘traditional Marxist view’ is a straw target. No serious author would determine the value of a commodity only in terms of value contained. This is certainly not Marx’s theory which is based on the dialectical relation between production and distribution. On the other hand, Marxian value theory is not a ‘monetary theory of value’, if this is a denial of the physiological, material nature of abstract labour and of the fundamental principle (a commonsense principle) that only what exists potentially can become realised.

I agree with Heinrich that Marx’s work is incomplete, that it is the result of a long process of self-clarification and that it can be interpreted in different ways. This, however, does not imply necessarily that it is internally contradictory or ambivalent, especially on questions of fundamental importance as those discussed here. And, in any case, the point is whether an interpretation is present that unifies apparently contradictory statements into a coherent whole. This is indeed the case of the notion of abstract labour submitted here.

The specificity of the present approach is two-fold. First, it stresses the actual materiality of abstract labour, both transhistorical and capitalist, and places abstract labour within the wider context of a theory of objective and mental labour. In so doing, it ejects the objection that the materiality of abstract labour deprives people of consciousness and knowledge. Second, it stresses the dialectical articulation among trans-epochal abstract labour, capitalist abstract labour and value (individual value, realised value and the latter’s monetary form) as the theorisation of a real movement. From this angle, it would be more correct to refer to Marx’s theory of labours and values, in the plural.

2.4. Arthur’s own notion

Let us now turn to Arthur’s own notions of abstract labour. As seen above, for Arthur, abstract labour (in Marx’s sense) does not produce value. However,
capital does not produce value either. Capital’s work of exploitation cannot be abstract: ‘I never argue it is abstract’. 46

For Arthur, if capital does not create value, it posits value in production.47 More specifically, concrete labour ‘becomes socially posited as abstract in virtue of its participation in the capitalist process of valorisation’, 48 i.e. because it is exploited by capital. And why is this so?

The reason why [concrete, G.C.] labour is properly conceptualised as ‘abstract’ within the capital relation [of production, G.C.] is that industrial capital treats all labours as identical because it has an equal interest in exploiting them regardless of their concrete specificity.49

Thus, by subjugating concrete labours to exploitation, irrespective of their specificities, capital treats them as equal and thus posits them as ‘abstract’.50 This view is flawed on at least two accounts.

First, suppose it were possible for capital to treat different use-values equally in the process of exploitation, thus erasing their specificities. In this case, given that concrete labours are such in virtue of those specificities, what would be left would not be abstract labour as a pure form devoid of content but nothing at all. Abstract labour as pure form, exploitation without the object exploited, is a figment of imagination, a metaphor lacking substantiation in reality.

Secondly, in spite of an equal interest in exploiting different use values, it is not possible for capital to treat different use-values equally in the process of exploitation. It is certainly true that capital has an equal interest in exploiting all different concrete labours irrespective of their specificities. But this does not imply that it exploits them equally.51 There is no general, equal way to carry out what Marx calls in Capital, Volume III, the work of control and surveillance, a way to control and keep labourers under watch, that is indifferent.

47. In a previous critique (Carchedi 2003) I wrongly stated that, for Arthur, capital produces value. It should be said, however, that my mistake is not without justification. As Arthur concedes, ‘It seems that the point causing difficulty here is that I have not sufficiently made clear [that] I attribute to capital as a social form the positing of the product of labour as value. A related point is that although I slip into the standard terminology by speaking of the “creation” and “production” of value, I reject any analogy here with material production’. However, in his recent book, Arthur repeats, quite confusingly, that ‘to be the source of new value is to be that out of which capital creates value’ (Arthur 2004b, p. 211, emphasis in the original).
50. While, for Murray, concrete labours are homogenised because they all produce use-values for exchange, for Arthur, the homogenising factor is that they are all equally subjected to exploitation.
to the object of surveillance. Concrete labours are, by definition, different. If they are different, *each one of them is exploited in its own specific, different way*. There are as many works of control and surveillance as there are concrete labours. The janitor and the engineer are both exploited. But the way the former is exploited differs from how the latter is exploited. Arthur might assert that, if all concrete labours are exploited by capital, they acquire a common characteristic which ‘abstractly negates all difference of use-value between commodities and thereby declares them all identical as values’. But capital’s practice shows that the opposite is true, that the work of control and surveillance can only be concrete and differentiated in spite of capital’s equal interest in exploitation, that it is not possible for capital to treat different use-values equally in the process of exploitation, and that, therefore, capital’s exploitation cannot ‘declare’ use-values as equal, as abstract labour. Capital’s actual practice, the reality of capitalist exploitation, can only re-affirm the differences between the objects of its exploitation. On this account, as well, Arthur’s approach cannot theorise abstract labour in production. ‘Carchedi’s proof that the labour of supervision is concrete only’, far from being ‘irrelevant’, seems to me to be just highly relevant.

But ‘abstract labour is constituted in the capitalist relation as well as in commodity exchange’. In Arthur’s words, it is ‘the exchange abstraction itself [that, G.C.] posits value’ or, even more clearly, ‘*only the very fact of being exchanged unites the commodities generally*’. Here, too, two objections can be raised.

First, on the one hand, concrete labour ‘becomes socially posited as abstract in virtue of its participation in the capitalist process of valorisation’. On the other, it is ‘the nature of commodity exchange which abstracts from . . . the entire substance of use-value’. If these two notions are unrelated, Arthur has a problem. If they are related, *how* are they related? Arthur does not pose this question, let alone answer it. The problem is magnified by the introduction of money. Arthur holds that money

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52. Arthur 2004b, p. 41.
56. Arthur 2004b, p. 158, emphasis in the original.
59. ‘Arthur thinks that he can, and must, determine what the value-form is in terms of the sphere of exchange independently of production’ (Murray 2005, p. 70). But, for Arthur, ‘abstract labour is constituted in the capitalist relation as well as in commodity exchange’. The point is that production and exchange are unrelated.
does not merely solve the quantitative problem of providing a measure common to values, it solves the qualitative problem of establishing the very commensurability of commodities through relating them to each other as values.60

Which aspect of the quantitative commensurability of use-values is expressed by money? Their being all ‘equally’ subjected to exploitation or their all being produced for exchange? Second, this position forecloses a price theory. As Arthur explains, ‘There is no such thing as “intrinsic value”, only conjunctural correlations of different amounts of use values’.61 But then any exchange ratio goes, including the exchange of a transatlantic ship for a pencil. Exchange ratios are simply ‘shaped by external conditions’62 and no explanation is offered of their level or of the relative stability of prices. More than a theory of exchange ratios, this is an open admission of the inability to provide such a theory. Even a price theory based on the interplay of demand and supply, in spite of its numerous contradictions,63 is superior to this ‘determination’ of exchange ratios.

3. Concrete labour

The difference between Arthur and Marx does not concern the notion of concrete labour. Rather, divergent opinions emerge concerning the assessment of its role in the production process, especially in the complex and fragmented production process. For Marx, ‘As the commodity is immediate unity of use-value and exchange-value, so the process of production, which is the process of the production of commodity, is the immediate unity of process of labour and process of valorisation.’64 Here, the labour process is the transformation by the labourers of use-values into new use-values through their concrete labour, through the specific form of their activity; and the (surplus-) value-producing process (the valorisation process) is the process through which the capitalists force the labourers to labour for a time longer than that needed for the reproduction of their labour-power. As the capitalist production process increases in complexity and is segmented due to the technical division of labour, the individual labourer develops into the collective labourer and a ‘directing authority’ is needed ‘in order to secure the harmonious working of

61. Arthur 2004b, p. 93
62. Arthur 2004b, p. 156
63. Carchedi 2006
64. Marx 1976b, p. 81
the individual activities. A single violin player is his own conductor; an orchestra requires a separate one. And, Marx adds,

If, then, the control of the capitalist is in substance two-fold by reason of the two-fold nature of the process of production itself – which, on the one hand, is a social process for producing use-values, on the other, a process for creating surplus value – in form that control is despotic.

In other words, on the one hand, the labour process must be coordinated. The function of co-ordination and unity of the labour process is part of the function of labour even though carried out in a despotic form. On the other hand, the function of capital, the work of control and surveillance, is performed not any longer (only) by the capitalist but by a bureaucratic structure, going from the top managers to the first line supervisors, that performs that function on behalf and for the benefit of the capitalist as the appropriator of surplus-value.

An industrial army of workmen, under the command of a capitalist, requires, like a real army, officers (managers), and sergeants (foremen, overlookers), who, while the work is being done, command in the name of the capitalist. The work of supervision becomes their established and exclusive function.

Put simply, the same person as co-ordinator of the labour process may be a worker (it does not matter that she co-ordinates the production of use-values in a despotic way as long as her task is part of the production of those use-values) and an agent of capital, if she carries out the work of control and surveillance (without being necessarily a capitalist). ‘The genuine, specific function of capital… is the [extraction and, G.C.] appropriation of unpaid labour’.

It is here that the difference between Marx and Arthur emerges. While the notion of use-value is the same in Marx as in Arthur, the question as to who creates use-values is answered in two radically different ways. For Marx, the work of co-ordination of the labour process is part of the labour process itself, i.e. is part of the function of labour, of the collective transformation of use-values. Therefore, for Marx, neither the capitalist (as the appropriator of surplus-value) nor the agents of capital (the expropriators of surplus-value)

66. Marx 1967a, pp. 331–2, emphasis added.
67. Ibid.
perform the function of labour. Capital does not produce the commodity: labour does. For Arthur, on the other hand,

Since all [labourers, G.C.] contribute piecemeal to the process of production, the whole is not constituted as their productive power but as that of the capital hiring them. This means not only that each individual does not produce a commodity but that since the collective labourer is set up under the direction of capital it is hard to say that the collective does either. It seems more reasonable to say that capital produces the commodity than that labour does.69

Or, the commodities ‘are taken as products of capital’ 70 The point, however, is not whether Arthur is conforming with Marx. The point is whether Arthur’s alternative approach is free from inconsistencies.

Since, as seen above, capital does not produce the value of the commodity (it posits that value by equally exploiting concrete labours), the statement that capital produces the commodity cannot but be understood as capital producing the use-value of the commodity, its empirically observable form. Arthur can hold this position because he departs from Marx’s analysis of the production process on a significant point, the work of co-ordination and unity of the labour process.71 More specifically, Arthur (a) ignores the fundamental distinction between the function of capital and the function of labour, (b) fails to see that the capitalists (and other agents of capital) can perform this double function, i.e. that as co-ordinators of the labour process they are part of labour and as supervisors and controllers of the same process they are part of capital (even if these two functions might be combined in the same person), and (c) therefore mistakes the despotic form of that aspect of the function of labour (co-ordination and unity of the labour process) for an aspect of the function of capital. Which conclusions follow from this stance?

First, if the individual labourers participate in the labour process, even if in a piecemeal fashion, it would seem reasonable to conclude that the commodity

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70. Arthur 2004b, p. 41; see also pp. 47–8. Arthur quotes Marx to the effect that ‘Capital… necessarily produces commodities, produces its product as commodities, or it produces nothing’ (Arthur 2004b p. 28). Taken out of context, it would seem that, for Marx, it is capital, rather than labour, that produces the commodity. But a cursory glance at Marx’s text shows very clearly that, here, ‘capital’ is used by Marx as a shortcut for ‘capitalist mode of production’. This quotation is preceded by the sentence ‘it is only on the basis of capitalist production that the commodity first becomes the general form of the product’ (emphasis added, G.C.) and is followed by the sentence ‘Therefore… that the value of the commodity is determined by the socially necessary labour time contained in it, first come to be realised with the development of capitalist production, i.e. of capital’ (emphasis added, G.C.). Thus, it is the capitalist mode of production and not capital (as opposed to labour) that produces commodities.
is the product of the joint effort of capital (because it co-ordinates and unifies labour which for Arthur is the function of capital) and of labour. But this would contradict the assertion that ‘It seems more reasonable to say that capital produces the commodity than that labour does’. Second, Arthur, on the one hand, holds that labour does not produce the commodity\textsuperscript{72} while holding, on the other, that ‘workers can produce more than they consume and, hence, there is a surplus product’.\textsuperscript{73} This is an inconsistency. Third, if the labourers do not produce the commodity, \textit{they labour but not produce}. The capitalists do produce the commodity by co-ordinating the labour process. However, ‘\textit{qua} capitalists they do not labour’.\textsuperscript{74} They produce but do not labour. It follows that \textit{commodities} are produced (by capital) but that they are the result of nobody’s labour.

4. Exploitation

Let us finally consider Arthur’s notion of exploitation. The author distinguishes between exploitation in production and exploitation in distribution.

4.1. Exploitation in production

In Arthur’s conception, labourers are exploited in production in the sense that they are forced to labour through the expropriation of their productive powers. The relation between the expropriation of productive power and the extraction of labour is unclear. I think it can be stated as follows. First of all, since, for Arthur, ‘the whole [i.e. the commodity as a whole, G.C.] is not constituted as their [the labourers’, G.C] productive power but as that of the capital hiring them’\textsuperscript{75} the labourers’ productive power would seem to be the capacity to produce not single parts of the commodity but the whole of the commodity. Thus, labour is expropriated of its productive power, in the sense that the work of co-ordination and unity of the labour process has become a part of the function of capital (rather than being, as in Marx, a part of the function of labour) and thus performed by capital. It is through the work of co-ordination and unity that (surplus-) labour can be extracted from the labourers. The above has shown the inconsistency of this approach.

Aside from this, there are two dimensions in Arthur’s notion of exploitation in production, the qualitative and the quantitative. Qualitatively, ‘There is a

\textsuperscript{72} Arthur 2004b, pp. 47–8.
\textsuperscript{74} Arthur 2004a, p. 18.
\textsuperscript{75} Arthur, 2004b, p. 47.
close connection... between abstract labour and alienated labour’. 76

Quantitatively, since the labourers labour the whole of the working day for
capital, exploitation ‘comprises the whole of the working day, not just the so-
called “surplus labour time”’. 77 This implies that the distinction between
necessary labour and surplus-labour is obliterated and that it is impossible to
distinguish between them *ex ante*. 78 However, the quantity of value can be
measured, irrespective of what goes to capital and what goes to labour: ‘the
magnitude of value is determined by the socially necessary exploitation time’, 79
i.e. by the socially-necessary work of control and surveillance. Three objections
can be moved against the notion of socially-necessary exploitation-time
(SNET, for short).

First, it might be impossible for Arthur to conceptualise the distinction
between necessary and surplus-labour *ex ante*. The capitalists, however, do not
seem to have any problem in making that distinction, as shown by their
constant attempt to reduce necessary labour and to increase surplus-labour.
The notion that exploitation takes place during the whole of the working day
is simply inconsistent with empirical reality.

Second, it has been shown that if concrete labours are different, so must be
the work needed to control them. It is thus impossible to compare quantitatively
different work of control and surveillance and thus to find a SNET. Third,
even if the SNET were a viable concept for the measurement of the value
created, the notion of SNET as a measure of value clashes head-on with the
contrary notion that value can be measured by the socially-necessary labour-
time (SNLT for short): ‘only because capitals are inherently time-oriented in
virtue of their form is the measure of such amounts of labour [the amounts of
labour extractable, G.C.] socially necessary labour time’. 80 Which one
determines the magnitude of value, the SNLT or the SNET?

4.2. Exploitation in distribution

The second notion of exploitation is in distribution. This ‘arises from the
discrepancy between the new wealth created and the return to those exploited

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78. I.e. ‘In order to avoid attributing the creation of surplus value to labour, [Arthur] invents
a novel definition of exploitation that excludes the concept of surplus labour time’ (Bell 2005).
80. Arthur 2004b, p. 205. This point seems to have escaped Murray (2005, p. 73) for whom
‘Arthur... attributes the quantitative determination of value... to (socially necessary) abstract
labour’. Bidet 2005 seems to think that, for Arthur, value is determined by the SNLT which, in
its turn, is determined by class struggle. Neither author sees the contradiction between SNLT
and SNET.
in production". For Arthur, those exploited in production are the labourers. But the labourers neither create the use-value of the commodity (capital does, by co-ordinating and unifying their activities) nor the value of the commodity (their labour is the source of value, but does not create value because value is posited by capital through their exploitation). But, if the labourers create neither value nor use-value, no wealth can be returned to them. If commodities as use-values are received by labour, it is labour that receives a part of the use-values created by capital, i.e. it is labour that exploits in distribution. If commodities as value are received by labour, it is again labour that exploits capital because it is capital that posits the concrete labour which has gone into those commodities as abstract labour through the work of control and surveillance. In short, given Arthur’s theory of production of value and use values, exploitation in distribution leads to the notion that capital is exploited by labour.

5. The complete proof of value’s material existence before exchange

It has been argued above that to prove the existence of abstract labour (and thus of value under capitalism) before exchange it is sufficient to consider the human metabolism. This is necessary but not sufficient. It applies to the abstract labour performed during production and thus to the new value created during production. But the value of a commodity consists also of the value of its inputs. We must then consider how and why the value contained in a commodity’s inputs exists before that commodity’s exchange. Consider two production and realisation periods. Period t0–t1 produces commodity A. Period t1–t2 produces commodity B with commodity A as input. Point t1 is both the end point of t0–t1 and the start point of t1–t2 (what follows holds also for an interval between the two periods). At t1, commodity A is sold by the producer of A at one price and bought by the producer of B obviously at the same price. This is an incontrovertible fact. This price represents a certain quantity of value. The price of A when it leaves the to–t1 period is its realised value as the output of t0–t1. But it is also, and at the same time, an element

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82. Murray accepts Arthur’s words at face value: ‘Arthur’s first notion… just renames alienation, while the second doubles back to the traditional conception’ (2005, p. 81). Murray thus misses the point that Arthur’s notion of exploitation in distribution is incongruous with his view of the production of both use-values and value. The same point escapes also Hunt 2005, p. 163.
83. The value represented by this price can be computed according to the method submitted in Carchedi and de Haan 1996.
of the costs of producing B in the t1–t2 period. At t2, B is sold at which time
the producer of B might either recoup her investment in A or more or less
than that value (less for example if A’s technological depreciation during t1–t2
changes the average value of A by t2). The value invested in the inputs is only
potentially realisable when the output is sold. This, too, is an incontrovertible
fact. This means that A’s realised value as an output of t0–t1 at t1 is also A’s
potential value as an input of B, also at t1, and that this potential value becomes
realised at t2, when B is sold possibly in a modified quantity. It follows that a
part of the value of B (the value of A) is already contained in B before B’s realisation
because the potential value of A as an input of t1–t2 is its realised value as an
output of the previous period. The potential value does not come from nowhere;
its inputs are concerned, the value contained in this period’s output exists before
its realisation because the value of its inputs has been realised in the previous
period. It follows that a commodity contains value (and thus is coagulated
material expenditure of undifferentiated human energy) already before
exchange. But, then, a commodity must also have a value contained after
exchange, in a modified quantity, as value realised.

Whether value-form theorists are aware of it or not, the denial of the
objective existence of abstract labour, or, more precisely, of the objective
existence of the abstract labour embodied in a commodity before that
commodity’s exchange and therefore also after exchange, clashes both with the
reality of the human metabolism and with the reality of time, of the temporal
succession of production and realisation periods. Ironically, value-form theory
shares this latter feature with neo-Ricardianism and, just like neo-Ricardianism,
is doomed to exist in a timeless world. If the original aim of value-form theory
was to avoid the transformation ‘problem’ by denying the existence of value
before its exchange, the strategy has misfired. Value-form theory, to be credible,
must show that both the human metabolism and time do not exist or that it
can be justifiably assumed that they do not exist.

The value-form approach is implicitly a simultaneist approach. Its characteristic
feature is the belief that value comes into existence only at the moment of
realisation. Consequently, production and realisation are collapsed into each
other and time is wiped out. In short, to be able to criticise Marx, this approach
chooses a simultaneous view in which production and realisation are
simultaneous. The theoretical consequences are grave even if unsuspected by
the value-form theorists. A reality in which time does not exist is a static reality.
All theorisations of reality in which change is banned cannot but be functional
to the interests of capital rather than those of labour.
6. Conclusions

To conclude, Arthur’s position can be summarised as follows. The commodity as a use-value, in its empirical concreteness, is the result neither of the individual labourers’ labour nor of the collective labourer’s labour. Rather, it is the capitalists who, by co-ordinating and organising the labour process (seen as a function of capital), are the creators and the producers of the commodity as a use-value. As for value and surplus-value, labour does not produce them either. Rather, it is capital which, even though not producing them, ‘posits’ the labourers’ concrete labour as abstract, as value, because it equally exploits it irrespective of the specificity of the concrete labours. Finally, exploitation in production is similar to alienation and can be measured by measuring the socially-necessary exploitation-time. Exploitation in distribution is the return of the wealth to the exploited. The above argument has highlighted the many internal inconsistencies of this approach. It has also argued that Arthur shares with the other value-form theorists the assumption that neither the human metabolism nor time exist.

But this aside, for Marx, the labourers are the protagonists because their labour, under coercion, produces both the use-value of the commodities and the (surplus-) value contained in them. In Arthur’s approach, on the other hand, the labourers have become the ‘servants of a production process originated and directed by capital’ so that labour is ‘reduced to a resource for capital accumulation’. Capital is the subject of valorisation even if valorisation depends on labour being exploited. In short, labour is the servant who can only be given what has been produced by capital, the master. I cannot but repeat my conclusions in my 2003 critique of Arthur. In spite of its laudable intentions, the new dialectics renders a better service to capital than capital’s own ideologues. It gives away the most precious legacy Marx left us, the ability to see reality from the perspective of labour as the protagonist, as the producer of wealth and value, a perspective which, contrary to what is held by the new dialectics and the concomitant value-form theory, is grounded in a logically coherent, and as yet unsurpassed, economic theory of capitalism.

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84. Arthur 2004b, p. 47.
85. Arthur 2004b, p. 51
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Contradiction and Abstraction: A Reply to Finelli

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Abstract
Following the publication of my book The New Dialectic and Marx’s ‘Capital’, and the symposium on it in Historical Materialism 13.2, a critique by Roberto Finelli recently appeared: ‘Abstraction versus Contradiction: Observations on Chris Arthur’s The New Dialectic and Marx’s “Capital”’ in Historical Materialism 15.2. Finelli argues that my systematic dialectic is not taken sufficiently far, in that I retain presuppositions not posited by the capitalist totality. Here, I argue against Finelli’s closed totality of wholly abstract forms, not least because it affords no realistic exit strategy. I reaffirm that the logic of contradiction is required to conceptualise the capital relation.

Keywords
abstraction, contradiction, dialectics, totality, humanism, Marx, Hegel

My book, The New Dialectic and Marx’s ‘Capital’, raises two issues.1 What is ‘new’ about this dialectic? – and how does it illuminate Marx’s Capital?

My work starts from a Hegelianism-inspired reappropriation of the dialectic. But this interest in Hegel is unconcerned with recovering the grand narrative of Hegel’s philosophy of history and relating it to historical materialism; rather, it is focused on Hegel’s Logic and how this fits the method of Marx’s Capital. The effort is to construct a systematic dialectic in order to articulate the relations of a given social order, namely capitalism, as opposed to a historical dialectic studying the rise and fall of social systems.

Now, where the interpretation of Marx’s Capital is concerned, I draw also upon another relatively new tendency in Marxian theory, which emphasises Marx’s notion of the ‘value-form’. In value-form theory, it is the development of the forms of exchange that is seen as the prime determinant of the capitalist economy rather than the content regulated by it: all the material and technical

economic processes are accomplished within definite historically specific social forms. Things, such as commodities, are assigned a social role as mediators of production relations. This is how a category such as value must be understood. The value-form is the characteristic social form of capitalist commodity relations. Through the effectivity of form-determination, things acquire definite social functions. Marx develops increasingly complex value-forms, corresponding to increasingly complex production relations.

Hegel is a natural reference for value-form theory because his logic of categories is well suited to a theory of forms. Moreover, Hegel’s systematic development of categories is directed towards articulating the structure of a totality, showing how it supports itself in and through the interchanges of its inner ‘moments’. Since all moments of the whole exist synchronically, all movement must pertain to their reciprocal support and development. The method of presentation articulates the categories in such a manner as to show how the logic of the system tendentially ensures its completeness through ‘positing’ all its presuppositions. The presentation ends when all the conditions of existence needing to be addressed are comprehended by the entire system of categories developed. Such a system is complete only when it returns to, and accounts for, its starting point.

I argue capital is just such a totality. This is because exchange abstracts from the heterogeneity of commodities and treats them as instances of a universal, namely value. This practical abstraction parallels the way the abstractive power of thought operates, and it gives rise to a homologous structure to logical forms, namely the value-forms. Moreover, the totalising category here, namely value, develops systematically from its more simple and abstract shapes to its most complex and concrete reality. The dialectic of the value-form, from commodity to money to capital, may be exhibited in accordance with the Hegelian paradigm, I have shown.

However, I go further than just drawing attention to methodological lessons from Hegel’s systematic ordering of categories, as do others. I draw also on his ontology. Hegel is the expert on how an ideality would have to build itself up, moment by moment, into a self-actualising whole. If then, as I believe, capital has in part an ideal reality, then if it can be shown to incarnate Hegel’s blueprint it can claim to be self-sustaining. According to my interpretation, capital has a certain conceptuality to it. This ideal aspect springs from the inversion of concrete and abstract, characteristic of the system of production for exchange. In positing otherness merely as a moment of it, the totalising logic of capital really imposes itself in such a manner that material and social relationships become inscribed within it. But capital as an ideal totality cannot account for what is in excess of its concept of itself, the concrete richness of social labour, not to mention that of nature.
While I deploy Hegel’s logic in my reconstruction of *Capital*, it is important to notice that, on my account, Marx’s criticisms of Hegel still stand. One thinks of i) his 1844 point about the incomprehensibility of the transition from logic to *Realphilosophie*; ii) his 1845–7 parodies of ‘speculative construction’; iii) his 1857 attack on Hegel for conceiving the real as the product of thought; iv) his difference with Hegel on the self-sufficiency of conceptual forms, expressed in a telling remark in the first edition of *Capital*; v) his ‘Afterword’ to the second edition dissenting from the ‘mystified form’ of Hegel’s dialectic; vi) most importantly, from our present interest, Marx’s *Poverty of Philosophy*, which complains that in Hegel reality is drowned in a sea of abstractions.2

I do not seek to defend Hegel against all this, as do some Hegelian Marxists (for example, Tony Smith). Rather, my argument is that capital does in reality constitute itself through abstraction and the march of abstract forms. Capital is closed in form; hence the relevance of Hegel’s totalising logic. It is just insofar as it might be thought to share this character with Hegel’s logic that it may be criticised in parallel ways to Marx’s critique of Hegel.

In particular, in capitalism too the rule of abstractions predicated on the value-form is an appropriate object of critique. In both cases, the ontological primacy of the real spells the inability of the ideal to secure itself through positing all its presuppositions. Nonetheless, epochally, the Idea of capital has objective validity. This means that theory must take its claims seriously and trace how far it succeeds in positing all its presuppositions.

If the realm of value is that of a totality of abstract forms grounded in the peculiar practice of exchange, it follows that capital, defined as self-valorising value, is nothing but self-moving abstraction. Yet, such abstract forms are socially and materially determining of the content inscribed with them. *Form-determination*3 is the process whereby the value-form posits the material inscribed within it as value, and, more broadly, transforms it so as to make it adequate to the concept of capital. In its universality, the value-form functions as a principle of totalisation which impresses its logic on the finite material content. Of course, it is not possible to point out capital empirically. Immediately, we see only money, factories, workers and commodities. In this sense, capital is a spectre, the presence of an absence.4

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3. The term itself is present in Marx’s *Grundrisse*, especially where subsumption is discussed, but does not appear explicitly in *Capital*, I believe, although I think it does illuminate its argument. See Marx and Engels 1974–2005f, p. 81.

4. In the same vein, Finelli says capital is an ‘invisible subject’ perceptible only through its effects. Finelli 2007, p. 67.
In my book, I take the view that the totalising Subject of modernity is capital itself. When I say capital is a subject, this clearly requires some explanation. Obviously, capital does not possess consciousness or personality (these it acquires through its form-determination of the person of the capitalist). I mean by the term ‘Subject’ exactly what Hegel means by it in his logic, where he specifies the minimum determinations that are logically required. These are three: 1) a subject, in addressing the material given to it in its practices, must have the power to subsume the singulars under their universal concept; 2) a subject sets itself an aim; 3) a subject must be an individual, that is, maintain itself as such through totalising its determinations. On the first point, capital subsumes commodities under their universal concept, namely value, when it produces and markets them. On the second point, the structure of capital as self-valorising value is directed towards the production and accumulation of surplus-value. On the third point, the term ‘individual’ is again to be understood logically as that concrete universality that remains the same in all its specifications. That is to say, it totalises them; in its circuit, capital takes on the shape of money capital, production capital, commodity capital, while existing in their unity as a self-positing subject. Moreover capitals are logically unified in a single universal capital comprehending them, I have shown elsewhere.5

Finelli on capital

The view that capital is a Subject is a position also held by Moishe Postone6 and by Roberto Finelli. All of us also think that in some way this Subject has to be understood in Hegelian terms. However, there are differences between us. In his critique of my book, Finelli expresses this by counterposing to my logic of contradiction his own ‘logic of abstraction’.

Finelli’s interesting and insightful work has many points of contact with my own. There is indeed much on which we agree. We agree a) that capital is a peculiar Subject, founded in a social process of abstraction; b) that the circle of presupposition and posit7 is how it constitutes itself as a self-grounded power; c) that the world of abstraction is as real as that of the concrete;8 d) on the importance of form-determination and its difference from simple material determination.9

6. For my assessment of Postone, see Arthur 2004.
7. These terms were introduced to the English discussion in Bellofiore and Finelli 1998.
8. I tend to speak of the first here as ‘ideality’ where Finelli talks of ‘spiritualism’, but I am happy to equate capital with Hegel’s ‘Absolute Spirit’.
We disagree on two major points, it seems to me: first, on whether or not capital is a closed totality; and second, concomitantly, on the exit strategy. In addition, we disagree about the concept of abstract labour and about the reading of Hegel.

Finelli’s central thesis is that there are two worlds.

With Marx the heart of the dialectic lies in the split of the world into two: world 1, the world of the concrete, a world of human beings and use values, and world 2, the world of an inhuman abstract subject, the world of merely quantitative wealth predicated on the logic of accumulation.10

However, it turns out that there is only one world, because the logic of form-determination, and of positing the presupposition, means that the abstract world has completely colonised that of the concrete, emptying it of reality, leaving only a hysterically overdetermined simulacrum of the concrete.

Finelli objects to my account of capital that I do not push the logic of positing the presupposition far enough. While I agree the abstract world takes possession of the concrete, I retain the irreducible difference between the two worlds. Hence, Finelli correctly reads my position as follows: ‘For this position, it is a case of a struggle and of a contradiction between subjects and the world of the concrete, on the one side, and the Subject and the world of the abstract, on the other.’11

He rejects the logic of contradiction because he holds that the logic of positing the presupposition goes all the way down. He says that, properly speaking, the systematic dialectic does not tolerate the existence of presupposed elements. Such presuppositions must be dogmatic assumptions of a metaphysical or humanist nature. In sum, ‘the logic of abstraction does not tolerate any presupposed element if it is not posited, that is, produced and resignified by the totalising subject’.12

What is my response? To begin with, I insist on the reality of inversion. Only given this are there really two worlds. The world of abstraction gains its autonomy and power, as distinct from a set of abstractions epiphenomenal to the real world, only because reality itself is inverted. But this can happen only in social practice; hence the material basis retains its ontological primacy. Even if these abstract forms colonise the concrete effectively, through the process of form-determination, this always presupposes the original materiality of production and distribution, and hence the possibility of putting the world back on its feet, of a return of the repressed.

In the passage last quoted from Finelli, there is a fundamental ambiguity. There is a great difference between a Subject that ‘produces’ its world from its own resources, and one that simply ‘resignifies’ relationships already present.

It is important to my account of the ‘two worlds’ that capital, as the totalising Subject, is at home with itself only in the world of forms. At that level, it may well be conceded that it is grounded on itself, and achieves closure when producing commodities on the basis of ex nihilo bank credit (value produces value). However, at all points in its circuit, the process is borne by matter. This is why capital cannot be granted its claim to be the source of all wealth. This claim pertains only to wealth in its abstract form, accumulated capital. But not to wealth in its reality. The human and natural basis of the economic metabolism remains, regardless of how deeply capital penetrates these spheres, resignifying and reshaping them. Capital is a closed totality only in form; in reality, capital cannot posit its presuppositions where its material conditions of existence are concerned (such as the possibility of a surplus product). Yet, epochally, capital is triumphant, so science has the task of elucidating its logic of self-positing even if this means a certain methodological postponement of the identification of its limits.

The specific case cited by Finelli, when contesting my view that the concrete is ultimately irreducible to the abstract, is that of labour. It might seem that abstract labour is realised only in exchange when the labours embodied in commodities are counted as abstractions of themselves in so far as the commodities are equated in value. However, in my book, I argue that value is actual only when the commodities are products of capital; hence, the point at which labour becomes abstract must be taken back into production itself as it is value-formed by its location in the circuit of capital. The process of valorisation is borne by the material production process. Considered as the positing of value, this process takes the abstract form of the pure activity of value-positing. Labour counts now merely as simple movement in time. Just as value inheres in the shell of use-value, value positing inheres in the shell of labour. Value abstracts from use-value; value-positing abstracts from living labour; the abstract activity substitutes itself for the concrete one. This inversion is splendidly characterised by Marx when he says the worker is time’s carcass. Finelli charges me with empiricism because I stress there is always a gap here. The concept of labour as abstract can never be instantiated perfectly in a material incarnation just because of the irreducible qualitative concrete character of all material production.

His alternative account is strange in that he gives a pseudo-empirical incarnation of the concept; he locates abstract labour in the technical matrix of production by machinery, including the ‘informational machine’. Now, it
may well be that as a consequence of the form-determination of production
discussed above living labour becomes tendentially machine-like; but it always
counts formally as abstract regardless of how close is the empirical approximation
of the concept.

There is another interesting sense of ‘abstract’; separation out from the
whole. In the case of the division of labour imposed on workers in factories,
the dissociated labours are reunited externally from above; no doubt this
empties the work of meaning and results in the indifference of the worker to
the specific task assigned. But, again, the labours always count as abstract at
whatever level the division of labour is taken.

**Hegel and Marx**

According to Finelli, there is a contrast between the ontologies of Hegel and
Marx. For Hegel, he says, the ontological cleavage between Being and Nothing
is mediated through absolute negativity. For Marx, the ontological cleavage
between use-value and exchange-value is mediated through abstraction/
colonisation; this split is not to do with Nothingness but with concrete and
abstract. So one ‘is based on the power of… universalisation of the “negative”,
the other on the power of universalisation of the “abstract”.’

In my opinion, there is no ontological cleavage between Being and Nothing; indeed they are indistinguishable except as always already sublated in
Becoming. The radical ontological cleavage in Hegel is between Thought and Reality; here, the identity is merely speculative, in some sense always
accomplished, but in experience requiring ‘the labour of the negative’ to make
the bridge in so far as the Concept strives to actualise itself through idealising
Reality, presupposed as its own other, but not yet posited as such. In the
language of Hegel’s *Phenomenology* this is called ‘conceiving Substance as
Subject’.

The pure thoughts of the *Logic* (including both ‘Being’ and ‘Nothing’) are
generated through a radical abstraction from reality. Yet Hegel deems them
self-subsistent. Not only that, he attempts to show these categories are the
‘truth’ of reality. It is this contrast between forms of thought and the real
content which I see as parallel to Marx’s disjunction between exchange and
use. Immediately, as Finelli says, ‘exchange-value is external to use-value: when

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14. Hegel 1991, § 87; and especially the *Addition*: ‘in the case of being and nothing, distinction has no basis’ (p. 140).
there is one there is not the other'. However, for capital as self-valorising value to actualise itself, it must take possession of the sphere of use-value which is presupposed in production and circulation; and a speculative identity of value-in-process on the one hand and the concrete production of use-value, on the other, must obtain.

Certainly, the constitution of value as an autonomous sphere is by way of abstraction from (or absenting of) use-value. But, surely it is wrong to distinguish the power of abstraction from the power of the negative, because the generation of an abstract category/form results from the negation of all concrete determinacy? Not merely is all specific use-value abstracted from, but even the genus itself. The exchange process carries out an ‘infinitely negative judgement’ on the commodities, when imposing their identity as exchangeables against all their material differences. Leaving what as the ground of their Being? Nothingness!

Conversely, determination is negation (of the universal). For Hegel, absolute negativity characterises the Subject which determines/negates itself in some finite shape and then recovers its universality through refusing this fixity and superseding it. The same is true for capital in its circuit (as we saw above). So, I do not see the difference between Hegel and Marx where Finelli does.

There is, however, a profound difference between Hegel and Marx, which may be encapsulated as the difference between identity and unity. For Hegel, all difference is ultimately self-difference, so there is an identity of identity and difference in the Absolute. Similarly, for capital, living labour is ‘the use-value’ of capital, that is to say, of capital’s difference from itself as variable capital. But the capital relation is in reality a unity of opposites, namely of the ideal and the material.

There is a contradiction as soon as we assume the two worlds are both real, because each claims to be the truth of the other. For Hegel, nature has ‘its truth outside itself’ in the Idea. Feuerbach held the contrary view that nature stands in no need of mediation, whereas the Idea to be actual must mediate itself in its other in order to give itself content. In our case, capital makes itself actual, that is, valorises itself, only through the materiality of production. From its own solipsistic point of view, it is therewith a productive power. But, clearly, it is possible to produce wealth without capital. Nevertheless, capital

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19. Specifically, the unity of Thought and Being is achieved within Thought. See Hegel 1991, §215.
20. For the contradictions here, see Arthur 2009.
may claim to produce wealth in its current social form, namely capital itself. This solipsistic view is both true and false. The self-identity of capital is not ‘really real’ ontologically, in that its actuality requires it generate its own content which it cannot fully achieve (albeit it resignifies the material given to it). Conversely, the world of living labour is true only virtually: labour actualises itself only in the mode of denial; capital can be understood as its alienated form. The self-constitution of capital and the self-negation of labour are conditions of each other. The capital relation is indeed a relation, whereas each pole claims it is an identity.

The true (the capital relation is a contradiction in essence) and the false (capital is a self-positing totality) ontologies are both real and coexist as moments of one another. Capital says the factory has its truth outside itself in that it mediates capital’s self-valorisation. But, just insofar as capital depends on material potentials of labour and nature it cannot be, as it solipsistically imagines, a closed totality, hence it is open to determination from what it necessarily requires of labour; ultimately, therefore, it is open to subversion and overthrow from that side of the relation.

Where is value posited?

There is a complication in the relation of my work to that of Finelli. Following the value-form tradition, I find the origin of abstraction in exchange and circulation, which then imposes itself on production. Finelli, in contrast, locates abstraction first and foremost in production itself: it is only there that the value abstraction becomes ‘practically true’. An important consequence of his view is that he sees the capital-Subject as lying behind the superficiality of circulation. Indeed, he goes so far as to say that value is posited only as a result of the relation of domination in production: ‘It is surplus-value… which explains value and not vice versa’.21

This seems strange: even grammatically, ‘surplus-value’ presupposes ‘value’. I believe Finelli has got into trouble here because of a fundamental ambivalence in Marxist theory itself.

As it happens, Helmut Reichelt has posed the issue exceptionally clearly in a recent article in Historical Materialism. He finds in Marx’s Grundrisse: i) exchange-value-positing in and through ‘simple circulation’; ii) exchange-value-positing in and through the employment of labour by capital.22

22. Reichelt 2007, p. 9; but he is wrong to say the expression ‘simple circulation’ is ‘not found
In my opinion, Marx never satisfactorily resolves this problem of the constitution of value. Many readers of *Capital* miss this completely because Marx moves too quickly to identify value with labour in the course of the notorious ‘third thing’ argument. From the fact that a commodity has many exchange-values, Marx supposes that these express ‘something equal’, a unitary value that underlies the various exchange-values. As a quite distinct separate step, he then grounds this value on labour, tacitly presupposing, as Reichelt notes, that commodities are products of capital, and hence posited as values already.

The problem may be expressed in terms of the essence/appearance couplet. On the one hand, value appears in the *form* of value, notably price; on the other, the value-form as a whole is itself the shape in which social labour appears. There seems to be a double retreat from the surface of things: exchange-value–value–labour. In my opinion, the resolution of these difficulties may be achieved by a more precise distinction between the couplets form/content and form/matter. The relation of value to exchange-value is a logically tight conceptual necessity: value as content necessarily requires the form of exchange-value, and conversely. However, the relation between value and material labour is not a conceptual necessity, because it is perfectly possible for labour not to take the form of value. Conversely, it is logically possible that value be an empty form, prey to contingencies (as in the supply-demand paradigm). That, in this society, there is a law of value grounded on labour expenditures is discovered by theory. Theory also elucidates the way in which the material inscribed in the value-form has to be made adequate to it through its *form-determination* as content, always a struggle to achieve.

Bearing all this in mind, how is the place where value is posited to be located? Value as pure form is posited in developed circulation. But new value arises in production under the impulse of capital to valorise itself (hence the possibility of posing surplus-value as prior to value). The general formula of capital grounds itself on production, thereby giving itself a law of motion, formally determined through the competition of many capitals, and materially on the productive power of labour.

Finelli thinks capital is a productive power which simply expresses itself in circulation. But this is not coherent, because production is value-formed already within the overall circuit of capital. If it is right to ground value-positing on the pumping out of labour in the immediate production process,
this does not mean circulation is secondary, because positing the pure (empty) form of value is logically prior to positing surplus-value, albeit the magnitude of value is determined only through the competition of capitals for a slice of the social surplus-product.

To sum up, I say in my book:

The form of capital explains the drive for valorisation; but it cannot in itself, i.e. as pure form, bring it about, produce it. But if production is the overriding moment, this is not production as a factor external to, and causally effective upon, other factors, it is production as mediated by circulation whose form it internalises. Hence, methodologically, the exposition describes a circle: commodity circulation (form of value) – circulation reflected into production (valorisation) – circulation as a moment of production (realisation of value).23

Abstraction and contradiction

A great strength of Finelli’s work is his striking critique of postmodern society characterised by a hollow simulacrum of the concrete. He rightly attributes its emptiness to the power of the abstract Subject.24 Nevertheless, I have a different take on the challenge to that, retaining, in this respect, a logic of contradiction. Finelli’s objection to my position is that a Marxism of contradiction must be situated in a humanist problematic, an anthropology ‘based on the ontological primacy of the labouring subject as concrete collective agent, and on the irreducible opposition between the (taken-for-granted) communitarianism of the productive forces and the private restriction of the relations of production’.25 However, in the chapter on the negation of the negation in my book, I took care to argue that these social determinations are created by capital itself, albeit ‘virtually’ in the mode of denial. The constitution of the proletariat as a collective potential counter-subject is a historical product of capital’s own development – the flipside of real subsumption, if you like. Moreover, the same point applies when the historically developed sociality of productive forces is concerned.

In the sixth of the Theses on Feuerbach, Marx says that the standpoint of the old materialism is the individual but the standpoint of the new materialism is social humanity. However, this sociality is displaced because capital has constituted itself as the objective ground of human being. The non-actual

25. Finelli 2007, p. 66.
character of this subverted sociality means that its standpoint has a certain *speculative* character which is at the same time practical because it is immanent in the present order.

Moreover, if there is to be some immanent source of change, capital cannot be conceived as a closed totality; yet this is surely the consequence of Finelli’s ambition to demonstrate that capital posits all its presuppositions. In such a case, there is no exit.

Very oddly, notwithstanding this, Finelli does have a perspective of change. Even more oddly, despite his abjuration of ‘humanism’ in the first part of his critique, he ends up calling for ‘a new anthropology’. He advances a demand for the recognition of the uniquely individual character of human beings. Finelli counterposes this to what he calls the abstract materialism of needs. This anthropology of poverty issues in a demand for equal satisfaction, in effect, in this way, failing to overcome the present rule of abstraction. Finelli replaces this with ‘the immaterial need’ for recognition of the incomparability of human beings. This new anthropology issues in the right of everyone to see their singularity respected and developed, the liberation of the difference of individual subjectivities.26

Thus the inevitable consequence of his closed totality is that he falls into dualism when he comes to discuss the exit from capitalism. The ‘new anthropology’ appears from outside the closed totality of capital, yet is supposed to contest it.

Moreover, it seems to me there is a striking fetishisation of the singular here, which philosophically complements Finelli’s rejection of the abstract universal, and politically simply replicates one pole of those existing contradictions of capital Finelli already indicated. Capitalism in its surface forms not only tries to simplify everything to ‘one size fits all’, it also inconsistently appeals precisely to the consumers’ hunger to have their individuality recognised, when it says the product is ‘just for you’ because you are ‘special’ (if only in your own eyes). Finelli’s fetishisation of the singular does not escape the framework of capital’s false concreteness. Now, if we look to Marx, we find a much more nuanced account of human being in which the individual is always a ‘social individual’, even where bourgeois conditions promote an asocial sociality; the wealth of an individual, Marx says, depends on the wealth of his or her real connections. I concur with Finelli in his impatience with the left tradition that promotes equality. (Marx made clear on many occasions his disdain for that tradition.) But the choice is not between identity and difference. Individuals flourish only in and through the community.

26. Finelli 2007, pp. 72–3,
However, more important is the question of agency. Specifically, what role is class struggle to be given in a theory that depicts capital as a self-positing totality? We both agree that capital is the true ‘Subject’ of modernity. But we disagree about its supersession. Finelli has it coming externally through social subjects with a different project. I see in the proletariat the counter-subject created by capital itself as its repressed other, virtually present if empirically negated, as the ground of a self-transcending project of emancipation from, rather than of, wage-labour.

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Review Articles


Abstract
This review essay analyses the proposed synthesis of Lacanian psychoanalysis and Marxism, which often presents itself as a critique of the kind of utopianism associated with ‘Freudo-Marxism’. In Yannis Stavrakakis’s The Lacanian Left (2007) this anti-utopianism slides towards a left reformism, in which the emphasis on constitutive lack prevents any thinking of transformation. Ian Parker’s Revolution in Psychology (2007) presents a bracing but reductive polemic, in which psychology and psychoanalysis seem to function as mere reflections of capitalist ideology. What goes missing in both accounts is the possibility of a re-thinking of subjectivity, both individual and collective, posed between Lacanian psychoanalysis and Marxism.

Keywords
psychoanalysis; Marxism; Lacan; ideology; subjectivity

Writing the preface to Deleuze and Guattari’s Anti-Oedipus, itself perhaps the last instance of high ‘Freudo-Marxism’, Michel Foucault argued that the dream of the 1930s – placing ‘Marx and Freud in the same incandescent light’ – ‘had returned and set fire to reality itself’.1 The dream of ‘the possibility of the abolition of repression’,2 to use Norman O. Brown’s formulation in Life Against Death, was to find reality rather more impervious than Foucault supposed. His poetic formulation, however, perfectly captures the ecstatic and quasi-mystical, if not millennial, tone of much of Freudo-Marxism. What is obvious, if strange, is that this tone runs against the sobriety and scepticism regarding utopianism to be found in both Marx and Freud. Therefore, it is appropriate that the thinker who had done most to argue for a fidelity to the original Freudian discovery – Jacques Lacan – should be the one to douse the fire of this utopian dream. During his infamous impromptu at the red University of Vincennes on 3 December 1969, in the face of the usual student provocations of the period, Lacan would reply with asperity that ‘What you, as revolutionaries, aspire to is a Master. You will have one.’3 Willingly adopting the title of someone who is ‘anti-progressive’,

1. Foucault 1983, p. xii.
Lacan pinioned the nascent discourse of sexual liberation: ‘The regime puts you on display; it says “Watch them fuck...”’.

In his 1959–60 seminar The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, delivered four years after the publication of Marcuse’s Eros and Civilisation, Lacan had argued that the point of alliance between Marx and Freud was their shared critique of ‘progressivism’. So, when Lacan later characterised himself as ‘anti-progressive’, this signalled his fundamental agreement with the cynicism of Marx and Freud towards the ameliorative work of the good-hearted, or towards what Lacan called ‘bourgeois prejudice’. While the students of 68 put their faith in the slogan ‘enjoy without shackles’, Lacan was already suggesting that such enjoyment [jouissance] was all too congruent with the régimes it was supposed to be disrupting. Lacan remained far more faithful to Freud’s often-noted pessimism and scepticism, most problematically put for the Marxist reader in Freud’s mordant witticism reported by Ernest Jones.

[H]e [Freud] had recently had an interview with an ardent communist and had been half converted to Bolshevism – he had been informed that the advent of Bolshevism would result in some years of misery and chaos, and that these would be followed by universal peace, prosperity, and happiness. Freud said: ‘I told him I believed the first half’.

Not surprisingly this haut anti-utopian strain in Freud and Lacan gives rise to doubts as to the efficacy of any conjunction of Lacanian psychoanalysis and Marxism. While Freudo-Marxism may have bent the stick too far towards utopianism, the alternative of ‘Lacanno-Marxism’ appears to be a stark ‘realism’ that seems to rule out any revolutionary or political change whatsoever, except as a change for the worse.

It is on such seemingly unpromising ground that Yannis Stavrakakis’s The Lacanian Left is based. Consisting of a collection of previously published essays that have been expanded and revised, the book is divided into two parts: the first dealing with the major figures of the contemporary revival of Lacanianism from the Left, in particular Ernesto Laclau, Slavoj Žižek, and Alain Badiou; the second composed of a series of analyses deploying the Lacanian category of jouissance to grasp the ideological functions of contemporary culture. Stavrakakis willingly embraces Lacan’s anti-utopian radicalism as crucial in sustaining the ‘truly subversive edge’ (p. 2) of psychoanalysis for political theory. This is not, however, simply a fidelity to Lacan, but shaped by Stavrakakis’s own intellectual formation as a one-time postgraduate student in Ernesto Laclau’s ‘Ideology and Discourse Analysis Programme’ at the University of Essex. More than one wag has remarked of his previous book Lacan and the Political that it might better have been titled Laclau and the Political. Therefore, to use a Freudian term introduced into Marxism by Althusser, we might say that Stavrakakis’s putative Lacanian anti-utopian rejection of fantasies of fullness is ‘overdetermined’ by a Laclauian insistence on the necessity to keep open the constitutive gap that fissures any and every social formation. The result is a highly unstable amalgam in which the anti-

progressivism identified by Lacan slides inexorably towards revisionist liberalism cloaked in the rhetoric of the Left.7

This is all the more disappointing in that Stavrakakis appears initially to be on the right path in his highlighting of the fact that contemporary left theory pivots around the problem of negativity. If negativity is essential to provide a point of resistance and disruption to the extensive and intensive unfolding of capitalism then the issue becomes how this negativity can be alchemically transmuted into a new positivity – to be blunt, into a new functioning communism. In the dispersion or absence of identifiable agents to produce this passage the disorientation of theory is unsurprising. The solution of Stavrakakis to this problem partakes of what we might call the ‘Goldilocks and the Three Bears’ effect: his readings attempt to balance negativity and positivity so they are ‘just right’. Therefore, his first figure, Castoriadis, is too positive in his romantic emphasis on creativity; he then moves to Ernesto Laclau, who is too negative in his lack of a thinking of affect. Then we come to Žižek, again too positive in his belief in the miracle of the act that would change everything, while, finally, Badiou is nearly there in his recognition of the dialectic of the negative and positive, but not quite.

The problem is that Stavrakakis’s own conception of negativity and positivity remains simplistic. One the hand, negativity is assimilated to the effect of the constitutive gap or lack, in which Lacan’s concept of the ‘Real’ as what resists symbolisation is misread as the inadequacy of symbolisation to ‘cover’ empirical reality. On the other hand, positivity is an excess when conceived of under the sign of Lacanian jouissance – that excessive ‘affect’ in which pleasure is indistinguishable from pain – as the ‘glue’ that never completely binds the gap of negativity.8 Stavrakakis’s version of this ‘dialectic’ is simply to balance these two effects, and we can only agree with the footnote to this introduction where he remarks that his recourse to the language of dialectics to describe this seesawing balancing act hardly matches the ‘technical’ use of dialectics in either Hegel or Freud (p. 33, fn. 26). Instead, to quote Žižek’s stinging rebuke to Stavrakakis’s book, we have here an ‘ersatz political analysis’ in which the Lacanian discourse of jouissance is itself simply tacked on to an existing Laclauian framework to produce ‘Freudo-radical democracy’.9 Once again, psychoanalysis finds itself reduced to the supplementary role of making good an existent theoretical framework and the hope for ‘the Lacanian Left’ as ‘a new theoretico-political horizon’ (p. 3) recedes.

The result is not so much ‘the Lacanian Left’ as a psychoanalytic reformism. The emphasis on constitutive lack as such, the model of the Lacanian Real as an ever-receding outside, and the assimilation of this to an impoverished version of Laclau’s radical democracy cuts off the possible transformative links between Lacanian psychoanalysis and Marxism. The closing injunction of the work, that we settle down and ‘be able to really enjoy our partial enjoyment, without subordinating it to the cataclysmic desire of fantasy’ (p. 282), not only misses Lacan’s point that all enjoyment is, precisely, ‘partial’,10 but also leaves us in a position

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7. This point has already been made by Philip Derbyshire (2008), in his excellent review.
8. As Žižek notes, this is exactly the reverse of Lacan’s own conception and also hardly corresponds even to Laclau’s model. See Žižek 2008, p. 319.
10. See Chiesa 2007 for an account.
that is hardly recognisably ‘left’ at all. We are not far from the Voltarian cultivation of our
garden, but very distant from the moment when Freudo-Marxism seemed capable of setting
fire to reality itself.

The rejoinder is obvious, however. Those utopian hopes were dashed, and why should we
put our faith in a millennial and ecstatic Freudo-Marxism if it proved disastrously unable
to come to terms with the capitalist capture of jouissance? To repeat the nostrums of sexual
liberation as the road to revolution ignores the fact that, at least in certain countries and
in certain forms, capitalism is no longer driven by a Weberian ethic of asceticism but a new
ethic of licensed excess. Rather than holding up Stavrakakis as the disheartened realist in
comparison to a previous utopian revolutionary moment, we might be better off reading
his book as a more honest recognition of the political impasses of the present. While
certainly not endorsing his solution, or retracting my previous criticisms, I would argue
that his book speaks to the moment of an apparent lack of political agency for the Left.
Also, to put the question of negativity back on the table, especially in the light of the
sometime desperate and unconvincing turn to affirmation in contemporary theory (I am
thinking here of Badiou, Negri, and Žižek), locates an essential problem around this agency.
What remains to be decided is the role, if any, of Lacanian psychoanalysis in guiding any
future left politics; The Lacanian Left, against its intentions, suggests scepticism on that
score.

That scepticism is only compounded by a reading of Ian Parker’s Revolution in Psychology.
The book is structured as a ‘critical’ manual for prospective students of psychology, especially
those approaching the discipline from the Left. To provide a spoiler, the conclusion such a
reader is encouraged to draw is that psychology has nothing to offer left, feminist, and anti-
racist politics. Despite borrowing from Trotsky the concept of transitional demands that
need to be directed at psychology and psychologists, these are merely transitional to the
liquidation of psychology: ‘[t]he best, most progressive psychologists are those who do
something else with their time than practice, teach and research psychology’ (p. 185). To
borrow John Boyd’s conclusion on Labour’s 1983 election manifesto, we could say this is
‘the longest suicide note in history’.

Of course the reviewer can only heed Perry Anderson’s warning that we have to recognise
the exact nature of polemic as a literary form:

> Polemic is a discourse of conflict, whose effect depends on a delicate balance between
> the requirements of truth and the enticements of anger, the duty to argue and the
> zest to inflame. Its rhetoric allows, even enforces, a certain figurative licence. Like
> epitaphs in Johnson’s adage, it is not under oath.¹¹

The difficulty is the degree to which Parker exploits this ‘figurative licence’ in his prosecution
of psychology. Certainly there is material enough to criticise, and Parker does not waste his
ire when dealing with such instances as the American Psychological Association allowing
and supporting its members’ participation in interrogations at the Guantánamo Bay camp.
What is more troubling, and buried within the polemical style, are questions concerning
the exact ideological status of psychology and its privilege as a target of attack.

In fact, if we try to track its various senses through the text, Parker seems to deploy the concept of ‘ideology’ in a remarkably loose fashion. At different points, psychology is defined as a component of ideology, as an ideological system in itself, as the crystallisation of capitalist ideology, and as a necessary and essential ideological element of capitalism. The result, at times, veers dangerously close to a conspiratorial and instrumental conception of ideology, which runs against the more interesting (if sketchy) sections of the book that try to account for the historical genesis of psychology as ideology. At other points, we find a seeming endorsement of a vulgarised quasi-Althusserian opposition between science and ideology, such as in the statement that ‘[p]sychology is indeed a fake science that abuses the public’ (p. 7). This is exacerbated by the tendency to oppose psychology to the other human sciences, such as anthropology, on the grounds that psychology is less reflective about its own ideological function and that its methodological individualism and scientism leaves it completely unable to grasp social relations.

While there is a case to single out psychology for its ideological function, especially in its spread into popular discourses in contemporary capitalism, we might well wonder whether it is the major or worst offender in this respect. It is easily possible to multiply alternative bogey discourses: economics, management science, business studies, and so on. Even if we were to accept Parker’s point, we could note that, lurking between the lines of many of his own examples of ‘psychologisation’, is the use of biology to underpin psychology. Biology would not respond so well to being characterised as ‘fake science’, but nonetheless has self-evidently ideological effects which are not the sole province of hard-line neo-Darwinism. Granted that Parker’s target is psychology, and that this book is aimed at the lay reader or prospective student entering psychology, the reductive presentation does not serve the aim of grasping psychology as ideology. It puts aside the lengthy and hardly resolved debates within the Marxist tradition concerning ideology and, linked to this, the supposed status of Marxism itself as a discourse. Considering that one of the ideological effects of contemporary capitalism is to produce intellectual de-skilling, I wonder if this plumpes Denken approach is really the most subversive. To use an old but worthwhile formulation, a more dialectical approach would, to my mind, be better and more instructive.

These issues return in Parker’s considerations of alternative forms of psychology that might resist its ideological functioning (however that is conceived). What is gratifying is that Parker refuses to endorse a simple-minded opposition between ‘bad’ scientistic psychology and ‘good’ humanistic and ‘spiritual’ psychology. Wishing a plague on both their houses, Parker carries out a slash-and-burn operation on the various internal oppositions to psychology, noting how the supposedly spiritual or holistic alternatives themselves function ideologically as a form of licensed irrationalism. A kind of symmetry emerges here between scientism and spiritualism, which may be one of the key ideological features of the contemporary conjuncture. What is surprising to the reader who, like me, has encountered Parker previously through his reflections on psychoanalysis (he is a practising analyst), especially his book Slavoj Žižek: A Critical Introduction (2004), is his very low opinion of psychoanalysis as an alternative. For Parker, ‘left’ psychoanalysis circles around the opposition that I sketched above: between a Reichian ‘romanticising [of] the unconscious’ (p. 177) and a Lacanian emphasis on ‘lack’ which leads to a resigned acceptance of the failure of political commitment.

Parker’s criticisms are well made, and his analogy between the romantic unconscious of Freudo-Marxism and the supposed liberatory powers of Hardt and Negri’s multitude is
highly suggestive. What remains more debatable is the tendency to reduce psychoanalysis and psychology to reflections of capitalist ideology. To compound the sense of surprise and disappointment in a recent laudatory but also critical review of Stavrakakis’s *The Lacanian Left*, Parker has noted the tension confronted by those trying to build bridges from Lacan to the Left and those on the Left critical of the anti-utopianism of psychoanalysis – finding himself torn between one side of the bridge and the other.\textsuperscript{12} In *Revolution in Psychology*, this tension, which I would agree with Parker is both necessary and productive, is abandoned or dissolved. In one striking passage, Parker argues that psychoanalysis came into existence to address the alienations of capitalism, and so, it seems to be implied, will disappear with the abolition of capitalism. Pending confirmation of that eventuality could we not at a minimum take the point made by Trotsky and re-iterated by Isaac Deutscher: if the three great tragedies facing human existence are ‘hunger, sex, and death’, then Marxism presumes to deal primarily with the first and psychoanalysis may have a role still in dealing with the second (and perhaps even the third).\textsuperscript{13}

Parker’s polemical verve threatens to dissolve the whole question, and leaves us with a curiously undialectical and unhistorical image of psychoanalysis as simply the ‘twin’ of capitalism. The danger of a new Zdhanovism lurks here. This is all the more disappointing in that Lacan offered the most thoroughgoing reflection on the ideological recuperation of Freud’s discovery from within psychoanalysis. Lacan’s condemnation of American ego psychology as a buttress for the ‘American way of life’ and of ethics as mere servicing of the good(s) – running together the ethical ‘good’ with market ‘goods’ – and his historicisation of Freudian concepts, including the Oedipus complex, all suggest powerful points of intersection with Marxism. In particular the last point, although only sketched in Lacan’s later work, suggests a possible ‘bridge’ over the key problem for Marxists with Freud; in Deutscher’s words, his tendency ‘to deal only with bourgeois man . . . present[ed] as man at large’.\textsuperscript{14} We could also note Deutscher’s honesty, in that, while he criticises the ahistoricism of psychoanalysis, he also notes that Freud (and, I would add, Lacan) have lessons for Marxism concerning the reality and possible persistence of destructiveness and aggression that may not simply end with the advent of socialist man.

If we take these two books as evidence, then we could well conclude that to build bridges from Lacanian psychoanalysis to Marxism leads to reformism, while moving from Marxism to Lacanian psychoanalysis leads to the liquidation of psychoanalysis as an obstacle to the revolution. A sense of déjá vu may come over readers familiar with the debates of the 1970s concerning Lacano-Althusserianism. Althusser’s attempted integration of Lacanian psychoanalysis to make good what he saw as the deficit in Marx’s concept of ideology was widely taken to result in a functionalism that left the subject as consonant with subjection and the question of agency moot. In the fallout from that moment it appeared that two paths were possible: further into Lacanian psychoanalysis at the expense of Marxism or vice versa. The irony is that the more recent conjunction of Lacan and Marx, particularly in the work of Slavoj Žižek (and, in a different fashion, Alain Badiou), is the direct result of taking the detour into Lacan’s concept of the subject as divided and fissured, using it as the wedge.

\textsuperscript{12} Parker 2007, p. 117.
\textsuperscript{13} Deutscher 1972, p. 238.
\textsuperscript{14} Deutscher 1972, p. 234.
to disrupt the ideological capture of the subject – thereby playing off one sense of the word subject against the other.\footnote{Žižek 1989; see also Chiesa 2007 for an ‘internal’ reconstruction of Lacan’s concept of the subject.}

It is the core absence of any adequate consideration of this reformulation of the concept of the subject that vitiates *The Lacanian Left* and *Revolution in Psychology*. In the case of Stavrakakis’s book, the subsumption of Marxism to one particular construal of Lacanian psychoanalysis leaves the subject as the placeholder for keeping open lack – in the absence of the Lacanian insistence on the potential for the transformative relation of the subject to this ‘lack’ (we could also add, in the absence of the same sense of such a transformative relation in Marxist accounts of negativity). Parker’s work takes matters from the opposite direction, and leaves psychology and psychoanalysis not so much subsumed as replaced by Marxism. Here, Marxism’s own difficulties over the subject, and in particular the subject of ideology, are glossed over. What emerges is a tension between shorter-term recommendations for forming networks of activists in mental health and a rather hopeful and quasi-voluntarist sense of potential future revolutionary agency; as usual with such transitional programmes, much depends on how we should pass from the first to the second. Here, Parker runs the risk of neglecting the powerful arguments of Lacanian psychoanalysis in relation to the reformulation of ideology and concerning certain effects of ‘alienation’ that are irreducible to capitalism and which suggest a friction of the subject against ideological subsection.

To conclude we could say that both these books offer salutary warnings against the collapsing together of Marxism and Lacanian psychoanalysis. What they lack is a truly productive sense of the tension between these two paradigms as the site of a thinking of agency. Contrary to the appearance of crisis in ‘Lacano-Marxism’, we could argue, *pace* the old Chinese proverb, that crisis is an indication that ‘the situation is excellent’.

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References


Abstract
In the mid-1990s, Klaus-Michael Mallmann published his study on ‘Communists in the Weimar Republic’. His newly established social-historical approach on the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) has since been taken up by other historians. One of them is Christian Gotthardt, who recently published a book with the promising title ‘The Radical Left as a Mass Movement’. Here he focuses on the regional history of the KPD in the city of Harburg-Wilhelmsburg. The great strength of his book is the detailed description of the local Communists’ day-to-day work. However, when turning his attention to the turning points of KPD history, the problems associated with adopting Mallman’s social-historical approach become obvious. For example this leads them both to reject the theory of ‘Stalinisation’. The article shows that Gotthardt, as well as Mallmann, had come to questionable conclusions on the development of the KPD of the Weimar Republic by focusing on events outside of their context in time and space.

Keywords
KPD, Communists, Weimar Republic, Stalinisation

From 1920 until the end of the Weimar Republic in 1933, the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) was a mass-based party. With up to 300,000 members and 6 million votes in 1932, it was the second largest Communist party in the world. It published dozens of newspapers and magazines and had around 5,000 employees in its pay. Furthermore, the party built up mass organisations in different social and cultural areas. It founded choral societies, workers’ sports clubs and troupes of actors. The largest of these semi-party organisations was the Rote Frontkämpferbund (RFB) – a paramilitary organisation with 150,000 members at its peak. German Communists were influential in several union branches and hundreds of them were deputies in the local and regional parliaments as well as in the Reichstag.

These facts have long been established. But how did the rank and file of the party operate on a daily basis? Over ten years ago, the historian Klaus-Michael Mallmann undertook the task of analysing this aspect.1 Until then, research on the KPD had focused mainly on its politics and history of ideas: the party leadership, its ideological debates and the influence of the Soviet Union on party development. Mallmann set against this a history ‘from below’. He criticised that the ‘history of German Communism is predominantly still one of a dogma without people, a rule of apparatus without subjects’.2 He argued that political history can ‘on the face of it provide meaningful results, without, however, providing any answers to the usually unasked questions of their practical relevance in social historical terms’.3 Taking the KPD district of Saarland as an example, Mallmann places the ‘ordinary

I would like to thank Florian Wilde for useful references on the text. Other thanks go to Sarah Gottschalk, David Paenson, and Michael Robb, whose advices on the correct use of the English language were of great help for me.

people’ of the party base at the centre of his systematic investigation. This social-historical approach has since been taken up by other historians.

Eric D. Weitz, for instance, examined the daily lives of Communist workers at Krupp Steelworks in Essen and at BASF chemical plant in Leuna. He was able to show how local party politics were shaped by living conditions, experiences and interests. Recently, Ulrich Eumann widened the base of his research on the social history of German Communism by including five different regional organisations of the Party (Berlin-Brandenburg, the Ruhr, Western-Saxony, Pomerania and Upper Silesia) in his analysis. Christian Gotthardt’s book stands in the same tradition. With the promising title ‘The Radical Left as a Mass Movement’ he focuses on the KPD in Harburg-Wilhelmsburg.

The two communities Harburg and Wilhelmsburg – now part of Hamburg – merged into one of the biggest cities of the Prussian province of Hannover in 1927. More than 100,000 people lived in this industrial centre at the time, many of them metal workers employed in the harbour or in the large oil refineries. Both cities had a long labour tradition with the refineries being about 95% unionised, whilst the Social-Democratic Party (SPD) of Harburg could boast 68% of the votes as far back as the prewar 1912 general elections.

Harburg-Wilhelmsburg was a stronghold of the KPD, too. Communists were deeply rooted in many factories and neighbourhoods. From 1925 to 1929, the Party even took over the leadership of two union districts. In 1929/30, its members were elected to the shop stewards’ committees of the hospital administration and of the civil service. Moreover, Communists chaired the city cleaning and the building authorities. During the whole period of the Weimar Republic, the KPD polled between 15 and 20% in the general and local elections in Harburg-Wilhelmsburg. In some neighbourhoods, the Party gained more than 30% of the votes, giving it a lead over the SPD. And Communists were all along members of the local parliaments.

Gotthardt describes in detail the political practice of the Harburg and Wilhelmsburg Communists during the Weimar Republic. He emphasises the revolutionary postwar years. Then the communists – who at the time were (1918) still in the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD), which had been founded as a reaction to the prowar politics of the SPD – were ‘partly the driving force, partly the restraining force’ (p. 40) of the non-parliamentary movement. Until 1923, they actively took part in the workers’ councils, in strikes, sit-ins, demonstrations and hunger unrest. But that year marked a watershed for the revolutionary movement in Germany. In the spring, a new crisis developed, with French troops occupying the Ruhr, soaring inflation, a revival of the Left, but also the first growth of Hitler’s Nazis, and a successful general strike against the Conservative government of Wilhelm Cuno. The German Communists, with the support of the Comintern, prepared for an uprising. But then, suddenly, they cancelled their plans. Only Hamburg – and, according to Gotthardt’s research, also Harburg – were witness to an isolated and unsuccessful insurrection.

This defeat of the KPD bore on the whole communist movement in Europe. But it especially made an impact on the German Communists: After the putsch the German Communist Party was banned for three months and leading cadres were sent to penitentiaries or had to flee. What made things even more difficult, the Party needed to completely

re-evaluate its political approach. How was it to return to a political practice against the backdrop of re-stabilised capitalism? (p. 71). Now the party members had to act as ‘revolutionaries in non-revolutionary times’.6

Gotthardt describes the exhausting process of re-orientation after the revolutionary years:

It is quite clear that during the year following the rebellion in Hamburg [October 1923], Communists of Harburg and Wilhelmsburg experienced a period of paralysis and resignation. Members and supporters backtracked – some, because the revolutionary dynamic had faded away and stolen their hopes for radical change, others, because they perceived the October action as having been too adventurous. (p. 75.)

As Gotthardt points out, after 1924 the KPD turned to more ‘established’ forms of political intervention:

Whereas before the Party had concentrated on the workers’ councils, the liberation of prisoners, armed actions, organising public rallies and strike meetings, it now focused on work within parties, on protest meetings, plebiscites, electoral campaigns, work within parliamentary groups. Mass organisations took the place of the street masses. (p. 72.)

Gotthardt devotes a large part of his study to the social history of the KPD. He describes the political events in the city in great detail and provides a good description of the local politics of the KPD. He draws a picture of how the Communists worked in the local parliament, of the chances they had and the mistakes they made in the trade-union movement. And he points out how the KPD established itself as the party of ordinary people: workers, unemployed, tenants, pupils and parents. In this context, the resolutions proposed by the Communists in the local parliament are especially interesting. For instance, they demanded a reduction in the price of municipal gas delivered to poor households, called for the abolition of local authority subsidies for children’s homes run by religious denominations and argued for the introduction of a tax on luxury homes. The Communists demanded that the municipality support striking textile workers and submitted the demands of the unemployed committee and the tenants’ association to the local council. In doing so, they showed that they sided with ordinary people, whilst at the same time proving in practice how revolutionaries can work in parliament.

Furthermore, Gotthardt has done a great job in compiling a list of more than 600 persons involved in the local radical Left, including, in many cases, biographical data such as profession and political positions. Most of them were long-standing activists, had been members of the SPD up until 1916 and then – between 1917 and 1920 – of the Independent Social-Democratic Party.

The meticulous depiction of the Communists’ humble day to day work is a great strength of the book. However, when turning his attention to the turning points of KPD history, the problems associated with adopting Mallman’s social-historical approach become obvious. Mallmann had indeed come to questionable conclusions on the development of the KPD

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of the Weimar Republic by focusing on events outside of their context in time and space. In so doing, he questioned essential findings of existing research. First of all, Mallmann challenged the research on the social and political changes in the KPD of the Weimar Republic.

Until his book was published, researchers had acted on the assumption that the 'Bolshevisation' process forced through by the Stalin faction in Moscow had been the main cause behind the transformation of the Communist International (Comintern) ‘from an idealistic and relatively pluralist body of enthusiastic revolutionaries into a stiflingly bureaucratized mouthpiece of the Soviet state’. The Comintern now stopped acting in the interests of world revolution and instead only had those of the Soviet national state in mind. And, according to this interpretation, the national Communist parties simply became mere recipients of Stalin's orders direct from Moscow. As Ossip K. Flechtheim and especially Hermann Weber have pointed out, this meant that, within a matter of a few years, the KPD was transformed from a democratic organisation in which free discussion predominated into a completely undemocratic one, bureaucratically governed by the apparatus. Political conflicts were not 'solved' through political argument anymore but by organisational tricks. Members of the opposition suffered repression, were banned from speaking or got expelled without further ado from the Party. Along with that came ideological torpidity. Whereas, in the early phase, political positions were constantly reviewed and debated, they now turned into dogmas. The Soviet Union was 'stylised as the holy land, Marx, Engels, Lenin [...] worshipped like founders of a religion'. Weber appropriately named this process 'Stalinisation'.

Mallmann completely rejects Weber's 'Stalinisation orthodoxy'. Instead, he holds the view that authoritarian structures and rule by the apparatus were a phenomenon that had been immanent within German Communism from the start:

There was no need for Stalin to 'Stalinise' the KPD. The party leadership [...] accepted a Bolshevik remodelling completely of its own accord and with it all implicit consequences this had for its self-perception, its concept of the enemy, internal party democracy, its rapport with the working class. The emergence of strict party discipline, of the fiend among its own ranks, of opportunism lurking at every corner, of the need for mopping up operations – all this could be seen long before Stalin's ascent to power.13

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7. For a methodical critique of Mallmann, see Wirsching 1997.
10. See the introduction of Sigrid Koch-Baumgarten in Flechtheim 1986, p. 39.
11. Weber 1991, pp. 27–8. This thesis was formulated for the first time in Weber 1969. See also Weber 2007; LaPorte (eds.) forthcoming. Given the international impact of Weber's work, it is surprising that this is the first English-language study of Stalinisation theory.
So, according to Mallmann, Weber’s thesis of a ‘democratic Communism’ of the Luxemburg type in the early days of the KPD was simply not tenable: “The fact that Communism has never been a democratic project is a recurrent theme throughout my book.”

“At least in the scientific establishment Mallmann caused some stir.” His theses have prompted a lively debate in German-speaking KPD historiography over the past decade, although some more recent investigations provide grounds for refuting Mallmann’s views on inner-party democracy. Thus Florian Wilde and myself, for example, have provided evidence for the year 1919 that the KPD was, in all respects, a democratic party in which discussion flourished.

This remained true the following years, as demonstrated by further research. Wilde, for instance, has shown this for the period when Ernst Meyer was leader of the KPD (1921/22):

Meyer’s basic approach (and that of the Central Committee) to oppositional currents in the Party in 1921/22 was to solve political conflicts through discussion and not by bureaucratic manoeuvring [...]. In general the Meyer leadership tried to integrate the opposition whenever possible. The party press was generally open to views of the opposition, their declarations were circulated in print as a matter of course and at party conventions and conferences of the ZA [Zentralausschuss] they were given room to argue openly for their positions.

Otto Wenzel sees the year 1923 in a similar light:

[The Communist party apparatus] had its roots in the local groups, which met in plenary sessions at least once a month and constituted the final authority. Here free discussion was the rule. Criticism of any decisions taken by party headquarters was permitted and it was at this level that acceptance or rejection was decided on.

According to Hermann Weber, even after the defeat of October 1923

internal party democracy [showed itself] in the faction debates: the Right, the Centre and the Left all intervened in delegates’ conferences, district party conferences etc. with their own speakers and platforms and the active membership was able to express its will.

Theodor Bergmann concludes that the KPD was by no means less democratic than the SPD at the time. Up until the mid-1920s, the Communist press remained open for diverging.

often contrary positions. The party conferences of these years were likewise characterised by free discussion and fierce debates. Opposition members had the right to argue their positions out in the open. This only changed with the onset of the Stalinisation.

Furthermore, Mallmann’s claim that the Soviet Party’s influence on the development of the KPD in the late 1920s had not been as relevant as hitherto suggested can be easily repudiated. Norman LaPorte rightly observes:

Whereas the Fischer-leadership had come to power in the KPD as a result of the membership’s majority decision […] the new [Thälmann]-leadership was imposed as a result of Moscow’s machinations, playing one leadership faction off against another behind the scenes.21

As Eric Weitz already pointed out in a review of Mallmann’s book:

The KPD operated as a political party in a defined nation state with its particular party-political structure, and as a member party of the Communist International. It seems most fruitful to me to situate the KPD not only in its local and national, but also very decisively in its transnational, contexts. Communism was, after all, a movement that understood itself as internationalist and that was, without question, subject to directives from Moscow. […] It goes too far toward erasing the impact of Stalinism, and of the Soviet model in general.22

As a matter of fact, Mallmann completely leaves out the fact that Stalinisation was not merely a German phenomenon, but one that affected all other Communist parties of the world. On the whole, Weber’s ‘old’ thesis of metamorphosis is more convincing when it comes to explaining the politics and the development of the KPD in the 1920s than Mallmann’s. Recently, Kevin McDermott rightly observed:

The enduring strength of Professor Weber’s Stalinisation thesis is that it convincingly describes major historical trends at the centres of power while remaining sensitive to indigenous developments. It continues to serve as the defining concept on the history of the KPD and Comintern in the 1920s and 1930s.23

Gotthardt, however, is geared to Mallmann’s approach – but without explicitly saying so. He too concentrates merely on the regional social history of the KPD. In doing so, he often neglects the more general historical context, without, however, refraining from making very questionable generalisations of his own and, in the process, drawing quite different conclusions. Both indeed downplay Stalin’s impact on the politics and the development of the KPD. But Mallmann did this to show that no ‘Bolshevisation’ had taken place at all and that the Party had already been undemocratic in its early years. Gotthardt claims, on the contrary, that there had indeed been a ‘Bolshevisation’, which had, however, been developed by the KPD itself out of a specific situation in Germany. He sees the ‘Bolshevisation’ as a

22. Weitz 1997b, p. 68.
mere mechanical manoeuvre, as an ‘adjustment process to the reality of the stabilised Weimar Republic – a necessary professionalisation, as the buzzword is’ (p. 73).

Moreover this was a ‘success story’ as Gotthardt maintains:

The KPD’s organisational progress reflected itself in growing membership figures, a stronger commitment of the rank and file, at the same time a wider hearing and a strengthening of bonds with its sympathisers, especially in residential areas. The election results improved steadily, the Party became popular, it reached new social strata. (p. 74.)

He concludes: ‘The view that the KPD was isolated and unsuccessful on account of control from the outside needs to be rejected’ (p. 8). Here, he is simply ignoring essential facts historians have repeatedly pointed out – namely that membership growth and electoral successes in the final years of the Weimar Republic occurred in spite of the politics of the KPD, in particular its disastrous ‘theory of social fascism’ – and that the Party owed its appeal not to Stalinism but mainly to the radicalisation of large parts of the population in the wake of the economic crisis of 1929.

Furthermore, he does not recognise that all this served to bring the KPD in line with Moscow’s foreign-policy interests, a process that left the party leadership solely busy with ‘streamlining the Party, excluding all factions and currents – the Gleichschaltung of party life’, as Weber phrased it.24 Gotthardt’s lack of understanding of the real nature of the ‘Bolshevisation’ process shows up in his description of the constant shuffling of personnel in the parliamentary group. What he does not see is that this reflected the factional conflicts inside the Party of the mid-1920s. His interpretation of the internal wrangling is quite idiosyncratic. So, for instance, he rejects the notion that ‘factions and their infights in any way mirrored the structures and events within the CPSU (“Stalinisation”) and could therefore serve as evidence for heteronomy and Russification of German Communism’ (pp. 128–9). Instead, he argues that, after 1925, any ““real” factions representing distinguishable fundamental beliefs’ ceased to be a reality. ‘What we have after 1925 is something quite different: namely group intrigues disguised as “faction fights”’ (p. 129).

In reality, things were quite different. Various sources refer to ten different factions within the KPD in 1927 fighting both against bureaucratisation of the Party and the political orientation of the leadership.25 By 1929, all of them had been expelled from the Party by the Central Committee under Ernst Thälmann. Thousands of Communists were forced to leave the organisation. Overall membership fluctuated enormously. By 1927, only ten per cent of the members of 1920 were still in the Party. The leadership also fluctuated, as Hermann Weber and Andreas Herbst note:

Out of the 16 party leaders (making up the Politbüro, or Polbüro, as it was then called) during the 1923/24 period, only two still had a seat by 1929 (Ernst Thälmann und Hermann Remmele), and no less than 11 had in the meantime been expelled from the KPD altogether. Out of the 250 officers making up the broader party

leadership in 1924, 105 had been expelled or had left the Party within just five years.26

Gotthardt simply leaves all these facts out of the picture. In doing so, he reveals the problematic aspect of his otherwise innovative attempt to write the history of the KPD 'from bellow'. Heinrich August Winkler wrote already about Mallmann: 'There is only one thing this approach does not achieve: it does not explain the politics of the KPD. This is the fundamental flaw of his work and the price he has to pay for his complete rejection of the thesis of the Stalinisation of the KPD.'27 The same applies to Gotthardt.

I find myself also agreeing with the warning Karsten Rudolph gave us in the mid-1990s:

> Research on the history of Communism runs the danger of getting stuck in a pointless confrontation by opposing a sociologically narrow historiography to a political history which has already provided a lot of the answers beyond its own immediate constraints.28

Gotthardt's book in fact deepens this confrontation.

There is another problem, apart from that of method. Frequently, Gotthardt either ignores the current state of research or he adapts it to his conception of history. For example, he does not mention the detailed controversy over the Stalinisation of the KPD over the past decade. Instead, he even claims that 'the thesis of Stalinisation was considerably watered down by its own initiators' (p. 8). But Hermann Weber's that article he is referring to here contains no hint of any 'watering down'.29 He also leaves out important recent research on the crisis year of 1923, writing about the 'German October' without mentioning the three most important books on this subject which have appeared in the past five years.30 Instead, he confines himself to studies some twenty-five years old.

Moreover, Gotthardt's selection of archive material leaves one somewhat perplexed. He asserts that in spite of 'difficulties in finding adequate sources, due to the complete lack of KPD-owned local publications and intra-party tradition […] new sources could be tapped' for his book (p. 9). So his research is mainly based on the files of the state archives of Hamburg and Stade. He also evaluated the local press for his study. But it remains incomprehensible that he conducted no research in the most relevant archive for the history of the KPD – as all other authors did: the Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR im Bundesarchiv (SAPMO) in Berlin. This institution houses the whole party archive of the KPD during the 1920s. During the Cold War, the inventory was not available, as it was located in the GDR's secret archives. However, since the mid-1990s, it has been opened to the public. I am convinced that Gotthardt would have found sources for the local history of the KPD in Wilhelmsburg-Harburg had he tried to search there. I cannot explain why he did not do so.

All in all, one can say that Gotthardt’s volume is a rather exciting book for those who are interested in the local history of Harburg-Wilhelmsburg. He provides some formerly unknown facts and maybe some of its inhabitants will discover new sides to the history of their families. But anyone expecting new insights into the history of the KPD will be disappointed.

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References


**Abstract**

Through an immanent critique of Peter McLaren's recent work, the author demonstrates the strengths and weaknesses of critical-revolutionary pedagogy. This review reveals internal lacks, gaps, and contradictions emerging from within the three main dimensions of McLaren's overarching manifesto including passion, reason, and revolution. Although McLaren is an important voice in linking Marxist political and cultural theory to the practice of education, his work ultimately cannot complete its own project and as such needs further development.

**Keywords**
critical pedagogy, critical-revolutionary pedagogy, Peter McLaren, education

Renowned educational activist and theorist Peter McLaren has, in recent years, become a central proponent of a decisively revolutionary and Marxist pedagogy in North America. Turning away from his early embrace of 'postmodern' educational theory, McLaren's recent texts, reviewed here, attempt to ground his emerging revolutionary programme solidly within a Marxist-humanist theoretical framework. Each book makes an intervention into the field of critical pedagogy by re-centring class struggle in relation to global imperialism. Although critical pedagogy has its origins in a variety of Marxist and neo-Marxist theories, it has more recently branched out into postmodernism, poststructuralism and an identity politics detached from considerations of economic inequality or class struggle. As the recent anthology *The Critical Pedagogy Reader* indicates, the newly emergent strains of 'critical' pedagogy have decentred any clearly defined Marxist theory of liberation. Thus, there are queer critical pedagogies that subject heteronormativity to critique and (dis)ability pedagogies that criticise 'ablism' in the classroom. The net result of these various dispersals (in terms of both form and content) could be interpreted as the broadening of critical pedagogy’s horizons to include critiques of multiple forms of oppression, subjugation and discrimination within schooling. On the other hand, this pluralisation can also be seen as a form of postmodern fragmentation or academic compartmentalisation and specialisation, whereby the 'critical' in critical pedagogy is not so much sharpened as dulled and diluted precisely by losing sight of the material preconditions underlying a variety of identity politics.

The three books under review comment upon this current state of critical pedagogy, more often than not interpreting its various permutations as symptomatic rather than emancipatory. Thus, McLaren advocates a return to the Marxist lineage of critical pedagogy re-emphasising its revolutionary roots in class antagonism, Marx's labour theory of value and Lenin's theory of imperialism. He calls for a totalising pedagogy that understands and unites various educational practices under the umbrella of a global struggle against capitalism. Here, the enemies are clearly delineated. In particular, culturalist critical
paedagogies – which have rejected class analysis as reductionist and antiquated – and postmodern paedagogies caught up in discourses of deconstruction and/or desire are pinpointed as inadequate responses to world poverty and worker exploitation. McLaren also criticises those supporting a ‘social justice’ agenda in education for advocating a ‘democracy of empty forms’ (Rage, p. 24) that does not address the underlying exploitation of the working class, always already foreclosing any hopes for direct democracy. These more gentrified versions of paedagogy are not so much antithetical to capitalism as they are its support, reducing the claims of critique to those of liberal reformism. If paedagogy is to mean anything politically in the twenty-first century, then, as all three books indicate, it must focus its resources on class struggle and human liberation from exploitative, transnational labour. Here, McLaren employs class analysis to visit a number of issues in education, including a Marxist revision of his earlier work on multicultural education, a critique of teacher-training programmes, a scathing denunciation of George W. Bush and his imperial project, a historical-materialist contextualisation of the post-9/11 discourse of terror, and finally, a blistering condemnation of school-reform policy by neoconservatives and neoliberalists.

To up the paedagogical stakes, McLaren terms these interventions ‘critical revolutionary pedagogy’ (a term coined by Paula Allman) to distinguish between domesticated and radical versions of the critical educational tradition. This critical-revolutionary pedagogy is ultimately a revolutionary working-class paedagogy that teaches resistance to imperialism by fostering ongoing dialogue between students and workers and emphasising the active role of critical educators in labour unions and local political organisations.

What actually comprises a critical-revolutionary paedagogy? According to his Marxist-inspired manifesto, McLaren sees such a paedagogy as fostering a form of radicalised consciousness-raising through ten interrelated moments of critique and imaginative reconstruction: an acknowledgement of the historical specificity of a curriculum’s own concepts; the dialectical interpenetration of the local and the global (the classroom and the global relations of imperialism); the centralisation of human needs (as opposed to discourses of desire); resistance to normative theories of knowledge (as representative of an exploitative status quo); a critique of the capitalist mode of production; the inclusion of an anti-racist, anti-sexist, and anti-homophobic political agenda; advocacy for a universal standard of living; the struggle to redistribute wealth and socialise private property; the fight to unite democracy with socialism; and finally, respect for the standpoints of the oppressed. Thus, McLaren weaves a web that sutures together multiple struggles under the totalising umbrella of a Marxist struggle against imperialism. For McLaren and his chapter co-author Nathalia Jaramillo, this agenda aims to effect a transformation of the student in terms of passion (affect), reason (consciousness), and revolution (praxis) (Capitalists, p. 324), leading to a new revolutionary generation of youth who resist the allure of a commodified life world and actively struggle to realise a socialist future. Stated simply, the underlying pedagogical lesson for McLaren and Farahmandpur must be

that private property, capitalist accumulation, the extraction of labor surplus, and the search for profits are not natural facts of life but socially conditioned practices that hinder the development of self-production as praxis and that block the free development of individuals. (Teaching, p. 32.)
Or, as McLaren declares in *Rage and Hope*:

My particular task is to transform teacher and student practice into a far-reaching political praxis linked to social movements to contribute to creating a multi-racial, gender-balanced, anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist movement that is internationalist in scope. (p. 17.)

Here, McLaren renounces idealist notions of education that hope to edify the masses through the discourses of detached, analytical reason and/or a bourgeois ethics centred on sentiments. For McLaren, education and revolution have to be fused together so that education can become a force in transforming social relations rather than simply conserving them.

McLaren's challenge is undoubtedly provocative, and many of his ardent supporters regard his work as inspirational. As opposed to his comrades Mike Cole, Glenn Rikowski, and Paula Allman, what makes McLaren's project so compelling is its interdisciplinary nature and his singular call – not unlike that of Althusser – for a Marxist philosophy. Yet the merging of Marxist theory, cultural critique, political analysis and pedagogy appears uneven, and one is often left with the question as to how this version of critical-revolutionary pedagogy could be enacted in the classroom. McLaren's overall lack of examples indicates a faltering in his own pedagogical imagination when it comes to realising the concrete interconnectedness between the local and the global, thus hampering a revolutionary dialectic that calls for an articulation of the abstract and the concrete.

Symptomatic here are statements such as: 'This chapter discusses the dangerous triumph of global capitalism, advocates for a revitalized leftist critique of capital, and sketches provisionally a number of directions for critical education' (*Capitalism*, p. 76). Why is it that a book concerned with pedagogy and its centrality in the struggle against global capitalism repeatedly short-changes its subject? Why must pedagogy remain provisionally addressed or eternally deferred? In the same chapter, there is a brief moment in which practice breaks through McLaren's prose: the case of Los Angeles high-school teacher Bill Bigelow, who teaches his students about global sweatshops (p. 96). Yet, while including Bigelow into his analysis, McLaren simultaneously undervalues Bigelow's work referring to it as 'one (albeit modest) measure of resistance'. Here, McLaren's revolutionary imagination is swept up into a whirlwind of proclamations that undervalue the very real intervention of someone like Bigelow, who must labour under the strictures of standardisation, neoconservative and neoliberal educational ideologies, and so on. Again, in *Teaching Against* . . . , McLaren and Farahmandpur wait until the final chapter to present their rather brief outline of how a critical-revolutionary pedagogy would teach against terrorism – an outline previously published by Bob Kumamoto. Finally, if I am not mistaken, the 374 pages of *Rage and Hope* contain only one example of actual critical-revolutionary pedagogy in the classroom. This one example – a teacher who turned science class into a political space where the learning of science was coupled with learning about (and critiquing) the schooling process and the purposes and goals of doing science and its connections to social control, economic tradeoffs, and human welfare. (p. 231.)
This suggests the power of dialectical mediation that McLaren is capable of, yet is reluctant to engage in. Of course, McLaren’s restless revolutionary imagination wants to resist any ‘easy’ form of positivity (which could lead to complacency or a premature reconciliation between reason and reality that covers over the impossibility of such a synthesis under capitalism), yet such a great refusal seems to repel the very real interventions that McLaren is ceaselessly calling for. This is not simply a call for more examples to aid educational practitioners. Rather, the dearth of examples indicates a theoretical error in McLaren’s project, muting his clarion call to form a ‘philosophy of praxis’ through which action and theory interpenetrate one another. What we are left with are dozens of manifestos that do not realise Marx’s own plea for a new sense of action which cannot simply be announced or planned in advance but must correspond to the historical movement of the present. Without these examples, manifestos appear abstract, if not reified, discourses that lack the dialectical connection to life in schools that is called for.

Here we reach the crucial question for critical revolutionary pedagogy today: Can revolution be taught, and, if so, how in its teaching can revolution resist yet (necessarily) live within the parameters of capitalism without reducing its claims to ‘modest’ or ‘preliminary’ forms? Is critical-revolutionary theory too austere to actually become a pedagogical practice, and if so is there anything revolutionary about it beyond its own rhetoric? Stated differently, can critical-revolutionary pedagogy be enacted without being gentrified in our schools, and, if not, should critical pedagogy continue to make schools its major point of intervention?

McLaren’s work does not adequately address these last two questions, although (as I will argue below) his new emphasis on the role of educators in labour unions, mass demonstrations, and political organising coupled with his increasingly sparse treatment of teacher-training seems to suggest that he is moving away from schools as revolutionary foci. Again, this gesture is ambiguous, indicating both a retreat from the needs of teachers for actual pedagogical strategies and an advancement outward towards a more expansive revolutionary front, uniting educational theory with broad-based social movements.

The imbalance between theory and practice reaches its most symptomatic manifestation in McLaren’s exchange with C.A. Bowers – an educational theorist ardently opposed to the critical pedagogy tradition. While, by and large, I agree with McLaren’s defence of the central tool of critical pedagogy – the dialectic – it is important to note that this defence is presented in a strikingly anti-dialectical form as the slash-and-burn denunciation of Bowers’s position. The strengths of Bowers’s argument are dismissed in toto, missing an opportunity to dialogue across differences, and thus adding fuel to the fire for Bowers’s central claim against critical pedagogy: that it is abrasive and elitist. This renunciation of dialogue in the face of criticism is even more striking considering that McLaren’s pedagogical genealogy links him with Paulo Freire, whose famous pedagogy of the oppressed recognised dialogue as a central tool of revolution, and that, as Rage and Hope attests, McLaren regards dialogue as a major rhetorical form. In such cases, McLaren’s dialectic remains largely superficial or formal and does not penetrate into the depths of his Marxian critiques. As such, if the stated goal of McLaren’s work is to transform passion, reason, and revolution, reason here remains deprived of a dialectical movement leading from negation to preservation. In other words, an attempt to make critical revolutionary

paedagogy more paedagogical through a demonstration of its purported maxims is neglected. While the essay co-authored with Valerie Scatamburlo-D’Annibale in *Capitalists and Conquerors* on the positive and negative features of Paul Willis’s recent student-focused ethnographic work demonstrates the power of an immanent and dialectical critique, such examples are largely missing from both this book and *Teaching Against*. Here, McLaren and Scatamburlo-D’Annibale adequately synthesise dialectical rhetoric with its actual deployment. Yet I would suggest that, even in this case, a further movement is necessary. While Willis’s recent essays and books emphasise class consciousness (subjectivity) to the detriment of an analysis of objective forces of production, I would suggest that McLaren is open to the same critique in reverse. Certainly, questions of consciousness are central to any analysis of paedagogy. Yet, in McLaren’s continuing line of research, issues of consciousness become less and less important, often relegated to the rubric of postmodern affect or conservative idealism. To be truly dialectical, mediation is required, and McLaren’s own practice must return to itself through the negation of Willis to become more determinate. Again, if McLaren’s texts are themselves paedagogical moments, then the very praxis of the text does not adequately embody the principles of McLaren’s manifesto.

The inability to deploy the dialectic while simultaneously singing its praises fatally impairs another aspect of McLaren’s project: his rehabilitation of the Marxist language of ‘labour-power’ to define the function of schools. In *Teaching Against*, the authors write that ‘one of the fundamental functions of schooling is to traffic in labor power, in the engineering and enhancement of the capacity to labor so that such labor power can be harnessed in the interests of capital’ (p. 207). The problem is that such a theory has become reified in McLaren’s writing and thus abstracted from a historical movement that would place schools within a particular historical context. Rejecting either a scientific notion of capital or a total abandonment of this project, I would suggest that the labour theory of value is a starting-point from which Marxist theorists must begin their enquiry, but only to reinvent Marx’s own analysis in light of historical and contextually specific variables. As such, McLaren might well be correct on the general level, but within particular forms of postindustrial schooling in the US, this theory must be heavily modified to take into account the total capitalisation of life itself within a biopolitical economy. All too eager to deploy Marx’s labour theory of value, McLaren overemphasises the role of schools in economic inclusion, thus missing how schools in postindustrial societies increasingly function as institutions of exclusion and abandonment for poor students of colour. For instance, it can be argued that the ‘push-out rates’ in US urban centres have little to do with producing labour-power. Rather, they have to do with constructing a pipeline from school to prison. While it is well known that prisoners form part of a subaltern labour-force, the vast majority are simply utilised as bare life, filling up beds in a for-profit prison-industrial complex. Thus it is the bare life of the prisoners that is commodified. As such, pure survival enters into the sphere of exchange. In sum, McLaren fails to adequately demonstrate the use of Marx’s dialectical method either in his discussions of paedagogy or in his socio-economic analyses of schools.

While those looking for a clear articulation of critical revolutionary theory with classroom practice might be disappointed with the three books under review, it could also be argued that McLaren’s real moment of intervention lies less in outlining a viable

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2. Lewis and Solorzano 2006.
critical-revolutionary paedagogy than in crystallising what he sees as a new force in global struggles against capitalism: the educational Left. In this sense, his movement away from issues pertaining to the very real struggles of teachers is less a failure than a strategic rerouting of his energies as a theorist. If this is the case, then McLaren’s work ceases to be about ‘life in schools’ and becomes a manifesto for forming a counter-hegemonic bloc across a broad range of activists. It is here that McLaren’s project begins to mature into a new form of educational theory, one that could have broad implications for Marxism as a theory and as a political movement.

At strategic points in these books, McLaren appears to make a tentative intervention into Marxist scholarship as such, which has greatly underestimated the centrality of paedagogy for its political project. For instance, McLaren and Farahmandpur begin Teaching Against with a critical review of Hardt and Negri’s theory of Empire from a paedagogical perspective. Or again, in Teaching Against, the authors suggest that Freire’s dialogic paedagogy is in fact an important form of praxis for realising Bertell Ollman’s six moments of dialectical thinking. Furthermore, on the level of activism, McLaren and Farahmandpur chastise the Left for (a) misrecognising schools as sites of class struggle and (b) underestimating the potential role of educators in revolutionary action. This critique of high theory and leftist political activism in relation to paedagogical problematics is absolutely central for furthering Marxist philosophy and social theory as a whole. Thus McLaren (at his best) is not simply putting historical materialism back into educational theory – which is certainly an important project. He and his various co-authors are also attempting to understand how it is that education is a central concern for Marxism as such. Here, we can unite McLaren with a larger project in Marxist thought: the question of revolutionary organisation. While Lukács turned to the theory of the party, McLaren argues for the centrality of thinking organisation within the framework of an educational problematic via Freire. And, yet, the implications of paedagogy for Marxist organisational theory are once again conveyed as a deferred promise. How does paedagogy ‘solve’ certain issues concerning communication between revolutionary actors? For instance, in a very compelling interview with Glenn Rikowski in Rage and Hope, McLaren cites the four requirements of William Robinson’s counter-hegemony. According to McLaren, these include: (a) linking diverse social movements; (b) building an alternative socio-economic model to global capitalism; (c) transnationalising working-class movements; and (d) reorienting the work of organic intellectuals to serve revolutionary struggle (pp. 372–3). The gesture toward the role of the ‘organic intellectual’ is provocative, but McLaren does not further specify what role this is (beyond vague hints at building socialist organisations), how revolutionary-critical paedagogy is to play a part, and how such intellectuals are to aid the advance of the first three requirements. Here is an important moment when critical-revolutionary paedagogy can advance Marxist theory in general, and yet McLaren does not seem to follow through. Thus, for all the dense and proliferating lines of theoretical development, key issues feel oddly under-theorised and thus remain as symptoms.

If the third ingredient of a critical-revolutionary paedagogy is passion, then it is the aesthetic of McLaren’s style that arches out toward a new collective desire around which the utopian aspirations of the educational Left may unite. Certainly, one of the most distinct features of McLaren’s writing lies in its poetic quality, which is often seen by his many followers as ‘inspirational’. Thus, he has gained the aptly earned title of ‘the
poet laureate of critical pedagogy’ who writes ‘words that flame’. Yet this emphasis on aesthetics – perhaps over and above rigorous theoretical work – is ambiguous at best. Read in a positive light, it is McLaren’s insistence on the poetics of his prose that opens up a new aesthetic level of vision for re-imagining political life beyond the current distribution of the sensible. Thus, his particular contribution to critical pedagogy is less oriented towards philosophy or theory but should rather be approached in terms of the very natures of language and vision that enable us to refashion one-dimensional and instrumental signs and symbols in light of a revolutionary horizon. Such an intervention is needed, especially now when a positivistic, ‘neutral’ and ‘objective’ language dominates educational research. Here, McLaren’s writing harkens back to that of Marx himself, whose prose dialectically infused both his rage and his hope with a scientific understanding of capital. Yet, read in a more critical light, we should recall Walter Benjamin’s warning that within fascism – aesthetics replaces politics. As David Gabbard writes in his introduction to *Rage and Hope*, many feel ‘drawn in’ to the aura that McLaren’s writing produces. My fear here is that such a feeling could lead to the hypnotic love often associated with Freud’s critical notion of group psychology. Thus, McLaren’s aesthetics remain contradictory at best, poised between a new distribution of the sensible underlying the field of political struggle and a usurpation of the political by rhetorical flair, undermining the very notion of a critical perspective. McLaren does not realise a poetics that is paedagogical (that shows itself showing), that demystifies its own construction and recognises the commodification potential in the performance of all representation.

In sum, McLaren’s work leaves us with many unanswered questions, ambiguous gestures, uneven syntheses as well as with high hopes, grand gestures of refusal, and utopian inspiration. These various levels of disappointment and euphoria revolve around his two central problematics: (a) the relation between critical-revolutionary pedagogy and life in schools; and (b) the relation between the educational Left and Marxist organisational theory as a whole. Ideally, there should be a synthesis between the two, but McLaren’s treatment always verges on the edge of disintegration, reminding us that, within postmodernism, the total is always a sublime object. As such, we can read McLaren himself as a symptom of this very condition which he struggles against, and the truth of his work – read diagnostically – is that it literally embodies this complex set of limitations, frustrations, and impossibilities as it struggles against them. With reference to the historical connections between Marxist organisation and paedagogy, McLaren’s work is given a heightened sense of urgency for an educational crisis is not simply a single issue relegated to the concerns of those working in schools but is, rather, a defining (yet repressed) problematic of Marxism itself. Thus critical-revolutionary paedagogues cannot simply reinsert Marxism back into paedagogical theory but, rather, must also transform Marxist theory through this articulation. Here the dialectical movement between paedagogy and theory in McLaren’s work becomes necessary, yet, in his hands, it remains largely incomplete. What is key is how paedagogy could in fact become a central thematic for rethinking Marxist leadership, organisational theory, and, ultimately, Marxist theories of communication. But, without a
full interrogation of such issues, the potential importance of McLaren's work for Marxist theory – and the role of the educational Left in social movements – is short-circuited.

Such a result cannot do, for, as McLaren himself argues, the fate of a global movement against vampiric capital is what is at stake.

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