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# The Roma in Italy

## Racism as usual?

**Claudia Aradau**

**O**n 30 October 2007, Giovanna Reggiani, a 47-year-old Italian woman, was robbed and murdered in a deserted area of northern Rome. The man accused of murdering her was a Romanian Roma, Nicolai Romulus Mailat, who had been living in one of the 'unauthorized' settlements in Rome. The media immediately reported horrific stories of torture and rape, raising the 'spectre of "monsters" arrived from Europe'.<sup>1</sup> The crime became more than a crime; it was a crime against the nation. The wife of a naval officer, Reggiani sparked the protective and militarized anxieties that help constitute and reproduce the legitimacy of nation-states. And the nation reacted. The ex-communist mayor of Rome, Walter Veltroni, requested an emergency decree for the deportation of European citizens deemed to be a threat to public security. While the settlements at the margins of Rome and other Italian cities were being evacuated and bulldozed, the government of Romano Prodi, former president of the European Commission, was busy fast-tracking a decree on 'urgent provisions for removals from Italian territory for reasons of public safety'. The decree was openly aimed at Romanians and particularly the Romanian Roma, who had rights of mobility and residence since 2007 when Romania joined the European Union. The incident was followed not only by new security legislation but also by vigilante violence against Roma and Romanian citizens. Occasional instances of physical violence gave way to more systematic attacks on the camps. The media continued reporting details of the violence as emblematic of the 'discontent of the nation' with the government's policies on immigration and security.

Despite the urgency with which the Prodi government passed security legislation, and Veltroni's reassurances of firm action against crime perpetrated by Romanians, the government lost a vote of confidence in parliament and was swiftly replaced by a new Berlusconi right-wing government. In an alliance with the parties of the extreme Right, the Alleanza Nazionale (National Alliance) and Lega Nord (Northern League), Berlusconi came back to power on promises to crack down on crime and change immigration policies. Two weeks after his electoral victory, for the first time since the Second World War, Rome elected a right-wing mayor, former youth leader of the neo-fascist Italian Social Movement, Gianni Alemanno. Alemanno's 'Pact for Rome', which sailed him to power, had promised the expulsion of 20,000 immigrants in Rome and the destruction of the camps inhabited by the Roma. The government's 'security package' also envisaged the criminalization of undocumented migrants, the demolition of 'unauthorized' camps and the fingerprinting of the Roma. In the meantime, violence against the Roma continued unabated: arson, physical attack, insult and injury. In May 2008, a Roma camp in Naples was set on fire with Molotov cocktails. A few days later, another was burnt to the ground after a teenage Roma woman was arrested for allegedly trying to steal an infant.

The events were subject to widespread denunciation from all corners of the political spectrum. Liberals and radicals, capitalists and anti-capitalists, NGOs and governments, the Catholic Right and the secular Left reacted with declarations, appeals and press conferences, condemning the fascist turn in Italian politics and the ethnic profiling of the Roma undertaken by the new Berlusconi government. Alemanno's election as mayor of Rome reinforced suspicions about the rise of neo-fascism and an extreme Right whose security policy had gone 'out of control'. Liberal activists and NGOs focused on showing the falsity of the reports that had allegedly sparked the violence against the Roma and Romanians. The Roma represent only about 0.3 per cent of the Italian population. The teenager accused of trying to steal a baby was not Roma and did not try to steal the baby. Romanians are not criminals, but care for the elderly and clean the streets of Rome. Crime is not disproportionately the responsibility of foreigners. Rather, statistics show that crime has not increased over the past decade and Italy continues to have one of the lowest murder rates in Europe.<sup>2</sup> The Roma were not even foreigners, but more than half were European and Italian citizens. They were driven to live in makeshift camps by the lack of housing. Italy has a systematic and publicly funded system of camps that ignores the Roma's demand for adequate housing and continues to call them *nomadi*, despite their sedentary lifestyle. Many of the camps were set up to shelter refugee Roma from ex-Yugoslavia. Other camps have an even longer history. Campesina 900 in Rome dates back to the 1960s.

Exposing false perceptions did not make much of a dent in government policies or abate popular violence. Other voices continued denouncing the anti-Roma measures as racist and fascist and appealed to the universal prescriptions of law, democracy and human rights. *Famiglia Cristiana*, Italy's most widely read Catholic paper, suggested fascism was resurfacing in the government and drew parallels between the treatment of the Roma by the Berlusconi government and that of the Jews by the Nazis. The Council of Europe referred to 'historical analogies which are so obvious that they don't need to be spelled out'.<sup>3</sup> The financier George Soros sent a letter to Berlusconi demanding urgent measures to protect the Roma from racist aggression. Médecins du Monde, the French NGO founded by Bertrand Kouchner, Sarkozy's minister of foreign and European affairs, described the situation of the Roma as a 'state of exception' which should no longer be covered in silence.<sup>4</sup> The European Network against Racism denounced the Italian authorities for 'conducting arbitrary detentions and expulsions, making provisions for discriminatory anti-Romani and anti-Romanian laws and measures and openly inciting its population to racially motivated violence.'<sup>5</sup>

A state of emergency had been declared, executive powers were passing decrees that directly targeted particular sections of the population, and European citizens were losing their rights. The situation should have been indisputable. Nonetheless, the accusations of fascism and racism remained largely ineffective. Despite the rhetoric, few measures were taken by international institutions to try and halt racist discrimination against the Roma. The Italian situation appeared extraordinary, beyond the bounds of normal politics. However, rather than being something new, racism has long been constitutive of the normal politics of modern states. The problem with the accusations of racism and fascism was that they did not make sense of the government's measures against the Roma as part of the ordinary fabric of liberal politics. This was compounded by the gradual incorporation of anti-racist movements into a liberal discourse of culture and prejudice. Yet neither cultural nor biological difference was immediately at stake in the exclusionary reproduction of infra-humanity in Italy. The measures were part of a much more insidious and entrenched racism whose workings have been largely neutralized by the rhetoric of security. As Franco Frattini, Italian Foreign Minister and former European Commissioner for Freedom, Security and Justice, put it: 'These things are done by many other countries in Europe without causing any scandal.'

## Ordinary racism

Faced with accusations of racism and fascism, the Italian government reacted with indignation. 'Macché que razzisti, Italia e in regola' ('What racism? Italy is in order!') was the headline of one of the Italian dailies in the wake of the European debates about Berlusconi's 'security package'.<sup>6</sup> After all, when Berlusconi came to power, his 'security package' could rely on the emergency legislation brought in by Prodi's centre-left government. The Communists themselves, who had taken part in Prodi's twenty-month government, had been supportive of these measures. The government claims that all the measures it has taken are legal. In the wake of concerns voiced by the European Commission, Italy 'reassures the EU that fingerprinting Gypsies is legal and not racist'.<sup>7</sup> According to the government, the measures are actually compassionate, driven by a desire for social integration. The Italian interior minister Roberto Maroni justified the new state of emergency instituted nationally in July 2008 by the Berlusconi government as being 'better to assist the illegal immigrants by accommodating them in buildings rather than tents, and guarantee them more humane treatment'.<sup>8</sup>

In rejecting accusations of racism regarding the fingerprinting of the Roma living in camps, Maroni argued that 'I must be able to know who is in Italy, where they live, what they do, what they will do in coming months.' That fingerprinting will also entail the deportation of undocumented migrants appears as collateral damage of a policy that presents itself as genuinely striving for social integration. What better way to govern populations than by gathering adequate knowledge about their life? Furthermore, the 'security package' is not much of a novelty in the European security landscape. Maroni had, after all, pointed out that making irregular migration a crime only brings Italy into line with other European countries such as Britain and France, which have long had similar laws.

In Italy itself, accusations of racism did not stand before the law. In March 2008, the Court of Cassation passed a judgment on six defendants, including the mayor of Verona, who had signed a leaflet demanding the expulsion of all Roma from the city. The court decided that it was not a case of racism but of 'deep aversion [to Roma] that was not determined by the Gypsy nature of the people discriminated against, but by the fact that all the Gypsies were thieves'.<sup>9</sup> In the court's judgment, racism is defined by ideas of superiority and racial hatred and not by criminal statistics. As the mayor and the other defendants were found to be prejudiced against the Roma's criminal behaviour, rather than cultural or racial differences, such racial prejudices were not deemed to amount to racism.

Eventual anti-racist measures by EU institutions did not fare any better. Jacques Barrot, the European commissioner for justice, freedom and security, also declared: 'The measures being carried out by Italy to tackle the Roma emergency do not violate EU law.' In the wake of a report submitted by the Italian government, the measures envisaged in the 'security package' were found not to contradict European legislation since fingerprinting only targets persons who cannot be otherwise identified, rather than particular ethnic or racial categories.

The outbursts of violence and the vigilante patrolling of the streets of Rome appeared as expressions of popular discontent, which were justified by some voices on the extreme Right as responses to state indifference and inaction. The population, who



have supported the anti-Roma anti-immigrant policies of successive right- and left-wing governments, do not see themselves as racist, fascist or in any other way extreme. Those who started anti-Roma vigilante patrols on the street of Italian cities call themselves 'Circolo della Libertà' (The Freedom Circle) and claim to be acting against growing insecurity in urban areas.<sup>10</sup>

The widespread accusations of racism have ignored the discourses of law, freedom, liberalism and order that underpin both popular and governmental reactions. They share the liberal view that racism is a problem of individual prejudice and misguided perceptions and they are formulated in the liberal terms of the rule of law and universal rights. But by trying to find recourse in liberal law and universal rights, anti-racist accusations have inhabited the same space as the legal theory that condones it. What none of these accusations has come to terms with is the liberal justification of 'protective measures' within the confines of the law.

What is really at stake in Italy is not the rise of extremist language, but liberal politics as usual. Rendered more visible through the spectacular state interventions in the wake of the murder of Giovanna Reggiani, Italian government policies harbour many continuities and similarities with European policies already in place. The demand to introduce DNA tests for assessing demands for family reunification by refugees, the criminalization of illegal immigrants and the increase in prison time for migrants who have committed a crime are not new, but have already been introduced in several other European countries. Similarly, fingerprinting is not a novel measure, reminiscent of the 1930s. Rather, the fingerprinting of asylum-seekers is common policy in the European Union, where the Eurodac database aims at preventing asylum-seekers from applying for asylum in different countries. At the same time as the Italian government was undertaking the fingerprinting of the Roma, including children, the EU drafted legislation requiring the fingerprinting of all children over 12 years of age (after an initial proposal of fingerprinting everybody older than 6) for the purpose of fighting child trafficking. In the context of the 'war on terror', fingerprinting has become a much more extended device than denunciations of the Italian case care to admit.

What the Italian case should highlight is a more insidious and less striking form of racism that is already at work in Europe and whose effects often remain unnoticed: the increasing use of 'security' discourse to divide humanity with the commonsensical measure of a need for social protection.

### **Security as liberal politics**

By ignoring the co-constitution of racism and the modern state, liberal anti-racism is not only ineffective but can become a dangerous force in the perpetuation of state racism. The anti-racist discourse that emerged at the end of World War II understands racism as a matter of individual prejudice and proposes cultural rather than political responses to it.<sup>11</sup> From this vantage point, the accusation of anti-racism can be uttered by virtually anybody. State institutions can therefore become involved in an anti-racist struggle that is oblivious of the perpetuation of state racism through the use of security measures. Yet security has been constitutive of the biopolitical aspect of modern states, which place both the welfare and protection of populations at their core. Within the larger rationality of welfare and the betterment of populations, racism introduces a split in the continuum of life, differentiating the assurance of life from its denial. According to Foucault, the function of racism is to fragment and create caesuras within the biological continuum addressed by power. Yet racism becomes invisible as immediate cultural or biological coding through the separation between state and society brought about by the security *dispositif*.<sup>12</sup>

The security *dispositif* treats populations as 'natural objects' with their own laws of functioning and self-regulation. It is thus no surprise that the Italian government relied

on laws that allowed for emergency measures in situations of natural disasters, calamities and other events. With the development of biopolitics, it is not the relation between state and citizen that is at stake, but the relation between state and population as an object of government. While contractual relations to the state require the legitimation of sovereign power in relation to right, governmental interventions are assessed in terms of their utility or non-utility for this new object of government, the population.<sup>13</sup> State measures become justified by the principle of efficiency and integration in the ‘natural’ functioning of societies. Limits to what the state can do are no longer primarily established through the contractual negotiation of rights between the individual and the state, but in relation to the objectives of governing society.

It is the definition of society and population as independent realms of knowledge which should not be destabilized that provides the most insidious justification of the anti-Roma measures. As the social becomes naturalized, the state holds individuals and groups of the population accountable for the proper use of their freedoms. Those who do not conform to the limits and conditions set by the state become dangerous, disorderly excesses that disturb the good functioning of society. As they pose a risk to the good functioning of society itself, their neutralization or elimination can only be a logical corollary. With the neoliberal representation of society on the model of economic markets, which only need framework conditions to do their self-regulative work, policing excesses and disorderly disruptions of the well-functioning societal organism become a necessity without immediate biological or cultural inscription.

The Italian government has justified its measures in relation to intrusions upon the ‘natural’ functioning of society. The presence of the Roma is seen as being of an ‘extreme critical nature’ and as a cause of ‘serious social alarm’. The Roma disrupt the security and ‘nature of things’ in Italian society. Therefore the ‘security package’ only aims at restoring the self-governance of society and does not necessarily apply to particular ethnic or cultural categories. As such, it can apply indiscriminately to both the garbage situation in Naples and to the Roma, using similar measures to restore the proper functioning of cities. Soldiers are deployed to fight both crime and the garbage crisis.

In the biopolitical state, law has changed its function and itself become a site of racism. Legal interventions make decisions dependent upon standards of efficiency and appropriateness ‘naturally’ contained in the characteristics of society. Thus, fingerprinting is an appropriate intervention for correctly identifying all members of a community. After all, the Red Cross joined the government’s fingerprinting process, arguing that it was done by respecting rights. And how could a database managed by a humanitarian organization not be respectful of human rights?

In the terms of neoliberalism, the kind of individual to be fostered through law and other social measures is the entrepreneur. Legal interventions no longer attempt to palliate the effects of the market, but to create subjects as entrepreneurs and to regulate the unavoidable conflicts that emerge among competing entrepreneurs.<sup>14</sup> Those who cannot become self-governing are to be preventively neutralized. And while these categories can become culturally and racially reinscribed, their exclusion is nonetheless rendered in the preventive terms of protecting society and securing its way of life.

## Notes

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# Sarkozy's law

## The institutionalization of xenophobia in the new Europe

**Dominic Thomas**

**F**rance's recently elected hyper-president, Nicolas Sarkozy, assumed the presidency of the European Union on 1 July 2008 under acrimonious conditions triggered by the 13 June 2008 Irish 'no' vote on the Lisbon Treaty. Nevertheless, France has been able to obtain virtually immediate consensus on two significant and connected initiatives: the European Union Pact on Migration and Asylum and the Union for the Mediterranean project. Closer scrutiny of these French priorities provides interesting insights into broader debates on the contested parameters of a European identity.

Recent developments in Europe shed new and disquieting light on the original organizing principle of the European Union, according to which the EU was to become a 'family' of democratic European countries. EU membership has continued to grow (adding new members in 2004 and 2007) and this growth has been accompanied by the liberalization of internal frontiers. These measures have also coincided, however, with heightened concerns over border control and the vulnerability of 'Fortress Europe'. At the same time, assertions of national sovereignty have taken on an increasingly shrill and reactionary intensity, raising important questions about belonging, cohesiveness, and the sanctity of the original structuring aspirations and objectives.

France has, historically, played an extremely important role in defining EU identity, and policies and measures concerning migration and security precede the Sarkozy administration. In the Third Annual Report on Migration and Integration (2007), the EU emphasized the point that the 'integration of third-country nationals is a process of

mutual accommodation by both the host societies and the immigrants and an essential factor in realizing the full benefits of immigration.’<sup>1</sup> However, French determination to impose and extend a key domestic policy agenda item throughout the EU zone must be understood as the outcome of electoral campaign promises made by then-candidate Sarkozy to his extreme right-wing constituencies. Polls conducted during the 2007 French presidential elections revealed that a majority of Sarkozy supporters believed there were ‘too many immigrants in France’. In turn, this has resulted in a shift away from policies concerned with the integration of migrants towards an emphasis on protecting its ‘own’ citizens from migrants through more restrictive laws, regulations and restrictions.

### **The politics of ‘co-development’**

The creation in 2007 of the new Ministry of Immigration, National Identity, Integration and Co-Development essentially completed a project Nicolas Sarkozy started as minister of the interior (2005–07). In that capacity, he had already made the fight against illegal immigration a priority, resulting in dramatic increases in expulsions during both this period (35,921 in 2005, 34,127 in 2006, and 20,411 during the first six months of 2007, a 19 per cent increase over the similar period in the previous year) and in the last couple of years.<sup>2</sup> Under the leadership of his close friend and political ally, Brice Hortefeux, the new ministry has endeavoured to capitalize upon the widespread belief that national identity has been eroded. For example, DNA testing has been proposed as a ‘scientific’ way for ‘foreign families’ to prove their ties to France, but instead has served to support prevalent assumptions that *visible* minorities and immigrants belong to a distinct social configuration, outside the dominant order of things. Likewise, reforms to immigration policy have overlapped with the consolidation of extreme right-wing positions in Europe or at the very least their mainstreaming by right-wing political parties; calls for increased border control, heightened security, and the expansion of police powers have become routine in many European countries. The new preoccupation with border security, while reviving discussions on European identity and integration, have encouraged monolithic interpretations of history that fail to account for the fact that European populations are more intimately related to non-European ones than some European people wish to believe.

The structure of the new French ministry is organized around four main priorities: chosen/selective immigration based on certain skill sets; the fight over illegal immigration, the introduction of integration contracts (comprising language proficiency tests and a commitment to respecting Republican values and ideals); and measures aimed at co-development partnerships with sending countries. The key objective has been to reduce dramatically family-related immigration (i.e. reunification) in favour of economic migration (i.e. exploitation).

To this end, domestic policy and foreign policy can no longer be decoupled, since they unambiguously concern both facets of immigration: namely, the dynamics of internal race relations and policies aimed at controlling the entry of migrants into France. Naturally, these mechanisms reinforce existing paradigms concerning the criminalization of poverty in the *banlieue*, and these have been transferred to economic models that essentialize the criminality of immigrants. These labels emerge as inseparable components of the illegal migrant’s ‘clandestine’ status in the EU, a presence that is therefore assumed *a priori* as a ‘risk’ factor, while also being structured around comfortable and shared negative representations. (A similar trend applies to the United States, where immigration discourse has moved away from seeing it as a positive historical phenomenon to viewing it as an undesirable component of globalization.)

The politics of ‘co-development’, meanwhile, essentially reproduce age-old patterns of labour acquisition in the global South; all that has changed is that the coordinates



of human capital exploitation have shifted from the healthiest and the strongest (slaves) to the best and the brightest (employees). Brice Hortefeux defends this dimension, arguing that these mechanisms do not entail a 'brain drain' but rather a 'circulation of competence'.<sup>3</sup> This position entails consideration neither for the nature of neo-colonial relations and the circumstances that trigger migration, usually in the guise of perilous Mediterranean crossings whose recalibration echoes an earlier *middle passage*, nor for the broader unidirectionality of the process of labour circulation. In fact, France has been actively establishing *quotas* with African-sending countries, agreeing for example on 25 February 2008 with Senegal to issue 'competence and skills cards' to young Senegalese workers in return for assistance in fighting illegal immigration, improving border control, and streamlining the process of repatriating illegals (similar deals are being pursued with Benin, Congo Republic, Gabon, Morocco, Togo, etc.).

Before we look at the ways in which the French government has sought to extend these policies to the EU, we should briefly consider earlier EU initiatives. In October 1999, EU leaders at a European Council meeting in Tampere, Finland,

called for a common immigration policy which would include more dynamic policies to ensure the integration of third-country nationals residing in the European Union. They agreed that the aim of this integration policy should be to grant third-country nationals rights and obligations comparable to those of citizens of the EU. The European Union is keen to promote economic and social cohesion throughout its territory. As such, integrating third-country nationals has become a focal point of the European Union's immigration policy.<sup>4</sup>

For many years, EU leaders have underscored the importance of fostering *prosperity*, *solidarity* and *security* alongside immigration. These guidelines have been both augmented and redefined, however, under the aegis of the new European Union Pact on Migration and Asylum, presented to the European Council of Ministers of Home Affairs/Interior and Justice on 7 and 8 July 2008 in Cannes, France. Brice Hortefeux underlined the imperative of achieving uniformity among the disparate national mechanisms currently in place and the need to regulate legal immigration and asylum policy concerning third-country migrants (i.e. any person who is not a national of an EU member state). Proposed measures were targeted at developing a common and coordinated policy, one that would endeavour to harmonize approaches to legal and illegal immigration: the first to proceed through a European Blue Card Scheme designed to address internal labour shortages, the second to be controlled through a newly integrated series of 'security measures', consisting of deportation, detention, expulsion, regularization, repatriation, return directives. Approved in principle in July, these measures were voted on at the October 2008 EU summit meeting.

In some cases, at least, these tougher regulations have been counterproductive. In recent years it has become harder for immigrants to achieve regularization; expulsions are accompanied by a five-year ban from the EU, which, rather than solving the initial problem, merely ensures the illegality of returnees; many workers find themselves reduced to the status of illegals when they are made redundant; and, finally, 'returning' illegals to third-party states merely transfers their status, vulnerability and problems to another space. At the same time, the kinds of economic disparities long observed in the global South are also increasingly in evidence in the economically prosperous regions of the North; riots in France during the autumn of 2005 underscored the class and racial marginality of disadvantaged populations.

### **Without papers, or rights**

Economic migrants, faced with these new pressures, have recently become increasingly vocal in their demand for social and political rights. 'Illegals' around the world are slowly beginning to emerge from the dubious 'safety' of legal invisibility, and have begun to press more directly for public representation. During April and May

2008, several French businesses (with support from the CGT and other trade unions) went on strike to support the illegal workers known as the *sans-papiers*, and called for regularization. This action also served to counter popular misconceptions and stereotypes concerning illegals, bringing attention to the 'legal' work they perform and contributions they make, but also signalling the dangers of restrictive employment laws in exposing workers to exploitative employment practices that European workers would find unacceptable.

EU laws designed to punish abusive employers exist, notably Article 5 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights that concerns the *Prohibition of slavery and forced labour*: (i) No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; (ii) No one shall be required to perform forced or compulsory labour; (iii) Trafficking in human beings is prohibited.<sup>5</sup> The European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg is also committed to protecting human beings from slavery, servitude and forced or compulsory labour. Nevertheless, abusive practices have been widely tolerated, and extensively documented. Hugo Brady has shown that

The Commission estimates that there are around 8 million illegal immigrants in the EU, and that this number increases by 500,000 to 1 million every year.... These workers are drawn to Europe mainly by the knowledge that they can find work illegally in the construction, agriculture, cleaning and hospitality industries. Many end up doing under-paid or dangerous work.<sup>6</sup>

Fabrizio Gatti, the recipient of the 2006 award 'For diversity – against discrimination' has provided a compelling account of the glaring failure of the EU to address exploitative labour practices. Gatti equates current employment conditions with slavery:

In order to pass a week undercover amidst the slave labourers it is necessary to undertake a voyage that takes one beyond the limits of human imagination. But this is the only way to report on the horrors that the immigrants are forced to endure.... They're all foreigners; all employed as so-called 'black workers', the name used to describe illegal, untaxed and underpaid work scams.... Down here they also ignore the Constitution: articles one, two and three, as well as the Universal Declaration of Rights.<sup>7</sup>

Considerable disparities persist in the EU concerning integration and the required degree of adherence to national codes and values. The Union for the Mediterranean (in effect the culmination of the Barcelona Process that began back in 1995) was agreed on 13 July 2008 in Paris, and signed by the 27 EU members and 43 non-EU countries (except Libya): it extends both the economic and the social priorities of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, while simultaneously promoting the circulation of goods but *not* people. (France's support for the Union for the Mediterranean project and its implicit position that Turkey's proper role should be confined to this body rather than the EU itself, serves as a strong indicator as to what they will be prepared to accept in terms of future EU membership.) Efforts at defining a common or shared European identity have been informed by such categories as *desirable* and *undesirable* subjects, and Eurosceptics and repeated 'no' votes (France, the Netherlands, Ireland) have also contributed to feelings of disidentification alongside rising xenophobic tendencies aimed at non-EU members. The very concept of 'integration contracts' reveals the degree to which the French authorities continue to subscribe to and embrace a long-held belief that such a European identity either exists or can be achieved. What is less clear is the degree to which any such identity will depend on an increasingly rigid polarization of 'insiders' and 'outsiders', on the increasingly paranoid resentment that divides privileged members of the 'family of democratic European countries' from their extra-European cousins.

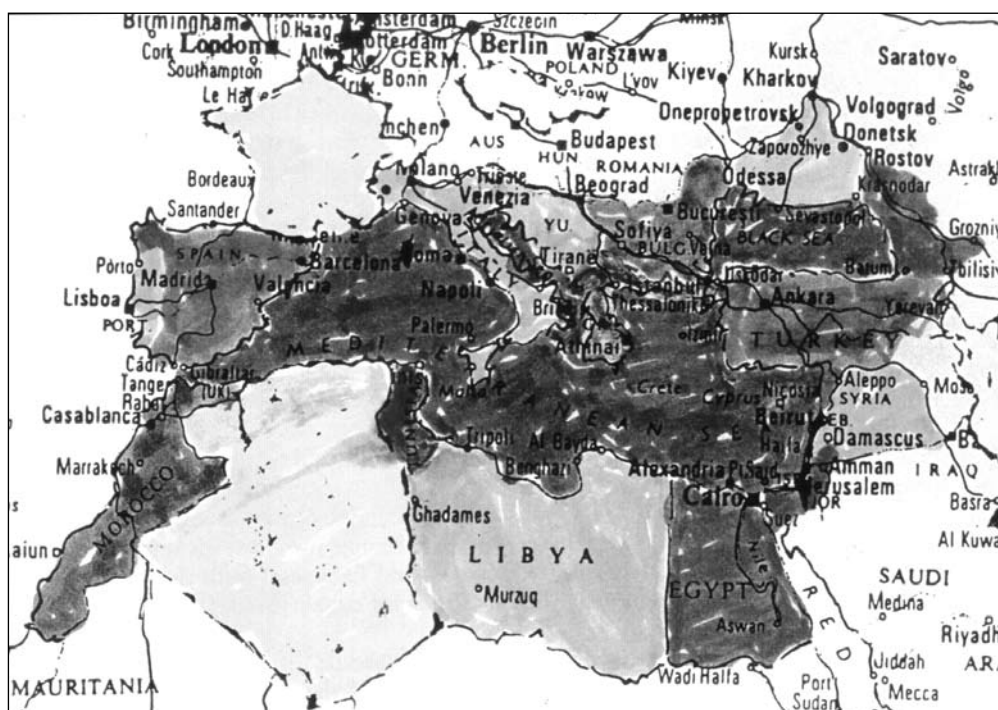
Repeated attempts have been made to connect the fight against illegal immigration to a discourse of human rights concerned with the protection of vulnerable subjects

from fraudulent traffickers and employers. Abundant evidence of growing insensitivity to migrants demonstrates their ineffectiveness, as do the findings of demographers who have demonstrated Europe's long-term need for cheap labour. Instead, obsessive concern with the apparent need to delineate a European identity in a newly 'uncertain' global landscape has encouraged legislators to approach immigration exclusively in terms of security and economic policy, without adequate mechanisms for ensuring that basic standards of equality and justice apply to the new global migrant working class. The resulting dehumanization of migrants and their characterization as economic burdens (immediately scapegoated during downturns in the global economy) have made it easier to expel them and to dissociate such harsh measures from any reference to the migrants' own experience. Additionally, the commitment to a dramatic reduction of family reunification in favour of the economic migration needed to build a more cohesive 'European family' ignores and occludes the collective migration experience over a much longer historical time frame. If more attention were paid to this history, debates about European identity and singularity would be less distorted and short-sighted.

### **'New Europe', old history**

In the absence of such attention, questions about the nature of 'Europeanness' are difficult to address. Current talk about the emergence of a *new* Europe remains exceptionally vague. EU member states have denounced evidence of ultra-nationalism and human rights abuses in countries seeking EU membership, but do not always adhere to those standards themselves. Proposed measures in Italy to fingerprint and register Gypsies (communities who were previously expelled by Mussolini in the late 1920s and subsequently exterminated during the Second World War), along with the similar treatment of Roma populations in Portugal, France and elsewhere, are a case in point. European immigration policy increasingly depends on multilateral and non-reciprocal Euro-Mediterranean agreements and partnerships that serve to restrict population movements and duplicate age-old historical patterns of exploitation and uneven exchange. French-African relations were conceived from the beginning in terms of racist and culturalist supremacy, and they continue to shape patterns of neo-colonial domination and exploitation that contribute directly to the very problems of destitution and emigration that France bemoans. EU subsidies and biased trade policies ensure that 'co-development' policies serve largely to perpetuate African poverty. EU

Rasheed Araeen, Union of Mediterranean Countries, 15 March 2005



immigration policies pay obsessive attention to the problems associated with poverty in the global South, yet, as Philippe Bernard has shown, for every migrant who tries to move illegally from Africa to an OECD country there are more than four people who migrate illegally from one African country to another (4 million and 17 million people respectively).<sup>8</sup>

A speech delivered by President Sarkozy in Senegal last summer ('The tragedy of Africa is that the African has never really entered history...') drew liberally on racist stereotypes recycled from colonial times. Much of the language used to describe today's clandestine and 'illegal' immigrants was first developed, in the nineteenth century, in response to those *indigènes* of Algeria or the Ivory Coast who stubbornly refused to appreciate the virtues of the French *mission civilisatrice*. Today, as Mauritanian filmmaker Med Hondo has argued, 'seeing Africans chained together like criminals prior to forceful repatriation is a spectacle that does little to honour those states who claim to embrace the rights of Man and democratic ideals. Nothing is worse for a person than humiliation. This has become the daily lot of immigrants in the countries of the North.'<sup>9</sup> Drawing on more recent historical memories, the French government has also established target figures for the expulsion of illegal migrants that have resulted in often arbitrary *raffes* (round-ups) of subjects – a term that evokes the 1942 *rafle du Vel d'Hiv*, for starters, which led to the deportation of French Jews to Nazi concentration camps.

Europe cannot afford to ignore such antecedents when its leaders have recourse to terminology and procedures of this kind. The racial profiling of 'insiders', the return of biology and race, rising Islamophobia and anti-Muslim sentiment, the demonization of asylum-seekers – all these measures are directly related to the most troubling sequences in European history. Any searching genealogy of the European family yields a lesson, first and foremost, on the institutionalization of xenophobia.

## Notes

1. Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, *Third Annual Report on Migration and Integration*, Brussels, 11 September 2007, p. 3.
2. *Les Orientations de la politique de l'immigration*, La Documentation Française, Paris, 2007.
3. [www.immigration.gouv.fr/article.php?id\\_article=640](http://www.immigration.gouv.fr/article.php?id_article=640), 19 June 2008.
4. [http://ec.europa.eu/justice\\_home/fsj/immigration/integration/fsj\\_immigration\\_integration\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/justice_home/fsj/immigration/integration/fsj_immigration_integration_en.htm), September 2007.
5. Available at [www.europarl.europa.eu/comparl/libe/elsj/charter/art05/default\\_en.htm#6](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/comparl/libe/elsj/charter/art05/default_en.htm#6).
6. Hugo Brady, *EU Migration Policy* (2008), [www.cer.org.uk/pdf/briefing\\_813.pdf](http://www.cer.org.uk/pdf/briefing_813.pdf), p. 27.
7. Fabrizio Gatti, <http://espresso.repubblica.it/dettaglio/1%20was%20a%20slave%20in%20Puglia/1373950>, 4 September 2006.
8. In any case, though Europe has been and remains actively complicit in the destitution of large parts of Africa, the defenders of Fortress Europe cannot directly govern the behaviour of the people they exclude: 'in spite of all the obstacles, xenophobia and expulsions, when one considers the multiple forms of migration, Africans emerge as the most mobile inhabitants of the planet'. Philippe Bernard, 'L'autre immigration africaine,' *Le Monde* 26 June 2008, p. 2.
9. Cited in Ibrahima Signaté, *Med Hondo: Un cinéaste rebelle*, Présence Africaine, Paris, 1994, p. 72.

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# Critique of Violence: the deposing of the law

## Walter Benjamin and the Red Army Faction, Part 2

### Irving Wohlfarth

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.

W.B. Yeats, 'The Second Coming'

The 'Critique of Violence' (1921, hereafter abbreviated to 'Critique') is the only published statement of Benjamin's on politics and violence from a cluster of projected and/or lost writings dating from his 'theological' period.<sup>1</sup> Various philosophical readings of this difficult, singular essay have been published and discussed over the last ten years. During the same decade, a no less dense three-page draft from the same year, 'Capitalism as Religion', has attracted equal, but separate, attention.<sup>2</sup> Their relation is both antithetical and contrapuntal. The one sketches the seemingly inescapable immanence of an all-encompassing world-historical dynamic; the other invokes the imminent possibility of 'striking' a way out. This polarity surely reverberates beyond its immediate context all the way into ours.

Since the early 1980s there has been a marked increase of interest in the early theological Benjamin and a concomitant decline of interest in the late materialist one. In some obscure way, these fluctuations could conceivably belong to the after-effects of the episode of the Red Army Faction (RAF), or at least to the larger political conjuncture in which it intervened. The argument might go roughly as follows. Globalization and the creation of a *Weltinnenraum* ('world interior') define the present age. In and through massive convulsions – revolutions, world wars and their attendant catastrophes – world history has steadily become more 'integrated'. *The Communist Manifesto* described the prehistory of this accelerating dynamic and announced an imminent end to it; in the wake of the failed Russian Revolution and the Shoah, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947) drastically rewrote the scenario; between the two, 'Capitalism as Religion' described a religion to end all religion – a secular,

neo-mythic monotheism which promises no beyond, only the endless spatio-temporal extension of its own self-produced, self-enclosed hell. It was against the neocolonial expansion of this system – more precisely, against the US conduct of the Vietnam War – that the '68 student movements, and then the RAF, struck out, at a moment when a world-historical reversal initiated by Third World wars of liberation could still seem a possible prospect. Since then, entirely different, mainly Islamic terrorist movements have arisen, many directly or indirectly engaged in an unequal struggle against American imperialism. In the West, political radicalism has largely retreated within the confines of philosophy. With the successive collapse of the student movements, their terrorist offshoots and the Soviet empire, the erstwhile Left has fallen into long-term disarray. In Germany, many who once blamed Adorno for arguing the impossibility of forcing a way out have, openly or not, conceded his case; one of the former adherents to the 'critical theory' (*die Kritische Theorie*) of the Frankfurt School has announced the 'end of critique'; in our post-communist era, others have variously turned to the early pre-Marxist Benjamin. The missed encounter between the 'Critique' and the RAF – the hypothetical object of the following remarks – has yielded to a long 'Saturnine' conjuncture between 'Capitalism as Religion' and the global present.<sup>3</sup>

'Seize the day': this recipe for happiness is also, according to Benjamin, the essential political task. It is only because the rendezvous with the present can be missed, as it almost always is, that it can ever hope to be seized. Hence Benjamin's 'Copernican' theory and practice of historiography, according to which it is the – allegedly fixed – past that revolves around the – disappearing but thereby graspable – present, and not the other way round.<sup>4</sup> The primacy of politics over history is, he claims, the firm experiential given on which the reading and writing of history pivot.

With few exceptions, however, the present is more or less absent from recent philosophico-political readings of Benjamin's 'Critique'. If his 'Copernican' theory is valid, this relative silence must in turn be read as an oblique commentary – eloquent, inarticulate or both – on the task of seizing the present. What the best readings nevertheless share with the 'Critique' is a search for alternatives to what, by analogy with the 'really existing socialism' of the erstwhile Soviet bloc, might be termed 'really existing' politics. From the 'Judeo-Platonic' standpoint outlined in the 'Epistemo-Critical Preface' to Benjamin's study on *Trauerspiel*, what we are in the habit of *calling* politics is as remote from a politics worthy of the 'name' as the human species is from the 'idea' of humanity. Just as 'what we call progress' is, according to the Ninth Thesis, a 'storm blowing from Paradise', so what we call history is still sunk in what Marx and Benjamin call 'prehistory'. This is how it looks not merely – from above and beyond – to its Angel, as Benjamin portrays him, but also – from below and behind – to Kafka's ape.

The politics on which Benjamin's 'Critique' stakes its claim has a name or idea which likewise needs to be rescued from standard 'prehistoric' usage: anarchism.<sup>5</sup> Herewith an attempt to do so in the spirit of this and other texts. In declaring its allegiance to anarchism, the 'Critique' exposes itself to what Benjamin elsewhere calls 'enthusiastic misunderstanding'.<sup>6</sup> Enthusiastic because self-interested, such misunderstanding confuses adult and 'childish' versions of anarchy. What usually goes by that name – the lawless violence 'loosed' upon the world whenever the 'centre' loses its 'hold' – is the scarecrow brandished, in their *Grande Peur*, by threatened rulers, the better to banish the thought of that *other* anarchy for which (according to *Schönes Entsetzen*) the 'dull crowd' is, deep down, waiting. *Such* anarchy would no longer be the distorted mirror-image or reactive by-product of the existing order, but their joint undoing – the smashing of a 'kaleidoscope' that merely reshuffles the pieces – the disordering of the disorder that all so-called order has so far visited upon the world.<sup>7</sup> The terms thus change places. 'Order' creates its own anarchy; anarchy liberates its own order. Haunted by a prospect that once constituted its own programme, the bourgeois order conjures up the age-old spectre of Anarchy, the better to ward off its double – the spectre of a truly anarchic, finally viable management of human affairs. In short, the forces of Reaction choose to misunderstand what they understand all too well. They pass off the danger to their existence as one to civilization in general and conflate the promise of a revolutionary

leap *beyond* the law with the threat of an inevitable relapse into what allegedly reigned *before* it. Such wilful misunderstanding of what anarchism is, or could be, belongs to the system of defences with which any ruling order protects and justifies its existence.

Not (it might be added with or against Benjamin) that these safeguards could ever be instantly disposed of. Rome will not be unbuilt in a day, nor the police disbanded overnight. Whenever a 'power cut' occurs, as it did one night in New York, the looting immediately begins. Reactive lawlessness has all the predictability of a law. But (the ghost of the 'Critique' mutely asks) what in the name of God – alias the other anarchy – are the laws of a god-forsaken order supposed to prove?

### Three readings

This is not the place to comment on the three most remarkable readings of the 'Critique' to date, merely to situate them for our present purposes. Werner Hamacher and Giorgio Agamben both apparently endorse, without reservation, the anarchic premise of Benjamin's 'Critique': the rejection of law (*Recht*) in the name of justice (*Gerechtigkeit*).<sup>8</sup> Whereas Hamacher's intensive inquiry into the problematic of *Setzen–Entsetzen* (posing/positing/instituting/deposing) allows itself only an occasional foray into empirical history, Agamben's far-ranging argument bases itself on an ongoing 'state of exception' – a sweeping empirico-metaphysical 'actualization' of Benjamin's thought, certainly, but perhaps also the obverse side of its above-mentioned absence. Neither has any more to say than did Benjamin himself about how to reach the promised land of messianic anarchy. To the author of the 'Critique', this new era had not seemed so 'unimaginably remote' as to 'reduce a word against the law to futility' (*daß ein Wort gegen das Gesetz sich von selbst erledigt*).<sup>9</sup> And even when, in 1940, that era must indeed have seemed unimaginably remote and that word still more tenuous, Benjamin still held on to the same messianic prospect. The only solution to a 'state of emergency' that is in fact 'the rule' is, so the Eighth Thesis claims, to 'bring about a real state of emergency'<sup>10</sup> – one that will bring panic and dread (*Entsetzen*) not merely to fascism but to the entire international order and its acquiescent subjects. Not for nothing, however, and not for the first time, does Benjamin portray himself in the notes to the 'Theses' as clinging to the 'tiniest guarantee' like a drowning man to a straw.<sup>11</sup> The 'real state of emergency' was this infinitely fragile, yet shattering, guarantee. Whatever its chances of realization, this was in Benjamin's eyes the measure of what was needed to win the struggle.

Or, as he had put it two decades earlier, the critique of violence is synonymous with that of the law per se and ‘cannot be implemented by any lesser programme’. In defending a comparably maximalist position fifty years later, Agamben and Hamacher are unable to connect the ‘weak Messianic force’ given, according to the ‘Theses’, to ‘each generation’<sup>12</sup> with any more specific historico-political threat to the status quo: neither with the traditional lever of Marxist theory, which the ‘Theses’ could themselves invoke only in semi-biblical terms as the ‘oppressed’, ‘struggling’, ‘avenging’ class, nor even perhaps with those ‘most inconspicuous’ of historical changes that point towards the sun rising (the ‘Theses’ enigmatically assert) in the sky of history.<sup>13</sup> This inability is everyone’s and no-one’s. However ‘meagre’ the present may be, Benjamin claimed, one has to have it ‘firmly by the horns’.<sup>14</sup> The dilemma on whose horns we are caught today is that it has neither horns to grasp nor a collective hand with which to grasp them. Seizing the day – the possibility on which Benjamin’s entire position rests – has become an aporia. But was not he too already caught in this dilemma? Do not his frequent images of immediate hand-to-hand praxis often seem calculated to defy their own impracticability?

In his ‘deconstructive’ reading of the ‘Critique’, Jacques Derrida, unlike Hamacher and Agamben, voices serious reservations about Benjamin’s stark and, he claims, untenable opposition between law (*Recht*) and justice (*Gerechtigkeit*).<sup>15</sup> Not that he renounces Jewish messianism for the sake of an ‘ethic of responsibility’ – or not, at least, in the manner of Max Weber’s essays on politics and science as a ‘calling’. But the only tenable version of that call resides for Derrida in a ‘messianicity’ weaker even than the ‘weak messianic force’ of the ‘Theses’. The all-too-strong Messianism of the ‘Critique’ moves, he argues, in a historico-political danger zone that is also a German-Jewish hall of mirrors. Not content to echo the warnings of Benjamin’s German-Jewish friends against ‘dangerous liaisons’, he even claims to see a parallel between Benjamin’s – admittedly disconcerting – emphasis on the ‘bloodless’ quality of divine violence and the Nazi gas chambers.<sup>16</sup> The Holocaust would then be the ‘worst case’ (*Ernstfall*) against which Benjamin’s ‘Critique’ needs to be tested. *Entsetzen* would have taken a quite different turn. But Derrida gives no supporting evidence for this claim, which, as it stands, amounts to another ‘enthusiastic misunderstanding’.

Benjamin shares Marx’s axiomatic claim that philosophy is to become real, and reality philosophical. But that prospect, however imminent, is not to be

*imagined* – cluttered, that is, by images drawn from the class-bound present. Instead, it is to be *conceived*, *ex negativo*, as a class-less society. This Judeo-Marxist ban on graven images is part of the politics of *Entsetzung* announced in the ‘Critique’:<sup>17</sup> the clearing away of all programmes, models and statutes (*Rechtsetzungen*) that occupy (*besetzen*) the terrain in advance and, by over-anticipating it, obstruct the advent of a future that isn’t simply a prolongation of the present. At the same time, the ‘Critique’ shares with its commentators the problem of finding points of contact *with* the present – which is, we saw, the hinge on which Benjamin’s thinking turns. While it alludes to a number of recent events or models that lend actuality to its messianic promise – the German (and implicitly the Russian) Revolution, worker uprisings, strike laws, the general strike versus ‘political’ ones and, worse yet, the recent doctors’ strike – its discourse moves on a level seemingly far removed from messy empirical history. It may seem pointless to expect mediation of any kind from an essay dedicated, as we will see, to integral immediacy. Benjamin’s thinking nevertheless stands and falls by the possibility and urgency of mediating between idea and reality.

The philosophers, the RAF could have said, have merely interpreted the ‘Critique’; our task is to realize it. None of the above-mentioned philosophers pauses to consider this virtual claim. Is this a significant omission? And, if so, did it signal unmentionable sympathy with the RAF? Or, conversely, horrified dissociation from it? (The former does not exclude the latter, may indeed render it the more necessary, as the ‘Mescalero Letter’ showed.) Or neither? Would not the drawing of any lines, however diagonal, between the ‘Critique’, their interpretations of it, and the RAF inevitably have provoked enthusiastic misunderstanding of their own political intent? None of them, at all events, found it necessary to come to terms with the possibility of a terrorist (mis)reading of Benjamin’s text.<sup>18</sup> From a liberal-democratic standpoint, on the other hand, this eventuality may already be implicit, perhaps even implicated, in the ‘Critique’. On this there will be more to say shortly.

‘The philosophers have merely interpreted the world...’ But violence and justice are also at work, as Derrida stresses, in the act of interpretation itself, which always variously over-, under- and/or misinterprets. One cannot do a text justice without doing it violence; but the latter has, to be just, to be done ‘the right way’.<sup>19</sup> That is, with *all due* violence. The present article cannot undertake, even in ‘rough’ outline, to do justice to the problem of violence and

justice elaborated in the ‘Critique of Violence’ and its recent readings. Its concern is with something else – namely, the violent (mis)reading to which, under serious pressure (*im Ernstfall*) and/or in a situation of historico-political stalemate, the ‘Critique of Violence’ was, or might have been, exposed by the – or rather a possible – RAF. Texts are, after all, not only consumed by solitary readers but by groups, collectives, epochs and events. And the axiom that there can be no justice without violence applies with perhaps even greater force to a text that aims to show just that.

What could or must have drawn the RAF to the ‘Critique’ is obvious: its ‘devastating’ (*durchschlagend*) critique of the impure, mythic violence of the state in the name of a just, pure, divine violence and its human, namely revolutionary, counterpart. Here another enthusiastic misreading looms. If revolutionary action is in some sense inspired by the example of certain ‘striking’ acts accomplished by the Old Testament God, what is to prevent revolutionary leaders from appointing themselves His plenipotentiaries on earth, like, say, today’s Talibans or Revolutionary Guards?

To this suspicion a short, probably contemporaneous text, the so-called ‘Theologico-Political Fragment’, gives an unequivocal answer by explicitly rejecting the ‘political meaning of theocracy’.<sup>20</sup> Here, too, anarchic *Entsetzung* is at work. The Kingdom of God, it is announced, cannot be ‘posited’ (*gesetzt*), or even related to, as the ‘goal’ (*Telos, Ziel*) of the profane world, only as its ‘end’ (*Ende*). (Benjamin would perhaps have developed this argument in the chapter of his *Politics* entitled ‘Teleology without end-purpose [*Endzweck*]’.) There can be only one valid political goal: to render immediate, integral, anarchic happiness possible – the libidinal counterpart, in some respects, to what *The Communist Manifesto* terms the ‘unleashing of the productive forces’. ‘Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness’ are no longer limited, as in the American Declaration of Independence, to the rights and freedoms of property-owning individuals. ‘The Fragment’ does refer to the French Revolution; but what it calls the ‘striving of free humanity for happiness’ far exceeds it. It aims at nothing less than the ecstatic *dispossession* and Dionysian dismemberment of the self-positing self. Benjamin’s celebration of *Glück* recalls Nietzsche’s affirmation of *Lust*. It, too, eternally wants itself, its own ‘transience’ (*Vergängnis*) and ‘downfall’ (*Untergang*) – its *telos* and end in one. The dispossession of the state and the law is, in short, synonymous with the expropriation and division of the so-called Individual, who comes into his own by losing what he owns.

Here we are, to be sure, worlds apart from the RAF (and only superficially closer to the ‘free love’ of Kommune 1). *Prima facie*, however, the RAF cannot be faulted for having disregarded Benjamin’s theology. The latter *asks*, ‘The Fragment’ implies, to be disregarded, in order to make way for a truly profane, truly disenchanted world, rid not merely of myth but also of religion, once its victorious adversary. Theology is, however, to be *properly* disregarded, *productively* displaced (*entsetzt*) – namely, in a still theologically inspired manner, at least for now. Therein lies the singularity of Benjamin’s notion of a ‘profane order’ and its incompatibility with the all too profane world of the RAF.

## A surreal symposium

Let us now return to those broad features of the ‘Critique’ in which the RAF might have seen distant but usable analogies with their own political analysis. ‘Pure’ violence, which coincides with pure non-violence, is, it claims, to end the reign of ‘mythic’ violence and ‘depose’ (*entsetzen*) the state. Its highest political expression in present-day Europe is the general strike – not of the ‘political’ type calculated to extort improved conditions, but the ‘proletarian’ one directed at the ‘annihilation of state violence’.<sup>21</sup> There is ‘something rotten’ in the state as such – not merely in the State of Denmark. The institution of laws (*Rechtssetzung*) has always been that of power (*Machtsetzung*) by ‘prerogative’ (*Vorrecht*: literally, ‘pre-law’).<sup>22</sup> This mythical circle of Power, Privilege, Law and State is not, however, an anthropological or ontological constant but a pre-historical continuum punctuated by cycles of decay and renewal: ‘The law governing these oscillations’ – the law of the law – ‘rests on the fact that ... all law-preserving [*rechtserhaltend*] violence itself indirectly weakens the law-making [*rechtssetzend*] violence it represents by its suppression of hostile counter-forces.’ At war with an inner enemy that represents its own founding principles, the law is ‘shaken’ by both ‘fear’ and ‘self-mistrust’.<sup>23</sup> That all modern European states should have resorted to the ‘monopolization of force’<sup>24</sup> and feel threatened by the ‘mere existence’ of any force outside the law, irrespective of its intent,<sup>25</sup> is evidence in Benjamin’s eyes of their inner demoralization, perhaps even of their imminent breakdown. A virtual transfer of power is taking place here before the reader’s eyes. The shaken self-confidence of the state and its crumbling sense of its own legitimacy provide grounds for, and confidence in, the seemingly wild, millenarist gamble of this article on a ‘new historical epoch’ that will finally



break the age-old spell of myth. Distant rumblings can already be heard here between the lines. What, the text seems to be asking *sotto voce*, if it were only a question of pushing what is falling? Several years later Benjamin calls his surrealism essay a 'last snapshot of the European intelligentsia'. The 'Critique' could in turn be called an X-ray of European reaction. The mysterious source of Benjamin's 'illuminations' could in turn be identified as an anarcho-messianic X. It is around the promise of an unknown solution that the 'Critique' turns.

The RAF would likewise be sustained by its confidence in the vulnerability of the capitalist system on both inner and outer fronts. It was, however, the Soviet bloc that would collapse under such twofold pressure. Capitalism, spiritually spent and moribund though it may be, has 'creatively' renewed itself in and through its recurrent crises. The experience of his generation, Benjamin noted in the mid-1930s, was that capitalism would 'die no natural death'. This experience was in part the result of what he called the 'decay' of experience – the base metal of modern literature from Baudelaire to Kafka and Beckett. 'The world will end', according to a late unpublished text of Baudelaire's, by outliving its own historical *raison d'être* and going on impervious to its own horror.<sup>26</sup> It will end, in short, neither with a bang nor with a whimper. Perhaps the worst *Entsetzen* of all, not only for Benjamin's generation, is that there is no *Entsetzen*; that the 'dulled multitude' is not even potentially a critical mass; that the catastrophe is here to stay.<sup>27</sup> This spectre haunts Europe too and keeps the other one in check.

Let us return to the RAF by way of the contribution that Jürgen Habermas made in 1972 to a symposium entitled 'The Actuality of Walter Benjamin'. His essay begins:

The battle fronts that have begun to emerge in the brief period since the appearance of his [two volume *Schriften*] and their almost eruptive reception in West Germany were anticipated in his biography. ... Only as a surrealistic scene could one imagine Scholem, Adorno and Brecht assembled around a table for a peaceful symposium, with

Breton and Aragon crouching under it and Wyneken standing at the door ... Benjamin's intellectual existence had so much of the surreal that it should not be confronted with unreasonable demands for consistency. ... Benjamin belongs to those unsurveyable [*unübersichtlich*] authors whose work gives rise to a disparate posterity. We encounter them only in the sudden flash of actuality with which a thought achieves dominance for a few brief seconds of history.<sup>28</sup>

The tensions between author and subject are palpable. 'Always radical, never consistent', Benjamin never took back his 'word against the law' and could not forgive social democracy for its betrayal of the revolution. Habermas, for his part, consistently draws social-democratic conclusions from the experience of *his* generation – the progress in democratization made in Germany since the debacle of the Nazi 'revolution' – and will subsequently coin the term 'patriotism

**Anarchistische Gewalttäter**  
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Vorsicht! Diese Gewalttäter machen von der Schußwaffe rücksichtslos Gebrauch!

of the constitution' (*Verfassungspatriotismus*) as a renewed, now cosmopolitan, pledge of allegiance to the state of law.

As a master theorist in the making and a professional surveyor of the field, Habermas occupies an intellectual and institutional position worlds apart from Benjamin's, which he finds difficult to place but too important to ignore. The question is whether, in casting him here as an outsider, though a strangely central one, and elsewhere assigning him the role of an occasional corrective to his own grand theory, he is not engaged in re-marginalizing Benjamin's thought. By characterizing its reception as so many 'flashes' of 'actuality', he is in effect limiting its theory of reading – qua 'readability'<sup>29</sup> – to Benjamin's own *œuvre*. The implication is that work such as his own, committed as it is to a notion of cumulative progress in the intellectual as well as the socio-political realm, can count on a correspondingly larger, steadier reception. While some occasionally flash and erupt, others are here to stay, discuss and mind the store. Here, too, a 'battle front' has 'begun to emerge'.

The occasion was a symposium to mark Benjamin's 'eightieth birthday'. Habermas begins here by sketching the surreal symposium that Benjamin's thinking represents – one far removed from his own 'discourse ethics' – and the 'disparate' reception it has provoked. Given the 'eruptive' incidents of the foregoing years (the occupation of the Institut für Sozialforschung, the brief transformation of the German Department at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University into a 'Walter Benjamin Institute', etc.), the reservations voiced in the ensuing account of Benjamin's position contain a cautionary subtext for the student movement. (Max Weber's celebrated lecture 'Science as a Vocation', which had, amidst the throes of the German Revolution, warned a student audience against all attempts to stem or reverse the 'disenchantment of the world', may be regarded here as a distant precedent). But perhaps it even contains a little more. While no one could then know that an aberrant offshoot of that movement, the RAF, would soon be 'standing at the door' more like 'nihilism', Nietzsche's 'uncanny guest', than like Gustav Wyneken, Benjamin's early mentor, and intervening in more literally 'eruptive' fashion, Habermas seems to have sensed some such potential in Benjamin's thinking. History stretches out before the latter's 'Manichaean gaze', he writes, 'like the orbiting of an extinct planet on which, now and then, flashes of lightning descend from on high [*herniederzucken*]'. Where Derrida, two decades later, sees both the best and the worst at work in Benjamin's non-negotiable

opposition between law and justice, Habermas has only suspicion for the polarization he finds in his thought between the eternal return of the same and its erratic, short-lived interruptions. Such an 'anti-evolutionary' conception of history, he claims, ought not be thrown over historical materialism like a 'monk's cowl'.<sup>30</sup> Seven years before, as the student movement was beginning to emerge, Marcuse had pointed to the inner coherence between the anarcho-theological 'Critique' and the historical-materialist 'Theses'. Habermas claims that the ungodly combination of theology and historical materialism – the winning couple of the First Thesis – was bound to 'fail'.<sup>31</sup>

Should, then, this 'disenchanting' account of a new-found icon of the German Left be read not merely as an oblique commentary on the unrealistic expectations of student radicals but even as a glimpse of the extremist potential hidden under Benjamin's 'cowl'? Were the extremes between which his thinking moved – a mythical continuum and revolutionary intervention – a volatile cocktail? Did it 'contain' them? It is hard to decide. What *is* clear is that the only chance of breaking the catastrophic 'sequence' or 'chain' of events evoked in the *Theses* would indeed be – but how? – to 'spring' a surprise on them; and that the potential contained in such recurrent terms of Benjamin's as *Sprung* ('leap', 'crack') and *sprengen* ('explode') was activated decades later by a conspiratorial political sect bold and crazy enough to challenge the state's monopoly on legitimate violence not merely in theory or in principle but in practice. What Habermas had tellingly paraphrased as 'flashes' and 'now-times' (*Jetztzeiten*) striking down from on high now (mis)translated into the strikes of an 'urban guerrilla', whose bank-robberies, kidnappings and assassinations failed to provoke anything like the expected reaction from a (sociologically recomposed) 'working population' not at all interested in overturning the (politically recomposed post-fascist) state. No encouragement for this grotesque miscalculation was given by Benjamin. 'I am determined to do my thing under all circumstances', he had written in 1931, 'but this is not the same in every circumstance'.<sup>32</sup> On the one hand, he refused to 'foreswear' his "'former" anarchism',<sup>33</sup> which remained to the last the irreducible core of his thinking. On the other, he knew that it had to be 'recast' each time anew, to the degree permitted by the 'temperature' of the class struggle. The RAF refused to acknowledge what that temperature was.

Benjamin's disparate reception was, Habermas claimed, 'set up' (*angelegt*) in his work. He did not,

however, accuse it of having prepared the way for terrorist acts which no one could foresee at the time. On another occasion, he raised a storm by warning the student movement against 'left fascism'. On this one, he was perhaps the only participant to sense what could be made of concepts such as 'actuality', 'violence', 'justice' and 'decision' beyond the confines of a 'peaceful symposium'.<sup>34</sup> To fail to distinguish the violence done by the RAF from that invoked by Benjamin would, however, be to do his thinking the worst kind of violence. 'For it is not genuine renewal that is taking place here', Benjamin writes in another context, 'but galvanisation'.<sup>35</sup> The latter term fits the RAF well enough. In many cases, however, and perhaps even in theirs, it proves difficult to tell the two clearly apart. The distinction between the *Gewalt* of 'pure' actualization and the *Gewaltsamkeit* of 'impure' galvanization is intuitively compelling and theoretically indispensable. But who, short of God, is unfailingly competent to make it?

Who, then, does not in all earnest (*im Ernstfall*) share at least some of Habermas's evident dismay (*Entsetzen*) at Benjamin's theological thunderbolts? But who does not also feel dismay at such dismay? Are not the tremors that the 'Critique' inevitably produces mostly the protective prejudices of the status quo? Its refusal to let itself be actively dismayed at itself is, it was suggested, the real *Entsetzen*. This is why the 'Critique' cannot simply be dissociated from the RAF, or rather from what it should have been – *whatever that is*. That – Benjamin once said of Heidegger, whom he and Brecht planned to 'demolish' – is how *not* to do it. To know that much is not necessarily to know how it could or should be done.

### 'True' politics and the 'great' criminal

The parts of the 'Critique' which members of the RAF might have marked in red are easily identified. They include a paragraph on the 'shameful' nature of the *police*, which by mingling law-preserving and law-making violence routinely makes a mockery of the constitutional separation of powers on which all modern European law rests and brings with it an acute 'degeneration' of power characteristic of all modern democracies;<sup>36</sup> remarks on the 'decay' and the 'familiar woeful spectacle' of contemporary *parliaments*, which have 'not remained conscious of the revolutionary forces to which they owe their own existence';<sup>37</sup> and the analysis of *compromise* as the continuation of (impure) violence by other (impure) means.<sup>38</sup>

These and other passages signal an uncompromising rejection of all liberal-democratic politics, as repre-

sented in Germany by the recently established Weimar Republic. Politics – so the standard liberal wisdom has it – is 'the art of the possible' or, synonymously, of 'compromise'. 'True politics', the 'Critique' counters, thereby falls woefully short of the possible and is fatally compromised. Two models of conflict and its resolution are at loggerheads here: 'lazy' compromise (as the German language calls it) and strenuous happiness (*verum gaudium res severa est*). It is not, according to the central 'mystical' image of the 'Theologico-Political Fragment', by seeking to anticipate or conform to it, or, God forbid, to establish it on earth, but by recklessly 'striving away' (*strebt ... fort*) from the 'direction of messianic intensity' in pursuit of its own entirely opposite telos that the arrow (*Pfeilrichtung*) or force (*Dynamis*) of the profane order 'furthers' the coming of the messianic realm. A mystical transfer of energies takes place. To one coming corresponds another; to the messianic promise, Stendhal's *promesse du bonheur*. This immediate, untrammelled striving for happiness is the precise opposite of all compromise, which (according to a passage from Erich Unger cited in the 'Critique') results from the frustrating blockage of one striving (*Strebung*) by a contrary one (*Gegenstrebung*) and is thus, however freely accepted, imposed from without.<sup>39</sup> Ecstasy or stalemate: *tertium non datur*. Any third way would amount to the second: the middle road, the second best.

On this analysis, compromise is of the same stuff as the violence it supposedly renounces. What it *actually* renounces is violence of a quite different order: undiminished happiness. Unger's formula for the basic feeling underlying all compromise – 'It would be better otherwise' – will find an instructive echo in Churchill's oft-quoted remark that democracy is 'the worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time'. To this – the disenchanting wisdom of the disenchanted world – the following answer may be read from Benjamin's 'Critique'. In compromising with the worst, democratic politics compromises itself away. A true politics cannot be a matter of resigning oneself to the lesser evil or even to a better lot. It knows no sliding scale. It is violently, non-violently, other.

As the one f(r)action of the German Left that rejected all compromise and was ready to 'off the pig', the RAF might have imagined that it could simply paste some of the above-mentioned passages, as it did some from the 'Theses', into its 'declaration of intent'. That would, however, have been to quote them out of context – the context being in this case Benjamin's theory and practice of 'quoting out of

context' (*Zusammenhang*). Quotation, thus conceived, is synonymous with 'rescue' (*Rettung*), rescue with destruction; it is the act of 'exploding', 'hewing' or otherwise tearing certain saving elements out of a web of mythic guilt (*Schuldzusammenhang*). All sides can readily agree that the way in which the RAF went about *its* rescue operations further enmeshed it in the mythic web and compounded the guilt. All too readily, in fact. For such unanimity leaves entirely unanswered the decisive question posed both by the RAF's debacle and by Benjamin's 'Critique': what acts of 'pure' violence can, under existing conditions, cut the knot without thereby adding to the primitive accumulation of guilt? The RAF might have seen itself as putting Benjamin's 'Critique' to the proof; liberals might have retorted that, like Marxism and the Soviet Union, each disproved the other. A small faction claimed to represent the only alternative to capitalism; a broad front claimed that there was none. The future 'readability' of Benjamin's 'Critique' lies in the uncharted terrain situated between this ideological crossfire.

A further area of potential identification again reveals the vast difference between Benjamin and the RAF. The 'Critique' refers twice to the figure of the "great" criminal who arouses the 'secret admiration of the people' even in defeat.<sup>40</sup> One again recalls here the 'clandestine pleasure' (*klammheimliche Freude*) that the anonymous 'Mescalero' admitted to having initially felt at the RAF's assassination of the West German federal prosecutor – an unholy glee that he was, by the end of his letter, the first to condemn. (That he would feel constrained decades later to take the whole letter back is a dispiriting sign of the times.) His was not, however, the voice of the 'people'. Not even the collective suicide of the incarcerated inner circle of the RAF elicited any popular sympathy. Quite the contrary: whipping up the 'healthy popular instincts' (*das gesunde Volksempfinden*) of a darker age, the populist *Bild* newspaper approved all the excesses of state violence that the RAF had succeeded in bringing upon itself. From an enlightened liberal standpoint, the state 'overreacted'. From that of the RAF, it behaved entirely in character. Therein at least it had Benjamin's posthumous support.

The 'Critique' acknowledges various time-honoured ways of finding non-violent resolutions for human con-

flicts in 'the proper sphere of "understanding [*Verständigung*]"', namely language, among them 'politeness of the heart', 'diplomacy', and other 'techniques of civil intercourse'.<sup>41</sup> It gives no credence, on the other hand, to abstract antitheses, current then as now, between violence and non-violence, war and peace, coercion and freedom – in short, to pacifism and 'infantile' anarchism.<sup>42</sup> Instead, it allies the right violence with the right non-violence, pitting both against their negative – namely, mythico-legal – counterparts, provisionally concluding that since no resolution of human conflict is



Arrest of Holger Meins, Frankfurt, 1 June 1972

conceivable if violence is in principle entirely excluded, types of violence must be sought which lie outside the law.<sup>43</sup>

The 'Critique' identifies the source and model of such extra-legal violence as God: 'It is never reason that decides on the justification of means and the justice of ends; rather, fateful violence decides on the former, while God decides on the latter'.<sup>44</sup> Five years earlier, the essay 'On Language in General and the Language of Man' had invoked God as the origin of the Word. In invoking a non-legal violence conceivable only as a 'pure means' (*reines Mittel*) or as 'no means at all', the 'Critique' is taking up the central argument of that essay. There the Fall had been interpreted as that of language from a God-given 'medium' of just, unique and proper names into a man-made 'means' (*Mittel*) of idle, proliferating, arbitrary signs – from the *Mitteilung* ('imparting', 'communication') of the Logos into what Benjamin calls *Mittelbarmachung* and *Mittelbarkeit* ('mediacy' and 'means-ability') – in short, from Paradise into bourgeois society. This 'shattering' (*Erschütterung*) of an original 'immediacy' is itself already the bottomless 'confusion' of Babel, a 'chatter' without 'common basis', which only the fallen

can mistake for communication. Words and things are henceforth ‘entangled’ in ‘enslavement’ and ‘madness’; these are, we may now extrapolate, synonymous with ‘compromise’ and ‘unhappiness’. All this coincides with the ‘mythical origin of the law’.<sup>45</sup> The Fall may, in short, be called that first great *Entsetzung* of the world, which the second, revolutionary one is to take back.

The revolutionary task thus coincides, via the experience of language evoked in the above-quoted letter to Buber, with the task of the translator, as described in the essay of that title: it is that of rediscovering the magical, prelapsarian ‘im-mediacy’ (*Un-mittelbarkeit*) of the Logos. In which case, word and deed are no longer posed/imposed on the world as a means of arbitrary power but (according to the ‘Critique’) experienced as the medium or manifestation of divine power – that of the Old Testament God, as opposed to the gods of ancient Greek mythology:

If mythical violence is law-making [*rechtsetzend*], divine violence is law-destroying [*rechtsvernichtend*]; if the former sets [*setzt*] boundaries, the latter boundlessly destroys them; if mythical violence entails both guilt and retribution [*sühnend*], divine power only expiates [*entsühnend*]; if the former threatens, the latter strikes [*schlagend*]; if the former is bloody, the latter is lethal without spilling blood. ... The first demands sacrificial victims, the second accepts them.<sup>46</sup>

Two orders of violence are opposed here. (That even sacrifice can be of either kind is something to which we will shortly return.) Both are immediate, but in antithetical ways, mythical terror being unredeemed and divine terror redemptive. The ensuing reference to two manifestations of divine violence – ‘God’s judgement on the company [*Rotte*] of Korah’ and the ‘crowd’s divine judgement on the criminal’<sup>47</sup> – is as summary as the justice invoked, of which it mimetically partakes. A modern secular mind cannot but be disconcerted (*entsetzt*) by these unargued, unarguable fiats, which raise the following questions in the present context. Are they not themselves so many *Setzungen*, oriented though they are towards *Entsetzung*? Compelling though the distinction between mythical law and divine justice may in principle be, how in practice distinguish the crowd’s ‘divine’ judgement from, say, lynch justice? Or God’s destruction of the boundaries that myth ‘sets’ (*setzt*) from the one that is thereby set between their respective spheres? Are such theological dichotomies proof against the mythical ambiguity they are set against? Or does *Setzen* threaten in this context to lapse – though not in the sense of the Fall – into a quite different *Entsetzen*, namely the difficulty of

telling good and bad *Entsetzen*, pure and impure violence, purely, cleanly, properly apart except by an act of faith? Do these distinctions, in short, ‘deconstruct’ themselves?<sup>48</sup> But do they not also make it possible to think the present from a vantage point beyond it? In Benjamin’s texts, God, we may perhaps provisionally conclude, is the cipher for as yet unresolved problems which could be solved only by being displaced.

Benjamin briefly evokes ‘educative violence in its most perfect form’ as one contemporary manifestation of the ‘bloodless, striking, expiatory accomplishment’ of divine violence.<sup>49</sup> His chief concern, however, lies with what, he claims, may be named its highest human manifestation: revolutionary violence. Such an ‘extension’ of the notion of divine violence will, he anticipates, prompt the ‘most violent’ (*heftigsten*) attacks, ‘especially at the present time’. (The last phrase underscores the charged context in which the ‘Critique’ intervened.) Contrary to what its enemies will want to claim, revolutionary justice, as here conceived, does not grant men ‘lethal power against one another under certain conditions’. The commandment ‘Thou shalt not kill’ remains ‘immoveable’; unlike human laws, it cannot be ‘deposed’. But it becomes ‘inapplicable, incommensurable’, once the deed is done. It stands,

not as a yardstick of judgement, but as a guideline for the actions of persons or communities who have to come to terms with it [*sich auseinanderzusetzen*] in solitude and, in terrible cases, to take upon themselves the responsibility of disregarding it. Thus it was understood by Judaism, which expressly rejected the condemnation of killing in self-defence.<sup>50</sup>

An aphorism in *One-Way Street* varies the same thought: ‘The killing of the criminal can be ethical, its legitimation never.’<sup>51</sup> *Legitimierung* can almost be translated here as ‘legalization’. *Entsetzung*, qua ‘delegalization’, implicitly opposes the bourgeois-capitalist juridification of social life.

To think divine and revolutionary violence together is thus to be exposed to contrary ethical demands and to have to decide between them alone, in the heat of action, immediately. *Sich auseinandersetzen* (‘to come to terms with’) may perhaps be read here as the taking (*setzen*) apart (*auseinander*) of the self-positing individual (*sich*), this time in an ethical rather than erotic sense. A chiasmus forms here with another exemplary *Auseinandersetzung*. It was by virtue of Abraham’s unconditional submission to God’s command that he sacrifice his only begotten son that he was released from having to carry it out. The revolutionary may, with no less fear and trembling, temporarily release himself from the divine commandment not to kill, this time in

obedience to a radically profane mandate – one which is, however, itself divine (if one extrapolates from the logic of the ‘Theologico-Political Fragment’) by virtue of its uncompromising radicality. No ‘legitimation’, human or divine, may be sought for this act, which is not a wilful, superfluous ‘turning away’ (*Abkehr*) from God’s Word like original sin, but an unavoidable ‘disregarding’ (*absehen*) of it. Its only justification – but Benjamin places the word *Rechtfertigung* between inverted commas, as if it were contaminated by the law (*Recht*) – is that pure profane violence is done, like its divine counterpart, ‘for the sake of the living’.<sup>52</sup> Such exceptions to divine commandment would presumably be oriented towards what the Eighth Thesis will call the ‘true state of exception’. Refusing to rationalize what is *ungeheuer* (‘terrible’, ‘immense’, ‘monstrous’) about them away, the ‘Critique’ rejects all versions of the argument so endlessly debated then as now, especially in the context of revolutionary violence, that ‘the end justifies the means’. Read in conjunction with ‘Capitalism as religion’, which describes the inner and outer economy of capitalism as a ceaseless accumulation of debt/guilt (*Schuld*), the weighing of means and ends appears as a cost–benefit accountancy that perpetuates guilt by neutralizing it in the scales of the balance-sheet. Revolutionary terror of this kind would merely vary the horror of bourgeois society: namely, *Entsetzen* no longer experienced as such. Far from ending *Mittelbarkeit*, it would constitute a monstrous extension of it.<sup>53</sup> Thought, writes Benjamin, crystallizes out of a force-field of tensions. In the tortuous argument we have just summarized, elements of German philosophy and the Spartacus League wrestle (*sich auseinandersetzen*) with a biblical angel. The argumentative process is one of continuous decision, not of endless talmudic commentary or legal debate. What Benjamin’s Logos calls for is to call things by their name; ‘overnaming’ came, on this reading, with the Fall.<sup>54</sup> In this spirit, the ‘critique’ concludes by making short shrift of a new surrogate idol that is regularly paraded as an unanswerable objection to all terrorist violence: the ‘sanctity of life’. It dismisses this ‘dogma’ as the last misguided effort of a weakened Western tradition to seek out a lost sense of the holy in the ‘impenetrable mystery of the cosmos’.<sup>55</sup> Here the distance between the early Benjamin’s reflections on revolutionary violence and the prevailing political discourse of his time and ours is again apparent. It is in this untimeliness that their actuality resides. The perverse sanctification of ‘life’ is to be found everywhere today, from the ‘creative destruction’ with which the capitalist economy regenerates itself, through the

‘wars’ on everything that threatens its life and ours (terror, cancer, drugs), to the ‘pro-life’ movement on behalf of the unborn.

## A red thread

Benjamin’s thinking takes up a peculiar place in the landscape of modernity. Adorno regarded it as an unrepeatable coincidence of mysticism and enlightenment; Habermas, as an abortive attempt to combine the two. Nothing less, Benjamin’s First Thesis claims, can complete their common programme: the ‘uncompleted project of the Enlightenment’ (in Habermas’s phrase). It is between these poles that the ‘Critique’ negotiates a passage. Otherwise it negotiates with nothing and no one. It pursues its argument with a dry rigour equal to that of a legal brief; but it also brooks no argument. Its politics are entirely profane; but in its unequal struggle with the powers that be, this ‘word against the law’ draws inspiration from the power and the glory of the Word – the divine judgement which, in its ‘actuality’,<sup>56</sup> expelled Adam and Eve from Paradise.<sup>57</sup> As a sustained, self-fulfilling act of language which symbolically deposes all existing, legally constituted authority in the name of certain acts of God and man, Benjamin’s ‘Critique’ not merely *describes Entsetzung* but *partakes* of it. It rehearses, here and now, the coming standstill.

Perhaps this is what it took at that time to take all comers on. Rehearsed again today in the same terms, the imposing position of the ‘Critique’, and the oppositions and presuppositions it entails, would surely amount to a pose lacking in both theological and world-historical substance. (Was it by raiding the high ground of theology without ‘occupying’ (*besetzen*) it that the ‘Critique’ avoided this pitfall?) Surely, then, it asks meanwhile to be ‘deposed’ in turn? Nothing lay closer to the heart of Benjamin’s politics than that. The soberly materialist ‘liquidation’ of its founding rhetoric – its own ‘dismantling’ (*Abbau*) and ‘removal’ (*Entsetzung*) – was integral to it. But this impulse, too, is likely to meet today with enthusiastic misunderstanding. If Benjamin himself later dreamed of ‘blotting’ (out) the holy writ in which his thinking was ‘steeped’, he also noted his inability to do so.<sup>58</sup> Mainstream modernity might appear to have succeeded where he failed. But his incapacity puts our ease to a searching test. According to his essay on language, *Mittelbarkeit* is no longer ‘immanently’ magical, but ‘externally’ so, if not indeed, qua Babel, mythical and demonic. The fallen world would thus be less disenchanted than disinherited. Would not its lightweight babble sound as distorted to a putative Angel of Language as the

spectacle of 'progress' looks to the Angel of History? Above all, is it adequate to the tasks at hand?

The gulf between Benjamin's language and that of the RAF was at all events so vast that it is hard to discern any plausible relation between them. Meanwhile the storm that we no longer call progress has buried both under its rubble. In the wake of the RAF's defeat, the problem of political violence has been brushed aside and appears today both exhausted and taboo. The upshot has been, on the one hand, a return to the language and politics of inner-parliamentary opposition on the part of the Green Party, along with all the usual compromises (including the careerist variation, played by an erstwhile student leader who made it to foreign minister, on the slogan: 'the long march through the institutions'), on the other, a retreat by some of the best philosophers to various forms of 'weak' thinking.<sup>59</sup> Between the two yawns the political vacuum once so disastrously filled by the RAF.

The second sentence of the 'Critique' states that 'a cause, however effective, becomes violent, in a meaningful sense, 'only when it intervenes in moral relations'.<sup>60</sup> That sense is only residually present today and has largely been effaced by the objects of Benjamin's 'Critique' – doctrines of natural right that consider violence a 'product of nature, a raw material as it were, the use of which is in no way problematical unless force is misused to unjust ends' and, correlatively, the renewed extension to the sphere of law of a popular Darwinism that 'in thoroughly dogmatic fashion regards violence as the only original means, besides natural selection, adapted to all of nature's vital ends'.<sup>61</sup> All this provides an alibi for the perpetuation of what Benjamin calls 'natural' or 'pre-history'. In everyday usage, 'violence' signifies little more today than a by- and waste product of the social and political body, a disconnected statistical quantity that is 'on the rise', will never 'go away', but will hopefully 'decrease'. It serves a 'prehistoric' politics as the useful object of a manipulable fear.

A red thread runs through the 'Critique': the search for a 'somehow conceivable solution' (*Lösung*) or 'deliverance' (*Erlösung*) from the millennial past through a non-legal violence that operates in a 'somehow other' fashion than as a means.<sup>62</sup> Only by breaking the chains of means and ends forged by an all-pervasive sign-language (*Mittelbarkeit*) and by discovering a 'politics of pure means' would it interrupt the 'chain of events', namely the cyclical decay and rebirth of law-making and law-preserving violence. *Entsetzung* stands for this other violence – a violence to end all violence. In its more 'inconspicuous' manifestations,<sup>63</sup> it over-

laps with another overdetermined term in Benjamin's vocabulary: *Entstellung* ('distortion', 'displacement'). The latter exposes the *existing Entstellung* of Creation and prefigures its falling (back) *into* place beyond the rule of law. It is emblemized by the distorted figure of the little hunchback, who masterfully displaces – and 'sacrifices' – pieces on the chessboard. The Messiah 'will not wish to change the world by violence', the Kafka essay claims, but will merely make a slight adjustment to it' (*nur um ein Geringes sie zurechtstellen*).<sup>64</sup> He will thereby achieve what all the King's horses and all the King's men could not.

This 'other' violence was surely not present in the actions of the RAF, successful though they were in bringing out the structural violence of the ruling system; or if it was, it was distorted beyond recognition. Elements of the messianic world, the young Benjamin claims, are deeply embedded in every present as 'the most endangered, discredited and ridiculed creations and ideas'.<sup>65</sup> Such is the little hunchback embedded in the materialist automat. Too disreputable to show himself in public nowadays, this shrunken embodiment of 'theology' marks the last (dis)appearance in Benjamin's work of the messianic anarchism that he never foreswore.

Where has it migrated meanwhile? Where is the most promising violence to be found today? Hardly in the imminent prospect of a proletarian general strike or a revolutionary overthrow of the state – though, be it noted, no lesser programme will, according to the 'Critique', suffice. Only, then, in some equivalent of the 'weak Messianic force' and the 'here and there'<sup>66</sup> respectively evoked in the 'Theses' and the 'Critique'? The latter's twofold 'somehow' (a 'somehow conceivable' solution, a 'somehow other' violence) marks a blind spot – an incapacity that it is not, as Benjamin elsewhere puts it, 'in the power [*Gewalt*] of mere thought' to resolve.<sup>67</sup> Nor, it may in retrospect be added, does the solution lie in the power of mere action.

The RAF did not put Benjamin's politics into practice or to the test; it parodied, and thereby further discredited, them; in the terms of his 'Critique', it perpetrated *mythical* in the name of *revolutionary* violence. But this judgement, valid though it is, is easily confused with the verdict of the law. To pronounce it is, furthermore, to risk posing as the self-appointed guardian of a backstairs shrine dedicated to the Purest Flame; and this too is a parody of what is needed. To indict the RAF in Benjamin's name is, above all, to leave untouched the immense task that that motley bunch of desperados so crazily – and perhaps wickedly

– botched, but whose urgency they at least took seriously: that of a ‘world politics’<sup>68</sup> worth the name. In blindly taking at its word Benjamin’s ‘word against the law’, the RAF perpetrated a predictable fiasco. The question remains: how to take that word in a ‘somehow other’ way? How to implement it under today’s conditions, if not in the right, at least in a ‘productively false’ way? ‘Where others encounter mountains’, wrote Benjamin of the ‘destructive character’, ‘there too he sees a way’.<sup>69</sup> He is, however, an exception to the rule. His resourcefulness stands over against the ‘perplexity’<sup>70</sup> that is, according to Benjamin, the signature of the modern age.

Blanqui’s and Baudelaire’s hands are, wrote Benjamin, clasped on the stone under which the June revolution is buried.<sup>71</sup> Something analogous can probably *not* be said of Benjamin and the RAF, even in defeat. But this does not let the bystanders<sup>72</sup> – the rest of us – off.

Between the lines of the ‘Critique’ lurks a prognosis with which the present writer, for one, does not know how to disagree: if the accelerating world-historical dynamic, combined with the ongoing sleep of the collective, continues to prevent a historical subject from coming into existence, then humanity in general and in particular will, for lack of *Entsetzen*, continue to abort. ‘But once this kind of thesis has been put forward, one is already at such a remove from the concrete that it becomes embarrassing.’<sup>73</sup>

Perhaps we stand before anarchy like Kafka’s ‘man from the country’ before the law. Is it that we do not dare, or do not care, or know how to go in?

**Translated by Nick Walker and Irving Wohlfarth**

## Notes

1. No trace has survived either of ‘a very short but timely note on “Life and Violence”’ (letter to Scholem of 17 April 1920, in Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe* [henceforth *GB*], ed. Christoph Gödde and Henri Lonitz, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1995–2000, II, p. 65; English translation, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin 1910–1940*, trans. R. and E.M. Jacobson, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1994, p. 162) or of a substantial two-part essay entitled ‘The True Politician’ and ‘The True Politics’, the second part of which was to comprise two sections, ‘Dismantling Violence’ (*Abbau der Gewalt*) and ‘Teleology without Final Goal’ (*GB*, II, p. 109; letter to Scholem of 1 December 1920; *Correspondence*, pp. 168–9). Cf. Uwe Steiner, ‘Der wahre Politiker. Walter Benjamins Begriff des Politischen’, in *Internationales Archiv für die Sozialgeschichte der deutschen Literatur*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2000, pp. 48–92.
2. Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* (henceforth *GS*), ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1972–89, VI, pp. 90–103; Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings* (henceforth *SW*), ed. Michael W. Jennings, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1999, vol. 1, pp. 288–91. Cf. the collection of essays edited by Dirk Baecker, *Kapitalismus als Religion*, Kulturverlag, Berlin, 2003.
3. ‘[T]here is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one’ (*GS*, I, 2, p. 694; ‘On the Concept of History’, Thesis II, *SW*, vol. 4, p. 390). As the neighbouring reference to a ‘secret heliotropism’ (Thesis IV) makes clear, the secret that passes between the generations is revolution. Decades earlier, Benjamin had called the circulation of God’s word through Creation a ‘secret password’ (*GS*, II, 1, p. 157; ‘On Language as Such’, *SW*, vol. 1, p. 74).
4. *GS*, V, 1, pp. 490–91; *SW*, vol. 1, p. 2.
5. The term appears twice in the ‘Critique’, once to denounce the ‘thoroughly childish anarchism’, pacifism and libertarianism that merely amount to a reactive inversion of the authoritarianism and militarism they protest against (*GS*, II, 1, p. 187; *SW*, vol. 1, p. 241), once to distinguish a ‘general’, ‘proletarian’, ‘anarchistic’ strike from a merely ‘political’, ‘law-positing’ (*rechtsetzend*) one (*GS*, II, 1, p. 194; *SW*, vol. 1, p. 246).
6. Benjamin coins this expression in a letter to Gretel Adorno in anticipation of the reception that his ‘Theses’ will receive if published in their present unfinished form (*GS*, I, 3, p. 1227).
7. Cf. *GS*, I, 2, p. 660; ‘Central Park’, *SW*, vol. 4, p. 164.
8. Werner Hamacher, ‘Afformative, Strike’, *Cardozo Law Review*, vol. 13, no. 4, December 1991, reprinted in A. Benjamin and P. Osborne, eds, *Walter Benjamin’s Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, Routledge, London, 1994; Giorgio Agamben, *Homo sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. D. Heller-Roazen, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1998, and *State of Exception*, trans. K. Attell, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2005.
9. *GS*, II, 1, p. 202; ‘Critique’, in *SW*, vol. 1, pp. 251–2.
10. *GS*, I, 2, p. 697; ‘On the Concept of History’, Thesis VIII, *SW*, vol. 4, p. 392.
11. *GS*, I, 3, p. 1243 (notes and materials for ‘On the Concept of History’).
12. *GS*, I, 2, 694; ‘On the Concept of History’, Thesis II, in *SW*, vol. 4, p. 390.
13. *GS*, I, 2, p. 695; Thesis IV, in *SW*, vol. 4, p. 390.
14. *GS*, III, p. 259; ‘Against a Masterpiece’, in *SW*, vol. 2, p. 383.
15. Jacques Derrida, ‘Force of Law: The “Mystical Foundation of Authority”’, in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, ed. D. Cornell, M. Rosenfeld and D.G. Carlson, Routledge, London and New York, 1992, pp. 3–67. Cf. also the essay collection edited by Anselm Haverkamp, *Gewalt und Gerechtigkeit. Derrida–Benjamin*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1994.
16. Cf. Burkhardt Lindner, ‘Derrida. Benjamin. Holocaust. Zur politischen Problematik der “Kritik der Gewalt”’, *Zeitschrift für Kritische Theorie*, vol. 3, no. 5, 1997, pp. 65–100. It is not a foregone conclusion that Benjamin’s model of ‘pure’ revolutionary violence can indeed be shown to be potentially or dangerously ambiguous. But surely whatever evidence there might be for this would more likely be found in the RAF’s ‘armed struggle’ than in the Nazi gas chambers. Derrida might have countered that all three form part of a knotted intertext. All the more reason, the answer would be, to prevent it from becoming a seamless *Schuldzusammenhang*, a *nuît et brouillard* in which all texts are similarly guilty. A more



- 'prudent', 'vigilant' enquiry is needed, to cite Derrida's own terms, if interpretive justice is to be more than summary. This it admittedly always is – but always more or less.
17. The word *Entsetzung* is a legal term signifying the removal of an occupant from a post, an illegally occupied (*besetzt*) property (*Besitz*) or fortification. The notion is itself expropriated at the end of Benjamin's essay (*GS*, II, 1, p. 202; *SW*, vol. 1, p. 251, there translated as 'suspension'), where it now suddenly means *the removal of the law itself from its age-old bastions*. A quiet *coup d'état* is taking place: *Entsetzung* (qua 'removal') is unencumbered by emotion, even though *Entsetzen* (qua 'horror') is not far away. Around the same time, Benjamin had sought to 'liberate two ancient words, *fate* and *character*, from terminological enslavement and recapture their original life in the spirit of the German language' (*Correspondence*, p. 229). In the *Critique*, *Entsetzung* is in turn freed from, and turned against, the law. *Setzen* ('to pose', 'posit', 'institute') is cognate with *sitzen* ('to sit') and *besitzen* ('to possess'): the German language would thus support the anarchist claim that whatever is instituted gets ontologized as right, seat, possession, law (*Gesetz*). Brushed against the grain, *Entsetzung* has here become a synonym for dispossession, unseating, delegitimation, de-ontologization. 'Sitting' in judgement at the 'seat' of power is replaced by a 'standing' justice akin to that of a court martial (*Standgericht*). Benjamin's summary redefinition of *Entsetzung* is a case in point and thus illustrates itself.
  18. Derrida's essay is an exception inasmuch as it resists *any* attempt to cite our necessary and legitimate dissatisfaction with its injustices as a reason for writing the law off.
  19. *GS*, II, 1, p. 219; 'Experience and Poverty', in *SW*, vol. 2, p. 735.
  20. *GS*, II, 1, p. 203; 'Theologico-Political Fragment', in *SW*, vol. 3, p. 305.
  21. *GS*, II, 1, pp. 193–4; 'Critique', in *SW*, vol. 1, p. 246.
  22. *GS*, II, 1, p. 198; *SW*, vol. 1, p. 249.
  23. *GS*, II, 1, p. 192; 'Critique', in *SW*, vol. 1, p. 245. In 1916 the same term – *Erschütterung* – had designated the Fall of language (*GS*, II, 1, p. 154; 'On Language as Such', in *SW*, vol. 1, p. 72). In 1935 it will refer to the coming collapse of the 'commodity economy' (*GS*, V, I, p. 59; 'Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century', in *SW*, vol. 3, p. 44).
  24. *GS*, II, 1, p. 183; 'Critique', in *SW*, vol. 1, p. 239. Here Benjamin is tacitly referring to Max Weber's canonic definition of the modern state as 'a form of authority which (successfully) claims for itself the monopoly of legitimate physical force [*Gewaltsamkeit*]' ('Politik als Beruf', in Max Weber, *Gesamtausgabe*, ed. W. Mommsen and W. Schluchter, vol. 7, pp. 158–9; English translation 'Politics as a Vocation', in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H.H. Gerth and C.W. Mills, Routledge, London and New York 1970, p. 78). But he is citing it against itself, as he will Carl Schmitt's definition of the 'state of emergency' in the *Theses*, on behalf of a diametrically opposite political vocation. What Weber describes in allegedly value-free terms as an inexorable world-historical process of 'rationalisation' Benjamin diagnoses, like and unlike Nietzsche, as a collective pathology. The differences emerge even more clearly from the following passage: 'The increasing satisfaction and expansion of the market is therefore also paralleled (1) by that monopolisation of the legitimate use of physical force on the part of the political community which culminates in the modern concept of the state as the source of all legitimate use of physical force, and (2) by that rationalisation of the rules for the application of such force which culminates in the concept of the legitimate legal order' (*Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, vol. 22–1, p. 215). It is against the state's monopoly of legitimate force and its rationalization of the rules governing its application that Benjamin's affirmation of 'pure' violence and 'pure' means is aimed. Hence his critique of legal traditions based on positive and natural law, both of which operate within the framework of rationalized means-ends relationships.
  25. *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, vol. 22–1, p. 215.
  26. 'Le monde va finir...', Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres Complètes* (henceforth *OC*), ed. Y.-G. le Dantec, Gallimard, Paris, 1968, pp. 1262–5. Bloodthirsty revolutions and utopias figure here as a part of this unending end.
  27. 'That things "go on this way" is the catastrophe. It isn't about to happen [*das jeweils Bevorstehende*], it is forever happening [*das jeweils Gegebene*]' (*GS*, I, 2, p. 683; in *SW*, vol. 4, pp. 184–5).
  28. 'Bewusstmachende oder rettende Kritik', in *Zur Aktualität Walter Benjamins*, ed. S. Unseld, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1973, pp. 175–6; English translation, 'Walter Benjamin: Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing "Critique"', in G. Smith, ed., *On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Reflections*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1988, pp. 91–2.
  29. Cf. Benjamin's note on 'readability' as the fleeting, 'dangerous', 'critical' chance of a given historical conjuncture, *GS*, V, 1, pp. 577–8 nn 3, 1.
  30. *GS*, V, 1, pp. 189, 207; 'Consciousness-Raising', pp. 126, 114.
  31. *Ibid.*, p. 207; 'Consciousness-Raising', p. 113.
  32. *GB*, IV, p. 24, letter to Scholem of 17 April 1931; *Correspondence*, p. 377.
  33. *Correspondence*, p. 301.
  34. *Zur Aktualität*, p. 176; 'Consciousness-Raising', p. 92.
  35. *GS*, II, 1, p. 215; 'Experience and Poverty', in *SW*, vol. 2, p. 732.
  36. *GS*, II, 1, pp. 189–90; 'Critique', in *SW*, vol. 1, p. 243.
  37. *GS*, II, 1, p. 190; *SW*, vol. 1, p. 244. Especially in Germany, Benjamin adds, the most recent manifestation of such violence – presumably that of the Russian and failed German revolutions – had no impact on the various parliaments. The parallels with Carl Schmitt's book *Die geistesgeschichtliche Lage des heutigen Parlamentarismus* (*The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, trans. E. Kennedy, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1985), which appeared two years later, have often been pointed out.
  38. *GS*, II, 1, p. 191; *SW*, vol. 1, p. 244. Here Benjamin might have cited Clausewitz's classic definition of politics as 'the continuation of war by other means' – as he elsewhere does Schmitt's account of the 'state of exception' – as the formula for existing, prehistoric politics. Whereas the *general strike*, as here described, marks an unconditional cessation of the ongoing state of affairs aimed at putting an *immediate* end to the inherent violence of the law through non-violence, the *political compromise*, like the *legal contract*, *mediates* between parties and perpetuates the threat of violence by the very manner in which it blocks it. Such mediation is immediate only in a problematic sense. 'Pure means' do not further 'immediate', face-to-face resolutions of

- conflict but 'mediate' ones by way of things (ibid.).
39. *GS*, II, 1, pp. 203–4; 'Theologico-Political Fragment', in *SW*, vol. 3, pp. 305–6.
  40. *GS*, II, 1, pp. 183, 197; 'Critique', in *SW*, vol. 1, pp. 239, 248.
  41. *GS*, II, 1, pp. 191–2, 195; *SW*, vol. 1, pp. 244–5, 247.
  42. *GS*, II, 1, p. 187; *SW*, vol. 1, p. 241. One year earlier Lenin had written a pamphlet entitled 'Left-Wing Communism, an Infantile Disorder'. Benjamin, for his part, here denounces a 'childish' anarchism on behalf of one which Communism cannot do without. The combination of the two points beyond the present pre-historic infancy of mankind and its oppositions between childish/infantile/minor and adult/enlightened/of age. Cf. Benjamin's letter of 29 May 1926 in which Communist methods are preferred to 'useless' anarchist ones and anarchism serves conversely as a corrective to the 'nonsense' of Communist goals – there being 'no meaningfully political goals' (*Correspondence*, p. 301). The anarchic *Entsetzung* of such goals coincides with the freeing of 'pure means' from the endless concatenation – in Nietzschean terms, the slave mentality – of means and ends that we call the 'chain of events' (*GS*, I, 2, 697; 'On the Concept of History', in *SW*, vol. 4, p. 392).
  43. *GS*, II, 1, p. 196; 'Critique', in *SW*, vol. 1, p. 247.
  44. Ibid.
  45. *GS*, II, 1, p. 154; 'On Language as Such', in *SW*, vol. 1, pp. 71–2.
  46. *GS*, II, 1, pp. 199–200; 'Critique', in *SW*, vol. 1, pp. 249–50.
  47. *GS*, I, 1, pp. 199, 203; 'Critique', in *SW*, vol. 1, pp. 250, 252.
  48. Benjamin's 'Critique' reserves the notions of 'undecidability' and 'ambiguity' for the 'mythic' sphere of the law (*GS*, II, 1, pp. 196, 198; *SW*, vol. 1, pp. 247, 249), to which he opposes the unambiguous clarity of 'divine' and, by extension, revolutionary justice. It is, however, 'less possible', but also 'less urgent', to 'decide when pure violence was real in a particular case'; only mythical, not divine, violence is ascertainable as such, 'unless it be in incomparable effects' (*GS*, II, 1, pp. 203, 252). Benjamin's whole inquiry is nevertheless based on distinction (*Unterscheidung*) and decision (*Entscheidung*). Cf. *GS*, II, 1, pp. 179, 202; *SW*, vol. 1, pp. 236, 251. Derrida, on the other hand, denies the very possibility of cleanly separating pure revolutionary and impure mythical realms, arguing that the dichotomy between law and justice inevitably 'deconstructs itself' ('Force of Law', pp. 68 ff.). All such distinctions and decisions turn out, he claims, to be 'undecidable'. In this instance, however, his supporting demonstration is hasty and only partially convincing. What is finally difficult to decide is whether the notion of *Entsetzung* entails its own deconstruction (as Derrida elsewhere shows the notions of *pharmakos* or *supplément* to do in canonic texts of Plato and Rousseau) or whether it represents another type of deconstruction (*Abbau*). A parallel suggests itself here with the 'double strategy' outlined by Derrida in *Positions* (Minuit, Paris, 1974; University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1982): the necessity of both affirming positions/oppositions and of undoing them. A joint communiqué between Benjamin and Derrida might read as follows. The force needed to depose the old order will not begin to 'disenforce' its mythic violence by simply reaffirming the old logic of posing and opposing (*Setzung/Entgegensetzung*).
  49. *GS*, II, 1, p. 200; 'Critique', in *SW*, vol. 1, p. 250. Cf. also *GS*, II, 1, p. 182; *SW*, vol. 1, p. 238.
  50. *GS*, II, 1, pp. 200–201; 'Critique', in *SW*, vol. 1, p. 250.
  51. *GS*, IV, 1, p. 138; *One-Way Street*, in *SW*, vol. 1, p. 481.
  52. *GS*, II, 1, p. 200; 'Critique', in *SW*, vol. 1, p. 250.
  53. According to the 'Critique', natural law, which 'sees in the use of violent means to just ends no more a problem than does a man in the "right" to move his body towards a desired goal', served as the ideological basis for the terrorism that emerged under the French Revolution (*GS*, II, 1, p. 180; 'Critique', in *SW*, vol. 1, p. 236). The only case of terrorism to be mentioned in this essay is thus one of impure, 'naturalized' violence.
  54. *GS*, II, 1, p. 155; 'On Language as Such', in *SW*, vol. 1, p. 73.
  55. *GS*, II, 1, p. 202; 'Critique', in *SW*, vol. 1, p. 251.
  56. *GS*, II, 1, p. 149; 'On Language as Such', in *SW*, vol. 1, p. 71.
  57. *GS*, II, 1, p. 153; *SW*, vol. 1, p. 68.
  58. Cf. *GS*, V, I, p. 588 nn 7a, 7.
  59. Cf. Gianni Vattimo, *Il pensiero debole*, Feltrinelli, Milan, 1983, and Giorgio Agamben's Pauline reinterpretation of Benjamin's 'weak Messianic power', in *The Time that Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. P. Daley, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2005. The recent philosophical interest of Agamben and others in Melville's 'Bartleby, the Scrivener' points in the same direction.
  60. *GS*, II, 1, p. 179; 'Critique', in *SW*, vol. 1, p. 236.
  61. *GS*, II, 1, p. 180; *SW*, vol. 1, pp. 236–7.
  62. *GS*, II, 1, p. 196; *SW*, vol. 1, p. 247.
  63. The 'destructive character' clears ways 'not always with brute, sometimes with refined force' (*GS*, IV, I, p. 398; *SW*, vol. 2, p. 542). Force (*Gewalt*), however, it remains.
  64. *GS*, II, 2, p. 432; 'Franz Kafka', in *SW*, vol. 2, p. 811. Two far-flung, but equally violent/non-violent, ways of 'deposing' the law may be cited here: the strike as a collective messianic 'cessation [*Stillstellung*] of happening' (*GS*, I, 2, p. 703; 'On the Concept of History', in *SW*, vol. 4, p. 396) and the act, if it still is one, of *having ceased* activity. 'The law that is no longer practiced and merely studied', writes Benjamin of Kafka's 'New Advocate', 'is the gate to justice' (*GS*, II, 2, 437; 'Franz Kafka', in *SW*, vol. 2, p. 815). The only violence that study does is to the violence of the law; but this violation is the gravest. Already treating the law as a thing of the past, it quietly takes its and other texts apart and prefigures a possible future.
  65. *GS*, II, 1, p. 75; *Das Leben der Studenten*, in *SW*, vol. 1, p. 37.
  66. *GS*, II, 1, p. 202; 'Critique', in *SW*, vol. 1, p. 252.
  67. *GS*, I, 1, p. 207.
  68. *GS*, II, 1, p. 204; 'Theologico-Political Fragment', in *SW*, vol. 3, p. 306.
  69. *GS*, IV, 1, p. 398; *SW*, vol. 2, p. 542.
  70. *GS*, II, 2, p. 455; 'The Storyteller', in *SW*, vol. 3, p. 155.
  71. *GS*, I, 2, p. 604; 'The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire', in *SW*, vol. 4, p. 63.
  72. Cf. on this category Raul Hilberg, *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders: The Jewish Catastrophe 1933–1945*, Aaron Asher Books, New York, 1992.
  73. Letter of 29 May, 1926; *Correspondence*, p. 301.

# Gramsci and the political

## From the state as 'metaphysical event' to hegemony as 'philosophical fact'

**Peter Thomas**

One of the forms in which the waves of protests against the 'new world order' in the 1990s and, particularly, the varied political and social movements of the new millennium have been registered in political philosophy has been in a renewed interest in the nature of 'the political' and its relationship with 'politics'. Even and especially in their hesitations, weaknesses and defeats, these movements have prompted debate over the coordinates necessary to define a realistic leftist political project today. In turn, these discussions have reopened, at least for a significant 'minoritarian' current, the question of the contribution that philosophical practice can make to projects of political emancipation.

### The return of 'the political'

Schematically, we can distinguish between at least two broad 'camps' or approaches to the question of the nature of 'the political' operative in contemporary leftist political philosophy. One current – strengthened by its intersection with the revival of normativity in mainstream philosophy – has sought to formalize the relationship between 'politics' and a particular concept of 'the political' in a foundational sense, with the latter providing the ground or origin for the former. Determining the nature of the political is then seen as the *sine qua non* for the elaboration of political practice, precisely because politics is represented as but the conjunctural instantiation of a structure of 'the political' that necessarily and always exceeds it. While by no means limited to it, the rediscovery of the figure of Carl Schmitt by leftist political philosophers (particularly in the anglophone world) has perhaps been emblematic of this initiative.<sup>1</sup> For not so well disguised 'Platonizing' theories such as Schmitt's and its latter-day derivatives, 'the political' is not produced, constituted or even repressed by politics; rather, it is productive and constituting of it, preceding it in both a temporal and logical sense. In this perspective,

'the political' denotes an autonomous and irreducible realm of human experience whose basic structures and logic are distinct from other equally autonomous and irreducible realms: 'the social', 'the economic', 'the aesthetic' and so forth. Thus, just as any particular social practice participates in the 'logic' of the social, so any particular political act must participate in and finds its meaning within the logic of 'the political'.<sup>2</sup>

Whatever the claims sometimes made regarding its radical gritty realism, the Schmittian concept of the political in reality participates in one of the most venerable illusions of the Western metaphysical tradition: namely, the dogmatic assertion of a moment that provides the essence for the contingent events that are determined by it. Political philosophy, as the specific form of philosophy that thinks the political (and as distinct from modern political science, which can only analyse 'mere' politics), claims to have a privileged access to this moment, as the art of symptomatically reading the traces of the political whose nature is precisely to remain forever concealed as an essence within the mundanity of politics or concrete political activity. The claim, however, is of course tautological: in so far as this concept of the political is itself already a metaphysical construction, a certain type of metaphysical philosophy cannot but have privileged access to it, in a relationship of mutual confirmation. What remains unthought in this entirely traditional approach is both the production of the conceptual space of the political within philosophy and the constitution of philosophy itself, the material forms in which the political achieves its hegemony over politics and philosophy asserts its mastery of both.

Another current – which could perhaps be characterized as contemporary political thought's reconstructive 'transcendental' mode – has attempted to undermine such a traditional notion of the political by instead setting out to determine the conditions of possibility for genuinely radical political engagement.<sup>3</sup> In effect,

this approach offers a notion of a ‘real political’ or ‘true politics’ as a substitute for the pale imitations of traditional political philosophy and ‘official’ politics. Žižek, for instance, in polemic with Schmitt in particular and the ‘entire history of political thought’ more generally – ‘ultimately nothing but a series of disavowals ... of the proper logic of political antagonism’ – has argued that ‘a leftist position should insist on the unconditional primacy of the inherent antagonism as constitutive of the political’: ‘the internal struggle which traverses the social body’.<sup>4</sup>

For Žižek, the political thus ultimately finds its foundation in the social, or rather, it is precisely the suppression of the constitutive internal division of the social that requires the emergence of the political as the terrain of its resolution, in its turn suppressed or deformed by existing politics. Beginning in a similar way from contemporary forms of political and social conflict, Alain Badiou and other figures associated with him such as Sylvain Lazarus argue that a truly radical politics today can only exist at a certain ‘distance’ from the state, in a space uncontaminated by the logic of what Badiou calls, with a post-Maoist formula curiously reminiscent of Bordiga, ‘capitalist-parliamentarianism’.<sup>5</sup> Contemporary ‘official’ politics figures as but a deformation of the ‘Real’, the site of genuine political conflict, from which ‘a politics of a different nature’, in Badiou’s revealing phrase, may emerge.<sup>6</sup>

The role of philosophy for this approach consists in comprehending the emergence of these moments of ‘true politics’, as symptomatic of the ‘genuinely’ political and distinct from its forms of disavowal (in Žižek) or mimetic imposture (in Badiou and Lazarus). It is arguable, however, if this current is any better placed than the former to provide a useable account to contemporary political movements of either the constitution of the space of ‘the political’ as it currently exists, the role of philosophy in this process of constitution or their mutually reinforcing domination of politics itself, beyond an appeal to trust in a decisionist declaration: *hic rhodus, hic saltus*!

Gramsci’s theory of hegemony has not figured prominently in recent debates in anglophone political philosophy. Reference to Gramsci in contemporary intellectual culture is strongly influenced by the paradigm of ‘Neo-Gramscianism’, which has been more concerned to present Gramsci as a viable (neo-) Marxist theory within International Relations and its subdiscipline of International Political Economy than with matters directly philosophical. It is therefore all the more interesting to observe how the history of

interpretations of Gramsci’s theory of hegemony has been marked by variants of the two aforementioned contemporary approaches. Togliatti’s interpretation of *The Prison Notebooks* as the outlines of a ‘general theory of politics’ that could underwrite the manoeuvres of the post-World War II Italian Communist Party, for instance, tended to present Gramsci’s notion of hegemony in terms arguably consonant with a strongly foundationalist notion of the political. Gramsci’s genius was to have produced the most viable Marxist candidate for inclusion in the pantheon of the ‘classics’ of Western political philosophy. On the other hand, the Eurocommunists’ later championing of Gramsci as a theorist of modernization and development (supposedly justifying various ‘historical compromises’ from the 1970s onwards) was accompanied by a reading of his concept of civil society as the true locus of political power, only subsequently sequestered formally by the existing state form. The seizure of political power therefore required a laborious prior work of construction ‘outside the state’ in order to deprive it of its supports. More recently, there have even been attempts to articulate or synthesize Gramsci and Schmitt, either suggesting that Gramsci’s and Schmitt’s thought is compatible in certain key respects or arguing that Schmitt provides a salutary corrective to deficiencies in Gramsci’s thought.<sup>7</sup>

Despite these and other interpretative traditions, it is nevertheless my contention that a less overdetermined reading of *The Prison Notebooks* today can discern an alternative to both Platonizing and transcendental modes, or at least the outlines of a possible exit from them. *The Prison Notebooks* attempt to rethink the concept of the political in both non-metaphysical and concrete terms by means of a theory of hegemony. According to this reading, Gramsci does not provide a theory of ‘the political’ as such, even less than he provides a ‘general theory of politics’. Rather, he attempts to provide an analysis of the ‘production’ or, more exactly, ‘the constitution of the political’ – constitution in both the active and formalized sense – as a distinct social relation within what *The Prison Notebooks* describe as the bourgeois ‘integral state’. ‘Hegemony’ describes the process of this constitution, or the way in which historically identifiable political practices – the social relations of communication, coordination and organization of the project of a particular class or social group – have come to define the nature of ‘politics’ as such, as its politico-philosophical ‘distillate’. In its turn, this analysis forms the foundation for an attempt to think the possibility of a notion of a political ‘of a completely different type’ (to paraphrase Lenin’s

description of the status of Soviet power in the ‘dual power interregnum’ of 1917), a notion and practice of ‘the political’ that would be adequate to the formation of what Gramsci calls a ‘self-regulated society’.

Central to this analysis are three general lines of research of Gramsci’s overall project in *The Prison Notebooks*, with the latter two being read through the optic of the former: first, a non-essentialist theory of translatability between social practices; second, an anti-metaphysical definition of philosophy; and third, a critique of the integral relationship between all philosophy hitherto and the (bourgeois) state form (in Gramsci’s terms, the ‘integral state’), conceived as a dialectical unity of civil society and political society or the institutionalized form of the political. The purpose of this article is to elucidate some of the novel elements of this threefold theoretical movement and to suggest one of its possible meanings for radical politics today.

### **Translatability, speculation and the state as ‘metaphysical event’**

Gramsci was inspired to elaborate a theory of translatability in the first instance by Lenin’s remark to the Fourth Congress of the Third International in 1922 that the Russian Revolution had not yet been able to ‘translate’ its language into the Western European languages.<sup>8</sup> Trained as a linguist, Gramsci explored the significance of this enigmatic statement in a variety of contexts, not least in his comparative historical linguistics and its analysis of the relations between dialects and national languages.<sup>9</sup> It is also central to his theory of the relationship between philosophy and politics (and history), as the major representative forms in which a wider range of social relations are ‘condensed’. In 1931, having criticized at length Croce’s attempt to posit a ‘non-political’ or purely ‘philosophical-conceptual’ foundation for philosophy, Gramsci argues that

we arrive thus at the equality of, or equation between, ‘philosophy and politics’, thought and action, that is, at a philosophy of praxis. Everything is political, even philosophy or philosophies ... and the only ‘philosophy’ is history in action.<sup>10</sup>

Rather than the reductive or derivative forms of an hierarchical causation, or of an external articulation or even overdetermination of distinct and autonomous realms governed by their own logic, Gramsci posits the relationship between philosophy and politics, thought and action, as a dialectical relationship of simultaneous identity and distinction. This identity is not

posited as a function of a foundational essence, the originary unity of which is ‘expressed’ and thereby ‘realized’ in different terrestrial forms. Rather, the identity of philosophy and politics is conceived as an active relation of ongoing translation between different organizational levels and forms a class’s or social group’s activities; it is precisely this translation into different registers that retrospectively and temporarily ‘unifies’ a class’s project and allows its philosophical and political dimensions to be grasped as ‘attributes’, to use a Spinozian conceptual structure, of an achieved, rather than originary, ‘substantiality’. In other words, there is no *Ursprache* for Gramsci, just as little as there is a *telos* of immediate comprehensibility, in a homogenizing Esperanto; ‘translatability’ for Gramsci implies the always unfinished and therefore transformable nature of relations of communication between different social practices.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, the distinction between these forms is grasped as ‘quantitative’ rather than ‘qualitative’, related to differing intensities of organization, confirmation and contestation of social relations rather than unbridgeable distinctions between incompatible logics that precede them. Philosophy in this perspective figures as a particularly intense form of organization of the social relations of knowledge within which political practice occurs, and thus as itself already a form of highly mediated institutional and discursive political practice. Equally, politics, in so far as it attempts to modify the organization of the social relations of which knowledge forms an integral part, is itself already a form of highly mediated philosophical practice. Politics, that is, is comprehended as philosophy ‘in the practical state’.

This non-essentialist notion of translatability lays the foundation for Gramsci’s claim that metaphysics represents not the ‘hard core’ of philosophy but only one of its possible conjunctural ‘forms’. Like other Marxists of his generation, though not perhaps those of our own, Gramsci remained committed to the particular version of the more general late-nineteenth-century critique of metaphysics elaborated by Marx and ‘popularized’ by the late Engels. This critique insisted that metaphysical concepts must be rationally translated into their real forms of historical existence, as socially particularistic and temporally limited discursive forms that falsely claim a universal and ahistorical validity. In Gramsci’s particular case, the post-Marxist Croce’s distortion of this critique and attempt to apply it to Marx’s thought itself prompted a significant extension and precision. Following Marx’s *Theses on Feuerbach*, Gramsci identified ‘speculation’ as the hard core or

‘mode of production’ of the metaphysical form of philosophy.<sup>12</sup>

Croce had claimed, as Gramsci noted, ‘to have sought to “expel” from the field of philosophy any residue of theology and metaphysics, up to the point of negating any philosophical “system”’.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, he asserted that Marxism and its pseudo-concepts represented nothing more than a variation on traditional dual-world explanations of the metaphysical tradition. Marx’s ‘economic structure’, argued by the late Engels to be determining of other social practices ‘in the last instance’, was for Croce nothing but a modern variation of the Platonic *eidos*. Elaborating the philosophical coordinates that would later be exploited, often unknowingly, by various seasons of ‘post-Marxism’, Croce proposed a critique of Marx’s thought as ‘essentialist’: it accorded full reality only to the structure, leaving the superstructure to be grasped as mere appearance, mimetic failure or phenomenon. Marxism, Croce claimed, remained indifferent to real history, because it had already declared it to be essentially unreal.

Gramsci returned the charge with interest: if Croce could see in the founding propositions of the materialist conception of history only a speculative metaphysics, then this was because his own thought was essentially speculative.<sup>14</sup> Croce was unable to grasp the historical dynamism of Marx’s notion of structure as an ensemble of active social relations due to the unbridgeable distinction that the Crocean system posits between historical events and the conceptuality used to comprehend them: in other words, it was due to Croce’s unwitting restoration of metaphysics at the very moment of its supposed negation. For Croce, the structure of genuine thought in the form of philosophical concepts necessarily remains unsullied by historical development (as opposed to the merely ‘pseudo-concepts’ operative in practical action, dismissed as instrumental ‘ideology’).<sup>15</sup> Philosophical concepts are given in thought qua thought, as a ‘higher’, speculative form of knowledge of the Real, purified of practical distractions.<sup>16</sup> Thought can at best reflect history in the sense of a *speculum* (more or less accurately, depending upon the ‘purity’ of the concept), but it cannot participate in it and its fundamental ‘logical’ structure is not altered by it. Croce’s own attempted identification of history and philosophy, Gramsci argued, therefore remained trapped in an ‘idea’ of history that was unable to comprehend its own historicity. It could only presume to reflect upon reality as if from outside it, rather than acknowledging its own practical constitution as an element within it – in other words, the status of this ‘philosophy’ itself

and its purified concepts as instances of ‘ideology’, or practical interventions into the conceptual and political organization of the present.

For Gramsci, it was thus a question of deciphering this speculative disposition as an index of the political development of a class project, or of resolving ‘speculation into its real terms [as] ideology’. Rather than as being definitive of philosophy as such, the speculative metaphysical form of philosophy is thereby recognized as a particular phase in the historical development of an ideological formation. It is symptomatic of a phase of achieved social and political hegemony that seeks to insure itself against dissolution and disaggregation by means of ideal refinement and conceptual perfection.<sup>17</sup> In this sense, in so far as philosophy is defined as a practical social relation alongside others, the way is open to think the transformation of philosophy by the social relations it seeks to comprehend, or, in other words, the status of thought itself as a social relation of communication, coordination and organization.

The notion of translatability also has a determinant impact upon Gramsci’s critical reworking of the Hegelian notion of the state, in accordance with the young Marx’s critique. Marx had viewed the failed transition between civil society and the state in Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* as revealing not merely of a flaw in Hegel’s political philosophy or even in the Hegelian dialectic and philosophy in general, but of a fundamental reality of the modern state as such. ‘Hegel is not to be blamed’, Marx argues, ‘for depicting the nature of the modern State as it is, but rather for presenting what *is* as the *essence* of the State’.<sup>18</sup> For Marx, Hegel’s speculative hypostatization provided an all-too-true likeness of reality, a mimetic failure in the fullest sense: Hegel’s categories merely imitated – or in Gramsci’s terms, ‘translated’ – and thereby ratified an appearance that was no mere expression of an essence, but had been produced by the suppression of a complex series of political mediations. Thus for Marx, the modern bourgeois state itself figures as a pre-eminently ‘metaphysical event’. In Gramsci’s terms, it is the concrete realization of speculation as an extensive form of social organization.

Gramsci critically extends the terms of Marx’s critique of Hegel by means of the notion of the dialectical unity of ‘civil society’ and ‘political society’, two instances analytically separable but ‘organically’ united within the bourgeois ‘integral State’.<sup>19</sup> For Gramsci, the ‘political society’ (which in Gramsci’s sense means not only ‘official’ politics, but organizing and coordinating functions throughout the social formation) of the bourgeois integral state is a particular

‘condensation’ (to use a term of Poulantzas) of social relations, forces and forms of organization in the civil society that political society itself has either made possible or, at the least, overdetermined.<sup>20</sup> It is their institutional organization or comprehension, in speculative terms. Like Marx, Gramsci argues against Hegel that civil society is the true ground of the state, and not vice versa. At the same time, however, also following Marx, Gramsci acknowledges that in bourgeois society the ‘state’ (comprehended here as the concrete institutional functions embodied in the relations of ‘political society’) really is primary, in the sense that it is a real abstraction or hypostatization that subordinates and organises civil society. ‘Enwrapped’ and interpenetrated by this existing political society, civil society can then only figure as its subaltern ‘raw material’.<sup>21</sup> Political society, that is, posits itself as a speculative comprehension of a civil society that is constituted in its particularity precisely by political society’s claim to be an instance of organizing universality. Stated in Schmittian terms, it is the institutional realization of the claims of ‘the political’ to dominate and to organize ‘politics’; in Gramsci’s terms, it is the speculative translation of the bourgeois class’s project.

This condensation or speculative translation was historically effected by the bourgeoisie by means of a novel political practice, encapsulated in *one* of the concepts of ‘hegemony’ present in *The Prison Notebooks*.<sup>22</sup> Gramsci undertakes numerous studies of this process of the constitution of the political in various national contexts throughout his prison studies. As a distinctively modern political practice aiming to compose atomized, juridically free individuals into larger collective social bodies, bourgeois hegemony has traversed the boundaries between civil society and political society, simultaneously a form of both ‘civil’ and ‘political’ organization and leadership. It is the social relation of coordination and direction through which the bourgeois class project made the transition from a merely (economic) corporative to a properly hegemonic or political phase, successfully positing its own particular interests – above all, the form of private property – as valid for the society as a whole. The history of political society hitherto has consisted in its conscious separation from civil society, as the speculative juridical resolution of the contradictions of the social forces in corporative civil society. The practice of bourgeois hegemony itself, that is, has

been the means by which ‘the political’ has been ‘constituted’ as a distinct realm of social experience, concretely produced and institutionally formalized as the foundation of any possible ‘politics’. Indeed, in so far as a distinct political society is a social form that came into being only with the modern world, it is thus properly defined as bourgeois political society, like Hegel’s bourgeois civil society (*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*), just as the political is properly defined from this perspective as ‘the bourgeois political’.

This perspective in itself would be enough for a critique of those Platonizing or normative notions of ‘the political’ that posit it as a space prior to and determining of the moment of politics. Against this



traditional current of Western political philosophy, with its assertion of a relationship between the political and politics as one of generality/particularity, conceptuality/instantiation or determination/determinateness, Gramsci’s theory of hegemony seeks to demonstrate that the political of the bourgeois integral state is not constitutive but, rather, has been historically constituted in precise institutional terms – including and perhaps above all in the ratifying institutional forms of ‘political philosophy’. According to Gramsci’s analysis, ‘the political’ represents neither an origin of nor derivation from ‘politics’, but, rather, a highly mediated form of politico-philosophical organization, a philosophical ‘distillate’ of the bourgeois class’s hegemonic project. It is the level of speculative conceptuality corresponding to and organizing the already speculative structures of political society. A political philosophy that proposes this concept of ‘the political’ is merely repeating the unilateral and eternalizing translation of particular political practices into a speculative metaphysical concept that has already been achieved by bourgeois hegemony.

Gramsci's notion of the integral state, however, also provides a critical perspective on what I have referred to as a 'transcendental' mode of contemporary political thought, alongside other approaches with similar practical consequences. Existing political society and its organizing logic in the bourgeois political are not mere illusions to be wished away, or a location to be avoided. Rather, they are hypostatizations or real abstractions whose mode of existence consists precisely in the speculative relation they actively establish to politics at whatever 'distance' from the state: bourgeois political society and its accompanying 'political' posit 'real politics' as their object in order to 'contemplate' them, each in their own fashion, with the political seeking to regulate and dominate the possibility of any particular political act, just as political society juridically polices its concrete realization. It is therefore not a question of subtracting the deformations of the existing political society in order to reveal a hard core of 'politics' in the Real, be it in social antagonism, civil society or an indeterminate place beyond it. On the contrary, in so far as the

hypostatized forms of the bourgeois political really *do* determine the conceptual space in which politics in this social formation can occur – not only 'official' politics, but politics in the broader Gramscian sense, or social relations of organization – it is much more a case of determining the particular forms of practice, even and especially in their conditions of subalternity to or interpellation by the existing political society, that are capable of rupturing its material constitution from within. That is, those forms of activity and organization that might be adequate for the formation of a political 'of a completely different type'.

### **Towards hegemony as 'philosophical fact'**

It is in his theory of non-bourgeois or proletarian hegemony that Gramsci attempts to outline the political practices that would be adequate to the constitution of this new concept and reality of 'the political'. Rather than as a regulative instance foundationally distinct from and prior to 'politics', Gramsci configures this notion of 'the political' as a theoretical moment *within and contemporaneous with* 'politics'. The reference to Lenin is once again decisive for Gramsci's theoretical elaboration. In 1931, he argued that the late Lenin's 'theorization and realization of hegemony' in the post-revolutionary conjuncture – Gramsci's emphasis lies upon both terms, theorization *and* realization – constituted a 'great "metaphysical" event'.<sup>23</sup> Gramsci is referring here to Lenin's attempt – albeit limited and ultimately tragically defeated – to elaborate a form of social organization in the first extensive workers' 'non-state state' that would permit the Russian proletariat (particularly the industrial working class) to forge a 'composite body' with other oppressed classes (above all, the peasantry), providing them with democratic leadership and participation in an expansive political form.<sup>24</sup> It was a "metaphysical" event' in so far as it ruptured the stability of the constituted state form, its political society and logic of the political, comprehended as forms of 'institutionally realized' metaphysics. It aimed to subtract social relations and forces from the conceptuality of the bourgeois political by actively demonstrating at least the potential for an alternative form of social and political organization based upon radically different, non-speculative and non-hierarchical principles.

In 1932, however, Gramsci attempted to go further and to generalize this insight into a theory of a specifically proletarian practice of hegemony that could be translated into the 'languages' of the other European countries, with their different traditions and class compositions. Gramsci's fully developed theory of





hegemony thus consists in three integrally related 'moments': first, the attempt to 'translate' Lenin's practical elaboration of the pre-Russian revolutionary notion of hegemony in the post-revolutionary conjuncture into theoretical terms; second, the deployment of this theory for the study of the historical constitution of the bourgeois political in the West (viewed as the retrospective negative image of proletarian hegemonic practices in the East); and, third, the attempted further translation of this theory into concrete proposals for the forms of organization in which the popular classes in the West, under the leadership of those sections located in the 'decisive nucleus of economic activity' (that is, the waged working class capable of denying the bourgeoisie its material supports in the realm of production), could be unified into a political force capable of confronting and defeating bourgeois state power.<sup>25</sup>

The year 1932 represents Gramsci's *Annus mirabilis*, the year in which, articulating various aspects of his critical carceral researches, he formulates them into a positive programme of a 'philosophy of praxis' as a necessary component part of such forms of political organization and leadership among the popular classes. Only the most general outlines of this movement, in terms of its delineation of an alternative notion of the political, can be elucidated here. Central to the project of a philosophy of praxis is the elaboration of a different 'form' of philosophy that would not be speculative or metaphysical, and thus – following the young Marx's critique of Hegel – complicit with the 'metaphysical event' of the bourgeois state, but would rather be an active social relation of knowledge seeking to increase the 'coherence' of popular classes' political interventions. This philosophy – '*immanent to the things on which it philosophizes*', in Labriola's felicitous phrase – would not consist in the ideal unification and domination of that which lies outside it, but would instead be the 'translation' of or theoretical moment internal to the self-organization of the ensemble of social relations.<sup>26</sup>

Rather than the mere 'unity of theory and practice', or the external articulation of discrete elements, Gramsci argues that such a philosophy of praxis must aim to produce instead the active and ongoing 'identification of theory and practice'.<sup>27</sup> He argues that

If the problem of producing the identity of theory and praxis is posed, it is posed in this sense: to construct, on the basis of a determinate practice, a theory that, coinciding and identifying itself with the decisive elements of the same practice, may accelerate the historical process taking place, render-

ing practice more homogeneous, coherent, efficient in all of its elements, strengthening it to the maximum; or, given a certain theoretical position, to organize the indispensable practical element for setting it to work. The identity of theory and praxis is a critical act, by means of which practice is demonstrated to be rational and necessary or theory to be realistic and rational.<sup>28</sup>

The production of the identity of theory and practice then becomes the critical art of finding, in a Spinozist fashion, the adequate theoretical form of a practice, capable of increasing its capacity to act, on the one hand, or, on the other hand, the adequate practical form of a theory, capable of increasing its capacity to know.<sup>29</sup> Rather than as a function of the domination of the state form, this non-metaphysical form of philosophy is redefined as a relationship of enabling pedagogy. It attempts to act as the theoretical comprehension of actually existing practices, describing their tendencies and lines of potential development as concrete acts of organization and coordination rather than normatively prescribing their necessary forms from above.

Translated into political terms, it is the active dimension of the working class movement's hegemonic project itself, conceived as a potentially extensive, non-bureaucratic organizational form, which indicates the possibility of the constitution of a political of a completely different type. The traditional relationship is inverted; the materiality of the organization of social relations (that is, politics) asserts its hegemony over its comprehension in a speculative conceptuality (that is, 'the political'). The outlines of a different type of political now emerge, integrated with rather than separate from politics and configured as the theoretical form of self-comprehension of the practices to which it remains integrally related in relations of ongoing translation.

Thus, towards the end of May 1932, Gramsci returns to a consideration of the late Lenin's attempt to develop a proletarian form of hegemony – theoretically and above all practically – and formulates its significance in a non-metaphysical register. 'Ilich', he argues,

advanced philosophy as philosophy in so far as he advanced political doctrine and practice. The realization of a hegemonic apparatus, in so far as it creates a new ideological terrain, determines a reform of consciousness and of methods of knowledge: it is a fact of knowledge, a philosophical fact.<sup>30</sup>

Gramsci thus progressed from a theory of the bourgeois state as a 'metaphysical event', produced by bourgeois

hegemony's constitution of the political, institutionalized in a distinct political society and reinforced by its official political philosophies, to a theory of proletarian hegemonic practice as a (potential) 'philosophical fact', in so far as it aims to unite philosophy and politics, thought and action, in a self-regulated social form.

### **'A political of a completely different type'**

What actuality is there today for Gramsci's theory of hegemony as an analysis of the constitution of the (bourgeois) political and the outlines of an alternative form of proletarian hegemony based upon a philosophy of praxis? The political terrain in most national formations has radically changed from the period in which Gramsci, following Lenin, focused upon strengthening the political relations between minoritarian working classes and majoritarian peasantries, even if such relations of 'dialectical pedagogy' now constitute, on an international terrain, one of the most important fronts of the contemporary struggle against the latest phase of capitalist globalization. The continuing penetration of the commodity form into all spheres of life, the reorganization of the labour process in 'post-Fordist', 'high-tech', or precarious neoliberal forms and the concomitant decomposition of traditional working-class identities and communities would seem to deny such a theory of its material supports, even if wage labour is now more generalized than ever before. Above all, the profound political defeat of the socialist movement in the twentieth century and the ongoing disaggregation of leftist organizational forms are a long way from Gramsci's description of the formation of a 'Modern Prince' as an 'organization of struggle'.<sup>31</sup>

The contemporaneity of the theory of hegemony of *The Prison Notebooks* consists, in the first instance, in the theoretical distance it allows us to take from this present and the forms in which it is often comprehended. On the one hand, Gramsci's critique of 'the political', as a historically produced 'bourgeois political', provides a warning against leftist temptations to participate in contemporary political philosophy's turn to normativity – itself an integral element of the contemporary revival of metaphysics as a response to the institutional crisis of an increasingly technicist bourgeois philosophy. In particular, it provides an argument for why the resort to a metaphysical concept of the political such as Schmitt's cannot be regarded as a solution to the continuing organizational difficulties and marginalization of the Left, or the foundation for an authentically 'political' politics. On the contrary, in so far as it reproduces in theoretical form precisely the passifying speculative structure that

governs current official politics, it is an 'essential' part of the problem.

At the same time, Gramsci's approach also warns against the debilitating dimensions of approaches that seek a point of leverage in a space that would supposedly escape the political in its currently constituted form and the official politics it ratifies, whether it be sought in a 'true politics' beyond/at a distance from the state or even in a return, as Mario Tronti has recently suggested, to the 'world of labour(s)'.<sup>32</sup> Dialectically integrated within the integral state, these practices are already subject to overdetermination by the speculative logic of the bourgeois political, posited as objects of its contemplation and ideal coordination. Recourse to them will not find an uncontaminated space from which an external assault upon existing political society could be launched; nor will it discover a terrain of *potentia* to be mined for arms in the struggle against a now parasitic *potestas*, as Negri proposes, constituent power versus the existing state of affairs. Rather, it will encounter the bourgeois political in perhaps its most intense and pure form, in the claim of the non-political status of merely 'technical' organization – always and everywhere, of course, 'from above'.

The concrete negation of this hypostatization will only occur on the basis of renewing an organic relationship between leftist theory and forms of organization that already exist in the wide variety of practices and social relations that today compose what Gramsci referred to as the 'subaltern social groups': from 'instinctive' resistance to the extraction of surplus value, to rejection of the commodity form as satisfaction of social need, to nascent political demands for 'another world'. Necessarily, in their current disaggregation and subalternity, these forms are often incoherent and ineffective. They nevertheless remain the forms 'given by historical development'; if they are not yet the social element 'in which the becoming concrete of a collective will, partially recognized and affirmed in action, has already begun', as Gramsci described the political party of his day, they nevertheless constitute the only basis upon which such a Machiavellian 'concrete "phantasy"' could arise.<sup>33</sup>

The decisive role of theory in this conjuncture lies not only in the elaboration of the 'raw materials' in 'civil society' (the non-political in an 'official' sense) that could form the foundation for a future self-regulated society. Just as crucially, precisely in order to liberate those 'raw materials' from their subaltern interpellation by the existing political qua principle of speculative organization, it also requires the attempt to elaborate on the terrain of existing 'political society'

new practices of proletarian hegemony, conceived as political leadership within the popular classes, capable of challenging its speculative logic; forms in which theory's role will be more that of an enabling 'descriptive immanent grammar' of initiatives already under way rather than that of a regulative instance or even externally posed utopian prescription.

The main challenge for contemporary socialist political theorists and philosophers, that is, does not consist in the attempt to elaborate an 'alternative', leftist concept of the political, in order to gain, finally, its own mastery of politics. Nor does it consist primarily in the critique of the normative and metaphysical pretensions of this conceptuality of the actually existing bourgeois political and its ratifying political philosophy, nor even in the – absolutely necessary – critique of their continual intrusions into the socialist project itself. Rather, the task today is to attempt to put politics 'in command' within philosophy itself: that is, to practice philosophy as an organizational form of social relations that seeks to formulate adequate theoretical 'translations' of the concrete social and political relations and practices of resistance that alone will be able to give rise to a 'political of a completely different type'.

## Notes

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1. Many themes of the current Schmitt revival were prefigured in the turn to Schmitt within Italian Marxism in the 1970s, particularly by Mario Tronti in the 'autonomy of the political' debate – a rich season of political theory that unfortunately has not yet received the attention it deserves in international discussions.
2. For Schmitt, of course, the specificity of the political consists in the irreducibility of the friend–enemy distinction. See Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1996.
3. Rather than in the present indicative, this transcendental 'style' proceeds retrospectively, reconstructing the conditions of possibility of a memory in order to propose it in the conditional future: 'Radical political engagement existed; how was it/could it become possible (again)?' In so far as he posits the dual immanence–imminence of radical politics today, requiring more to be revealed than reconstituted, Negri is excluded from this approach, although the concrete political positions that emerge

from his presuppositions arguably have more in common with it than either the 'democratic materialist' Negri or his antagonists Badiou and Žižek would be comfortable to admit.

4. Slavoj Žižek, 'Carl Schmitt in the Age of Post-Politics', in *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt*, ed. Chantal Mouffe, Verso, London, 1999, pp. 28–9.
5. Bordiga's most memorable condemnation of parliamentary corruption was his intervention at the sixth plenum of the Executive of the Comintern in 1926. See *Protokoll. Erweiterte Exekutive Der Kommunistischen Internationale, Moskau, 17. Febr. Bis Marz 1926*, Verlag Carl Hoym Nachf, Hamburg, 1926, pp. 124 ff.
6. Alain Badiou, 'De quel réel cette crise est-elle le spectacle', *Le Monde*, 17 October 2008. English translation by Nina Power and Alberto Toscano available at [www.cinestatic.com/infinithought/2008/10/badiou-on-financial-crisis.asp](http://www.cinestatic.com/infinithought/2008/10/badiou-on-financial-crisis.asp).
7. For an example that tends towards the former approach, see Andreas Kalyvas, 'Hegemonic Sovereignty: Carl Schmitt, Antonio Gramsci and the Constituent Prince', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, vol. 5, no. 3, 2000, pp. 343–76. For an example of the latter, see Susan Buck-Morss, 'Sovereign Right and the Global Left', *Rethinking Marxism*, vol. 19, no. 4, 2007, pp. 432–51. What these syntheses or corrections must neglect are not only the findings of the most recent Gramscian philological research (see, e.g., *Le parole di Gramsci: per un lessico dei 'Quaderni del carcere'*, ed. Fabio Frosini and Guido Liguori, Carocci, Rome, 2004; Fabio Frosini, *Gramsci e la filosofia. Saggio sui 'Quaderni del carcere'*, Carocci, Rome, 2003), which in decisive respects corrects the distortions of Gramsci's thought performed by previously politically overdetermined readings upon which such elective affinities are based. They must also seize upon certain seemingly rhetorically similar formulations in order to disregard the more fundamental contradiction between the philosophical foundations of Schmitt's thought (particularly after *Roman Catholicism and Political Form* of 1923), as the most consummate form of 'juridical nihilism', and Gramsci's philosophy of a radical *Diesseitigkeit*, or plenitude of being and negation of any notion of the void. In their philosophical presuppositions, Gramsci and Schmitt are located at entirely opposite extremes of the modern philosophical tradition.
8. See Q 11, §46; Antonio Gramsci, *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks (FSPN)*, ed. and trans. Derek Boothman, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1995, p. 306. For Lenin's original remarks, see Lenin, *Collected Works* 33, p. 430. References are given to the Italian critical edition of Gramsci's prison writings: Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, ed. Valentino Gerratana, Einaudi, Rome, 1975. I have adopted the internationally accepted standard of citation in Gramscian studies, giving the number of the notebook (Q), followed by the number of the individual notes. The English critical edition of *The Prison Notebooks*, edited by Joseph A. Buttigieg, now comprises three volumes, containing notebooks 1–8; notes included in those volumes can also be located according to the notebook and number of note. If possible, I have also provided page references to one of the English anthologies of Gramsci's writings; in this instance, *FSPN*.
9. It is one of the great merits of Peter Ives's work (*Gramsci's Politics of Language: Engaging the Bakhtin*

- Circle and the Frankfurt School*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2004) to have emphasized that Gramsci's theory of language cannot be reduced to a supposedly merely 'cultural' concern – according to a dubious notion of 'Western Marxism' – but is rather central to his entire project, the concept of hegemony in particular.
10. Q 7, §35; Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (hereafter *SPN*), ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, International Publishers, New York, pp. 356–7.
  11. Gramsci polemicalises against Esperanto on a number of occasions in the *Prison Notebooks*, just as in his earlier journalistic articles, as a false solution to the real difficulty of constituting non-hierarchical relations of translation.
  12. Wolfgang Fritz Haug, 'Einleitung' to Antonio Gramsci, *Die Gefängnishefte*, vol. 6, trans. and ed. Wolfgang Fritz Haug and Klaus Bochman, Argument Verlag, Hamburg–Berlin, 1999, p. 1206. Gramsci translated the *Theses On Feuerbach* at an early stage of his incarceration. They become a touchstone to which he continually returned throughout his researches, to such an extent that it would not be an exaggeration to regard *The Prison Notebooks* in their entirety as an extended commentary and elaboration of this, one of the shortest texts in the Western philosophical tradition.
  13. Q 8, §22.
  14. Q 10I, §8; *FSPN*, p. 347.
  15. Q 10II, §2; *FSPN*, pp. 382–3.
  16. See Benedetto Croce, *Logica come scienza del concetto puro*, Laterza, Rome–Bari, 1967 [1908].
  17. 'One could ... say that every culture has its speculative or religious moment, which coincides with the period of complete hegemony of the social group which it expresses, and maybe coincides precisely with the moment in which the real hegemony disaggregates but the system of thought is perfected and refined as happens in epochs of decline. Critique resolves speculation into its real terms of ideology' (Q 8, §238; see also Q 11, §53; *SPN*, p. 370).
  18. *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, Volume 5, p. 89.
  19. According to Gramsci's famous definition, 'the State is the entire complex of practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its dominance, but manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules' (Q 15, §10; *SPN*, p. 244). Against a persistent misreading, it is necessary to insist that civil society for Gramsci does not lay outside the state (in its integral sense), but is rather an essential component part of it, the overdetermined form in which political society diffuses its rationality throughout the entire social formation (compare to Hegel's formulation of civil society as 'the external State'; G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, trans. T.M. Knox, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1942, §183). I have argued elsewhere that seeming 'antinomies' in Gramsci's concept of the integral state are best resolved by regarding it as a critical elaboration of the anti-atomistic presuppositions of Hegel's theory of the state. See Peter Thomas, *The Gramscian Moment*, Brill, Leiden, forthcoming.
  20. Althusser noted this dimension of the state's overdetermination of civil society in his rejection of the distinction between the private and the public while formulating his notion of ISAs. See Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy*, trans. Ben Brewster, New Left Books, London, 1971, p. 144.
  21. See Q 25 §5; *SPN*, p. 52. See also Q 3, §90.
  22. *The Prison Notebooks* contain not one but at least two concepts of hegemony (bourgeois and proletarian), which represent elaborations of the concept of proletarian hegemony already operative in Gramsci's precarceral political activity, particularly following the Fourth Congress of the Comintern in 1922. By the time of the first of the *Prison Notebooks* in 1929, Gramsci had developed this into an analytical concept to be applied as a 'historical-political criterion' (Q 1, §44) or 'canon of historical research' (Q 3, §90) for the study of the distinctive forms of bourgeois hegemony; finally, having conducted these historical researches, Gramsci returned to his point of departure (particularly from 1932 onwards) and attempted to elaborate the concept of proletarian hegemony theoretically, in particular, by articulating it with his notion of a philosophy of praxis.
  23. Q 7, §35; *SPN*, pp. 356–7.
  24. It is worthwhile stressing that the point of departure of Gramsci's theory of hegemony was the post-revolutionary conjuncture, particularly because it has often been claimed that the concept of hegemony in *The Prison Notebooks* is derived from Lenin's pre-revolutionary deployment of the term in, for instance, a text such as *Two Tactics of Social Democracy*. Gramsci, however, with his reference to the revaluation by 'the greatest modern theoretician of the philosophy of praxis' and the notion of the 'doctrine of hegemony as a complement to the theory of the State-as-force', makes it quite clear that his fundamental reference is to Lenin's attempt in the post-revolutionary conjuncture to re-elaborate the concept and practice of hegemony as a form of proletarian organization, particularly in the battle against bureaucratization and in the proletariat's relation with the peasantry.
  25. Q 13, §18; *SPN*, p. 161. See also Q 4, §38 for Gramsci's insistence upon the necessarily 'economic' as well as 'ethico-political' dimensions of (proletarian) hegemony.
  26. Antonio Labriola, *La concezione materialistica della storia*, ed. Eugenio Garin, Laterza, Rome–Bari, 1965, p. 216. For Gramsci's comments on Labriola's solitude in the Marxism of his time, see Q 16, §9; *SPN*, p. 390.
  27. For Gramsci's critical remarks on the limitation of prior formulations of the thesis of the unity of theory and practice, in both 'materialist' and 'idealist' philosophies, see Q 11, §12; *SPN*, p. 334 and Q 11, §54; *SPN*, p. 364.
  28. Q 15, §22.
  29. See EIIP13S.
  30. Q 10II, §12; *SPN*, pp. 365–6.
  31. Q 8, §21; Q 13, §1; *SPN*, pp. 125–33. Q 11, §12; *SPN*, p. 335.
  32. Mario Tronti, 'La politica al lavoro', *Il Manifesto*, 30 September 2008. English translation by Alberto Toscano available at: <http://conjunctural.blogspot.com/2008/10/old-guard-on-new-crisis-pt-2-mario.html>. Tronti immediately qualifies that such a renewed 'workerist' gesture should be understood as functional to the formation of 'a great political force, a popular Left ... social before it is electoral', though without specifying how this 'mass party of working men and women' would relate either to currently constituted forms of political representation or to the political overdetermination of this pre-electoral social 'base'.
  33. Q 8, §21.

# Progressive politics in transnational space

**Bruce Robbins**

‘Qui veut faire l’ange, fait la bête.’ David Rieff, perhaps the best-known American writer on humanitarianism and human rights, chose Pascal’s aphorism as the epigraph to his latest collection of essays. This cynical take on good intentions can arguably stand for the prevailing view of action in the name of humanity, or at least the unofficial view.<sup>1</sup> There is much to be said for it. How can one look closely at Kosovo today without sharing Rieff’s disappointment at what those magnificent abstractions have wrought? If one had to choose between cynicism and the hypocritical idealism of the so-called international community, there would seem to be no contest. Still, whether cynicism should be allowed to represent our highest wisdom on this subject (as it does not, I think, for Rieff himself) is another question. It is this other question that is posed by two recent books, one of them deeply cynical and the other making an exemplary effort not to be.\*

The *bêtise* in which the official discourse of the angels so often results was nicely expressed by US President Bill Clinton, speaking at the inauguration of the Holocaust Museum in 1994. Clinton spoke two emphatic words: ‘Never again.’ Pronounced in the year of the Rwandan genocide, this tribute to the memory of the Holocaust was ‘literally meaningless’, as Rieff observed shortly afterwards.

For if there was to be no intervention to stop a genocide that was taking place, then the words ‘Never again’ meant nothing more than: Never again would the Germans kill Jews in Europe in the 1940s. Clinton might as well have said, ‘Never again the potato famine’, or ‘Never again the slaughter of the Albigensians.’<sup>2</sup>

A reader today would not want to forget the slaughter of the Iraqis, which continues unabated as I write. The war in Iraq offers up an entirely different motive for popular cynicism, of course: not the hesitation

of the US government to act on its supposed ideals, but on the contrary its aggressive military actions, actions that have seriously tarnished the ideals of democracy and human rights invoked to legitimate them. One can only hope that there will be greater and greater readiness to refuse this abusive logic. But perhaps cynicism is not the most precise or desirable term for such a refusal. For cynicism refuses more. Its assumption is that ideals are simply irrelevant – irrelevant to what nations do and to what they don’t do, and for that matter (I will come to this) to what nongovernmental organizations do as well. It assumes, no doubt correctly, that self-interest held Clinton back from acting in Rwanda (so soon after the disastrous intervention in Somalia, American voters would not have put up with entanglement in another distant and messy corner of Africa). It assumes, correctly again, that much the same self-interest sent the US army into the oilfields of Iraq. And it assumes, this time more questionably, that it would be a mistake ever to expect anything other than self-interest, even from nongovernmental actors.<sup>3</sup>

Self-interest rules the world, of this the cynic is sure, and it will continue to do so eternally and immutably. It is against this background that Rieff’s eloquent sarcasm takes on a certain corrective force. If I read him correctly, his implied analogy between events that are inaccessible to action because they happened in the distant past (the slaughter of the Albigensians) and events that are inaccessible to action because the would-be actor is restrained by national self-interest (the slaughter of the Rwandans) shocks us into wondering whether after all we really believe that political self-interest must or can be quite as absolute and unquestionable as the linearity of time.<sup>4</sup> Surely the former offers at least a bit more freedom of manoeuvre than the latter?

\* Michel Feher, ed., with Gaëlle Krikorian and Yates McKee, *Nongovernmental Politics*, Zone Books, New York, 2007, 672 pp., £25.95 pb., 978 1 890951 74 0; Nicolas Guilhot, *The Democracy Makers: Human Rights and International Order*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2005, 288 pp., £30.00 hb., 978 0 231 13124 7.

To deny this degree of freedom, facing the future as if it were already as determined as the past, would be to express an excess of cynicism even about ourselves. For we are the constituencies whose capacity to sustain care about distant strangers we would be voting no confidence in. Worse, in that case we would not even be thinking hard enough about what in fact constitutes our self-interest. ‘Can anything be stupider’, Pascal asked on another occasion, ‘than that a man has the right to kill me because he lives on the other side of a river and his ruler has a quarrel with mine, though I have not quarrelled with him?’ He who mocks high-flown invocations of humanity by pointing out their embarrassing disconnection from reality on the ground does not do anything thereby to change the reality on the ground. Today, the cynic is resigned to living and perhaps dying within the reality of antagonistic nation-states, a reality which remains as stupid and as dangerous as it was when Pascal described it. Our citizenly self-interest, properly understood, demands that something be done. Which means that attention must be paid to cynicism too. Cynicism is a sort of defence mechanism, allowing us to maintain our daily routines without interruption. But in the long run, it does not defend us well enough.

### Cynicism about NGOs

It is not governments alone that popular cynicism understands to be acting in a self-interested manner under cover of humanitarian ideals. In the popular and journalistic mind, an accusation of covert self-interest falls equally on nongovernmental organizations, or NGOs. For Michael Maren, ‘aid and charity’ form an ‘industry’, a ‘religion’, ‘a self-serving system that sacrifices its own practitioners and intended beneficiaries in order that it may survive and grow’.<sup>5</sup> Writing about the ‘humanitarian international’ of experts and aid workers and its involvement in African famine, Alex de Waal accuses the struggle against famine of having become ‘professionalized and institutionalized’, a self-interested and self-perpetuating ‘industry’ (the same word again) that has taken famine as its ‘property’.<sup>6</sup> De Waal, who contributes an article to the Feher collection, speaks there of how humanitarian agencies, seemingly unbound at the end of the Cold War, found themselves shackled anew, tied both to ‘the hardware of the world’s most powerful states’, which they try to mobilize in pursuit of their philanthropic goals, and to ‘their own institutional self-interest’. Examples might easily be multiplied.

Institutional self-interest is also the prime explanatory factor in Nicolas Guilhot’s *The Democracy Makers*:

*Human Rights and International Order*. The title of Guilhot’s first chapter, ‘From Cold Warriors to Human Rights Activists’, succinctly encapsulates the story he tells. He traces the current vogue for human rights back to an origin in Cold War anti-totalitarianism. And he declares that origin to be absolutely determining. Today’s champions of human rights, Guilhot concludes, are ‘double agents’. They pretend to be, or think they are, agents of progressive causes. In fact they are traitors to such causes and agents of the enemy, whether consciously or unconsciously.

All these new forms of international activism and moral entrepreneurship are firmly located within the global networks of power. Far from fulfilling some counter-hegemonic role, as it is often argued or wishfully thought, they actually represent a specific mode of exercising global power. (5)

They do the ideological work of US imperialism, and for this they are rewarded, through their well-funded institutes and brilliant career trajectories.

Writing under the sign of Pierre Bourdieu, Guilhot announces that he has discovered a ‘field’ and calls that field ‘democracy and human rights’. The field, populated both by NGOs and by academics, came into existence, he suggests, because its ideologically inflected expertise was convenient to government policymakers. Its political meaning is expressed entirely by that convenience.

The emergence of an institutionalized field of democracy and human rights in the 1980s is the outcome of the successful reformulation of the old anti-totalitarian, anti-Communist ideological project in a completely new political context, dominated by the victory of Ronald Reagan. (52)

This field has served the self-interest of human rights NGOs, which get money from the government and from foundations in much the same way that Cold War journals and conferences once did. And it has served the interests of academics, who find that government-favoured ideas ‘offered fast tracks to academic tenure and prestige’ (110). Activists and academics alike have become professionalized. Professionalization is the term by which Guilhot posits the institutional self-interest linking intellectuals and activists, the Cold War and the post-Cold War period, the university and the NGOs, and turning them all into instruments of US power.

This is a pretty crude picture. My lack of sympathy has perhaps caused me to exaggerate its crudeness. But I don’t think so. Guilhot points out, correctly enough, the foundations on which NGOs of the global North

are dependent for much of their funding. However, he does not spend equal time on other sources of nongovernmental funding, which are diverse and considerable. He does not ask whether taking money from any given source (whether the Ford Foundation or the French government) in fact determines the political coloration of the work done with that money, in any particular instance. The global network of NGOs, he proposes, has tugged politics away from where it belongs (local grassroots organizations) and made it a reflection of what he calls, a bit obscurely, 'global trends and practices'. He does not recognize the extent to which many NGOs *are* grassroots organizations, sustained from below. That is rarely all they are, even in the best cases. And the potential to undermine local organizations and local governments, even unintentionally, is always a pertinent worry. But the absolute worst case – the NGO as a front for imperialism – certainly



cannot be taken as representative either. Guilhot does not weigh the two sorts or sets of cases against each other. He does not compare the actual impact of NGOs with that of any other political organizations, grassroots or not. No evidence that might test or inflect his conclusions is acknowledged. When he talks about academic disciplines, he does not recognize such obvious counter-examples as US departments of Middle Eastern Studies. Crude models of his sort – academic discipline rises in prestige because it represents the ideology of US government – simply cannot deal with such departments, which have been notoriously and controversially critical of US policy in the Middle East, in particular of support for Zionism. Guilhot cannot account for the influence of Edward W. Said, whose name (not in the index) has been hysterically invoked by politicians trying (vainly, thus far) to

control public funds that go into scholarship on the Middle East. If the politicians have to try so hard for it, is it not clear that such control is something they don't already possess? If university departments were what Guilhot says they are, Middle Eastern Studies should not exist at all in the USA, let alone enjoy such extraordinary prestige both at home and abroad.

Ditto for human rights organizations. We are asked to believe that when Human Rights Watch repeatedly condemns the human rights case by which the Bush administration justified its invasion of Iraq, or when the American Civil Liberties Union brings legal suits against the US government over Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo, these NGOs are actually helping Bush exercise global power. True, one can never exclude some element of symbolic legitimization that such activities might be seen as offering to the system as a whole. But Guilhot does not even pause to note the tension

between legitimization and genuine opposition or critique – to my mind, a very real tension. The progressive activities of these NGOs simply don't register.

Guilhot is right, of course, that American governments have tried to make the human rights programme into an instrument of their foreign policy. So have other governments. The US has tried to lop off economic and social rights (like so many others, Guilhot forgets cultural rights, which have been similarly disregarded) in favour of civil and political rights, thus seizing for the USA (and its European allies)

a strategic public relations advantage. But has it succeeded? Ronald Reagan, who came into office opposed to the human rights vocabulary, was reluctantly converted to it. This conversion is arguably the historical centre of Guilhot's book, for it seems to make a case for the independent power of the human rights NGOs. It is this case that Guilhot wants to refute. But he does not establish what he would need to establish in order to do so, namely that 'benevolent liberal networks committed to the extension of human rights' were completely taken over by 'a cynical, realist, conservative, and aggressive administration' (178) and successfully turned against their prior purposes. He never asks whether Reagan made any concession to the power of the human rights vocabulary, whether that vocabulary later made him and his successors vulnerable, whether it has always and everywhere submitted to the purposes

of US governments. What about those highly publicized lawsuits over Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib?

Like Bourdieu's, Guilhot's vision of the world is foreshortened and radically presentist, a disconnected series of battles between self-interested actors who are not constrained or informed to any significant degree by the outcome of past struggles. Each contest, fought in the brightly lit arena of the present, offers a completely fresh start. Thus there are no long-term cumulative effects of the commitment to human rights talk. Nor are there any dialectical twists and turns in which victory turns into partial defeat or defeat into partial victory. Neglecting to look for unintended consequences, Guilhot does not even speculate that the same historical swerve might have other meanings – for example, that policy knowledge might have been constrained to cloak itself in an emancipatory language, a language that comes back later to annoy and constrain the policymakers. 'The human rights doctrine developed by neoconservatives and Cold War social democrats in the early 1980s', he writes, 'transformed human rights almost beyond recognition. What was once an international legal standard had now become an instrument for reshaping other nations to America's specifications or at least in conformity with her interests' (82). There is no doubt that this is what the neoconservatives wanted to do. But (I repeat myself) did they accomplish their goal? Did they win agreement from all players? To what extent is any such agreement in force today? Guilhot does not pose these questions, let alone answer them. The reader will thus emerge from his book unenlightened about the actual politics of human rights today.

The historical irony that grabs Guilhot's attention (and that makes his book worth reading) is the link he uncovers between human rights neoliberalism today and genuine progressivism in the past – specifically (1) the Trotskyist Left and (2) Latin American anti-imperialism. What he calls the 'professionalization of activism' entails a migration of '*socially progressive repertoires of collective action*, inherited from anti-imperialist campaigns, struggles for rights, emancipatory causes, *from social movements often opposing state institutions to the most dominant state institutions themselves*' (3–4). At the centre of the anti-Stalinist side of the story is Max Shachtman (1904–1972). Shachtman

did indeed have a fascinating political career. A Trotskyist of heroic stature in the 1930s and 1940s, then an apostate to his fellow apostates, he allowed his anti-Stalinism to lead him gradually into the embrace of American anti-Communism, and he ended his life defending the US war in Vietnam. Guilhot follows the trajectories of his disciples, several of them moderately influential, as they too became figures of the American Right. It's as valuable a history as, say, that of the



students of Leo Strauss, like Paul Wolfowitz, who provided the ideological push for the Iraq War. But Guilhot does not ask the crucial questions that have been repeatedly asked about the Straussians: 'Does this historical continuity have anything significant to say about the nature of the initial ideas, in this case Trotskyism (stage 1)?' 'Does it say anything significant about the nature of human rights discourse (stage 3)?' 'Are these stages meaningfully linked by the intermediary stage of Cold War anti-totalitarianism?' Guilhot wants us to understand that they are. But if the linkage tells us nothing substantive about Trotskyism, neither does it necessarily tell us anything about the politics of human rights discourse.

The same holds for left-wing critics of the modernization paradigm in Latin America. Guilhot writes:

Their democratic activism, formed within a radical or leftist matrix, ended up generating policy-oriented science in line with the canons of academe and the needs of the political elite. Their political science became a kind of capital valorized within the field of state expertise and reformist politics. (132)

Guilhot does not even try to pretend that their turn to democracy and human rights discredits their initial critique of modernization theory. But if not, then what does it show? Nothing at all that I can see,



except perhaps that history exists and that we should continue to pay attention to it. Experience of the new Latin American authoritarianism in the 1960s and 1970s, which killed or imprisoned so many of their comrades, certainly gave the anti-imperialist critics a greater respect for formal democracy. They learned from historical experience, as Adorno and Benjamin did from the rise of fascism. Guilhot seems to feel that they should *not* have learned from history – that to have done so is to have abandoned the true political faith. He does not tell us what anti-imperialism ought to be doing now that it is not already doing. His political analysis stops at the level of name-calling: they are neocons. ‘By the end of the decade, this academic knowledge would become a quasi-official doctrine supporting the new international crusade for democracy launched by the neoconservatives in Washington’ (123).

The NGOs are today’s exemplars of civic virtue, Guilhot writes, and civic virtue ‘presupposes economic and social capital’. In this time-honoured fashion, especially beloved of the anti-intellectuals of the Right, progressives can be rejected on the cheap, without taking the trouble to describe what they actually believe or do, merely by associating them with ‘social elites’. ‘NGOs are the *honoratiors*, the *optimati*, that is, the aristocratic class of the present times. In the same fashion, the Neiers (Human Rights Watch), the Soros (Open Society Network), the Eigens (Transparency International) are leading members of the republican aristocracy within the Empire’ (6). There is considerable incoherence here. Guilhot invokes Weber, but Weber was not saying that the notables who took over tasks of administration had an economic interest in so doing. (What the notables had was leisure and authority.) What Guilhot wants to charge the professionalized NGOs with, however, is economic self-interest. Like doctors depending on the existence of disease, he suggests, they have a self-interest in perpetuating the crises and emergencies they are called in to deal with, and they don’t really want to see these problems solved. The analogy is wildly misleading. We need not suspect doctors of seeking to prolong or multiply our sufferings so as to get more money out of us, for we can assume that they can assume that there will always be enough ill-health to guarantee them a decent living. So too for NGOs.

Unpersuasive as it may be, Guilhot’s sociologizing points towards a more serious and troubling issue. The long-term social catastrophes faced by NGOs often go too deep to be dealt with by the NGOs alone or by the discourse of disinterested humanitarianism that

continues to inspire much of the support for them. Such situations require collective subjects on a larger scale, and they require the sorts of thinking, will and action that we are accustomed to call, by contrast, political, meaning (among other things) self-interested. Do the activities of the NGOs add up to something that could be thought of as genuinely political? As it happens, the dilemma of interest and disinterestedness is one of the main themes of the Feher collection.

### Nongovernmental politics?

Guilhot accuses the NGOs of little that we do not see them worry over themselves in *Nongovernmental Politics*. On such topics, there is every reason to expect a tone of self-righteousness. What one gets instead is self-questioning. Published in the United States, though much of it is translated from French – in this sense, it is an example of the strange transnational hybrid François Cusset calls ‘French theory’ – this long collection of essays, profiles and interviews (almost 700 pages) is brimming with self-criticism. Voice after voice expresses anxiety about sources of funding, mistakes of the past, the potentially depoliticizing effects of human rights talk, the risks of collaboration with unsavoury governments, and so on. If the group portrait of the NGO world that emerges never passes over into mere self-examination, it is only because everyone involved assumes that action of some sort must be taken, whatever the risks and uncertainties, and sooner rather than later. At the same time, one can hear the anxiety. Will the actions we propose merely offer moral satisfaction without in fact accomplishing anything of significance? In short, is nongovernmental politics really a politics at all?

This question, which leads to many more, is at the heart of the volume’s most searching self-criticisms. Traditionally, action in the name of humanitarianism and human rights claimed its unique authority on the basis of its neutrality. That claim was decisively shaken in Biafra in the 1960s, where the programmatic political blindness of the humanitarian organizations is widely believed to have led to tens of thousands of additional deaths. Médecins Sans Frontières, which was born from that trauma, thus became the exemplar of a new sort of NGO that cannot afford to be fully neutral, yet also cannot afford to be or claim to be fully political. It is on this inherently unstable point that Feher presses Rony Brauman in an interview. Once MSF gives up on the posture of the neutral witness and begins questioning ‘the political meaning and consequences’ of its actions (139), Feher declares, ‘you

are no longer able to present yourselves as nonpolitical observers of a political situation.' Doesn't MSF become one political agent among others, pursuing its own 'political agenda' (141)? Brauman is eloquent on his and his organization's past failings – for example, a certain proximity to Cold War liberalism. But the only real answer to Feher's question is one neither he nor Feher can easily articulate: that new forms of action are coming into being, or must come into being, in which politics and humanitarian neutrality in their traditional senses enter into previously unimaginable syntheses.

Moments of neutrality recorded here, like the MSF's refusal to sign a statement condemning the US invasion of Iraq, will enrage some readers, who will no doubt draw the opposite conclusion: that such organizations are constitutively incapable of becoming political in any satisfactory sense. In certain situations, Brauman argues, MSF's choice must be to 'just leave the scene' (139). (He too would presumably figure on Guilhot's list of 'double agents', but one thing is clear: he is not cynically trying to arrange a maximum of work for his NGO.) One may feel the same political dissatisfaction about, say, the Council for Responsible Genetics, a US-based NGO that 'takes no general position on the technoscientific capacity to trace and intervene in the molecular structure of living beings' (268). Yet we would hardly be better off, politically speaking, without this organization, which works to bring to public attention how genetically engineered crops affect both agriculture in the global South and consumers in the global North. And here, paradigmatically, what the idea of neutrality seems to stand in for is the project of putting together an as-yet-non-existent political subject that would include both global South and global North, a discourse that would simultaneously address both the victims and the beneficiaries of global capital. That's asking a lot. Under this planetary pressure, no existing conception of politics seems quite adequate. It is no surprise, then, that various authors should take risks with other vocabularies, including that of humanitarianism.

Under the heading of self-criticism, one could also take the instructive example of an NGO called Witness, discussed by Meg McLaglen. Founded in a moment of 'optimism' (320) about supplying video cameras to front-line defenders of human rights, Witness gradually realized that these activists were not in fact succeeding in getting their message in the proper form to the proper audiences. So it shifted its strategy, emphasizing not philanthropy (handing out cameras) but the training of the activists and 'brokering relations between

partners, audiences, and decision-makers' (321). Rather than bemoaning its professionalization, one might say, it decided to accept its privileged professional expertise and put it to work. Among the 'biggest successes' of this strategy, McLaglen lists its collaboration with Mental Disability Rights International (MDRI), which began with scandals in the treatment of psychiatric patients in Paraguay and ended in a huge shake-up of the country's mental health services.

It would take pages to list the movements and organizations profiled in this volume, explaining their activities, and detailing their internal debates. Many of these projects are both socially and technologically innovative, like Laura Kurgan's use of satellite photography to provide evidence of illegal logging in Cameroon. Or the so-called 'planespotters' who monitored obscure but publicly available data of the Federal Aeronautics Agency in order to figure out which civilian airlines were participating in the CIA's programme of 'extraordinary rendition' (337). Or the project of Israeli architect Eyal Weizman in collaboration with the human rights group B'Tselem to show that the apparently random pattern of new settlements in the Occupied Territories corresponds to a deliberate long-term plan for the Israeli control of Palestine. Nearly all of these projects show the signs of strenuous self-consciousness about their own limitations as well as the risks and potential complicities of their chosen tactics.

The contrast between the Guilhot and the Feher books also emerges from their respective treatments of George Soros and the Open Society Institute. For Guilhot (who is also the author of *Financiers, philanthropes: Sociologie de Wall Street*), the financier-philanthropist Soros simply represents American capitalism. In Feher's book, the Open Society Institute comes up twice by my count. The first time, in an essay by co-editor Yates McKee, it is presented as an affiliate of the Justice Mapping Centre, an NGO that has worked to demonstrate the deep injustice of the US criminal justice system by correlating state prison expenditures with the race and class composition of the neighbourhoods from which the prisoners come (349). In other words, its work addresses another of those paradigmatic groups of marginal victims – prisoners, the mentally ill, homosexuals – in whom the traditional Left was least interested, but who elicited the characteristic political efforts of Michel Foucault. The second time Soros's institute is mentioned, in a piece by Mathieu Potte-Bonneville, it is presented as a source of financing for Otpor, a network of civil society organizations that denounced election fraud and helped

make Ukraine's Orange Revolution in 2004 (608–9). Many local commentators immediately assumed, as Guilhot would no doubt assume as well, that such groups 'served no purpose other than establishing US-friendly governments in Central and Eastern Europe' (609). A 'less cynical view', Potte-Bonneville adds, connects these mass demonstrations instead with the counter-globalization demonstrations in Seattle in 1999 and the massive worldwide demonstrations against the war in Iraq.

Potte-Bonneville does not take one side or the other. He does not doubt American interests in the region, which events in Georgia have recently confirmed. But his essay – in this sense characteristic of the book as a whole – categorically rejects the assumption that international civil society, in so far as it crosses national borders, necessarily expresses *nothing but* the will of American policy and/or global capital. Might it not be that George Soros is both a capitalist financier and a philanthropist and that neither role is a simple function of the other? Why do Soros's critiques of Israel and the Iraq War have to be univocal expressions of predatory capitalism?

According to Potte-Bonneville, Foucault's activist interventions presuppose a more benign view of civil society than Foucault himself seems to have adopted elsewhere. In this reading, the landscape where the NGOs live and work is not that social wasteland, emptied of all true politics, lamented equally by Hannah Arendt and Giorgio Agamben. Theoretically speaking, the heart of the Feher volume is its dispute with Agamben's Heideggerian contention that the contemporary world order, always already enveloped in Western metaphysics, is completing the process of 'reducing all forms of life to "bare life"' (614). For Agamben, the humanitarian relief of refugees and the spread of human rights discourse belong to the same all-inclusive nightmare as the extermination camps of the Holocaust. Victims of incomprehensible disaster cannot be imagined, or imagine themselves, as political agents. From the perspective of the victims' political agency, efforts to help are indistinguishable from efforts to victimize. Thus *l'Europe des camps* can appear to fuse with the extermination camps. For the writers here,

on the other hand, refugees remain political agents. They are still drawn to identification with the political systems they belonged to before they became refugees, and they are capable of very varied identifications with other marginal groups; they are political subjects of a sort even in their dealings with NGOs. To pretend they are 'below' the 'threshold' of the political, Amy West argues, is 'almost' to support their marginalization. She warns against the 'romanticization of marginality' (410–12).

The unromantic alternative, more often assumed than argued in this volume, involves taking a more neutral view of governmentality, whether practised by NGOs in civil society or by the state. Foucault is a kind of presiding spirit here even though (or perhaps because) he is obviously not a fan of the state as defender of the common good. Nor is he a champion of civil society as a zone of popular self-organization that precedes the state and is naturally predisposed to contest it. Yet Foucault's embrace of 'the duty and right to address governing agencies, to hold them accountable for the external costs or collateral damages of their calculations or decisions', will often mean holding back from 'calling into question the bases of the latter's claims to authority altogether' (328) – will mean, in effect, strategically recognizing those authority claims in order to make alternative use of them. The contrast to the anarchic passivity of Agamben's messianism is not absolute, but it is striking.

What it entails in practice is shown by co-editor Gaëlle Krikorian's account of the struggle for democratic access to generic antiretroviral drugs for HIV/AIDS. This struggle succeeded, at least partially and provisionally, because it was able to enlist the good



offices of Jacques Chirac and Bernard Kouchner. It required the willingness and the resources of certain Third World governments, which defied the regime of intellectual property and produced inexpensive generic drugs. It even required the unintended assistance of George W. Bush. After the attacks of 11 September 2001 and the anthrax scare that followed, the Bush administration discovered that Bayer, which held the patent on the antibiotic used to treat anthrax, was demanding a high price. The government threatened to suspend its patent and produce its own. 'This announcement was heard around the world. The United States was preparing to do for anthrax what it was trying to prevent developing countries from doing for AIDS' (256). This was a propaganda godsend for the NGOs, and they knew how to use it. Within a year there was 'an international consensus in favour of access to medication' (256). Krikorian goes on to detail the problems that have predictably followed – the USA has not wanted to pay what it promised, for example. But she also insists that in this case 'humanitarian reason' did indeed express itself through state policy. The success happened because activists 'turned to their governments to call attention to their moral duties' (251). Agamben, who welcomes the apocalyptic disintegration of the nation-state, can hardly be imagined pronouncing these words. But if I were an African with AIDS, I would put more hope in Krikorian and her friends than in Agamben's anti-statist messiah.

The person with AIDS is of course a classic propaganda exhibit for humanitarianism. The exhibit tells us that this is an emergency. There is literally no time for the long-term thinking or the calculations of interest associated with politics. Something must be done, and done right now. It is a tribute to *Nongovernmental Politics* that, while keeping their focus on the urgency of action, its contributors largely refuse to speak in this familiar and somewhat irritating tone. They strike other tones, make other claims. And they insist over and over on how claims to disinterestedness are shot through with interests and inextricably political. The point is both to enrich and to displace what we understand by neutrality.

In the past, NGOs had often assumed the neutrality of fact. Naming entailed shaming. If you exposed the outrageous facts, it was thought, the proper action would automatically result. When actual video footage of police officers viciously beating African American Rodney King proved inadequate to secure a guilty verdict, however, it became clear that testimony is not enough; showing the body in pain is not enough.

Why not? Perhaps it is the absence of the public, or the absence of the right kind of public. In the transnational domain that is assumed by many of these organizations and movements, the absence would be that of the proper kind of 'international community' – the subject of a previous book by Feher. But one could say with equal justice that the problem is cynicism. Peter Sloterdijk has famously described cynicism as 'enlightened false consciousness'. Cynical consciousness can be considered enlightened in that it sees the self-interested motives beneath the veneer of altruism. That is what makes it immune to the usual humanitarian appeals. It can nonetheless be considered *false* consciousness because, however sophisticated, it is a form of disavowal. The large truth it pushes away is that things can be done, for ourselves as well as for others, and that we need not be saints, need not commit our days to the good of humanity, in order to do one or two of those things. We cannot stop asking whether such apparently piecemeal actions, which are often actions at a distance, sponsored by a bewildering variety of organizations and fuelled by suspiciously media-generated emotion, can be made to cohere into a genuine politics – and if so how, and how we can be sure it's the right politics. But neither can we be deterred by these legitimate questions from recognizing that this is now the landscape on which a transnational politics will have to be defined.

## Notes

1. David Rieff, *At the Point of a Gun: Democratic Dreams and Armed Intervention*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2005. Rieff's views have changed considerably in the past decade. He began as something of a champion of intervention in the name of human rights, and his recent disillusion is arguably proportional to his earlier hopes.
2. David Rieff, *Slaughterhouse: Bosnia and the Failure of the West*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1995, p. 27.
3. On the US refusal to use the word 'genocide' about Rwanda or allow the UN to act, see Samantha Power, *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide*, Basic Books, New York, 2002.
4. I note that taking credit for good intentions in a situation – vis-à-vis the slaughters of the past, for example – where it is literally out of the question that one will act on those intentions is a model of angelic discourse that is of some relevance to academic humanists, whose stock-in-trade is the past.
5. Michael Maren, *The Road to Hell: The Ravaging Effects of Foreign Aid and International Charity*, Free Press, New York, 1997, p. 11.
6. Alex de Waal, *Famine Crimes: Politics and the Disaster Relief Industry in Africa*, African Rights and the International African Institute in association with James Currey, Oxford and Indiana University Press, London, 1997, pp. 5, xv.

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| 29 January  | Leroi-Gourhan and the Limits of the Human<br><b>Christopher Johnson</b> (University of Nottingham) |
| 19 February | When Species Meet<br><b>Donna Haraway</b> (University of California, Santa Cruz)                   |
| 5 March     | Kant's Answer to the Question 'What is Man?'<br><b>Alix Cohen</b> (University of Leeds)            |

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### Alterliberalism

Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978–1979*, trans. Graham Burchell, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke and New York, 2008. 368 pp., £20.99 hb., 978 1 403 98654 2.

Six of Foucault's thirteen annual Collège de France lecture series have now appeared in English translation in the space of five years, including, in 2008, *Psychiatric Power* and now *The Birth of Biopolitics*. This latter series dating from 1979 constitutes the sequel to the previous year's lectures, *Security, Territory, Population*, which were published in English in 2007. The two series form a dyad, with a common theme: government. *Security, Territory, Population* looked at the 'governmental rationality' (or 'governmentality', to use Foucault's neologism) associated with what, in French, is called *raison d'état*: a historical movement concerned with the maximization of state power and, thereby, with the wealth and well-being of people. This constituted a considerable break with the logic of governance that had predominated in the Middle Ages, when there was no properly specific theory of the state or of statecraft. The newly released lectures, on the other hand, are concerned with a deliberately opposed governmental rationality, liberalism, which is of course concerned with maximizing wealth and well-being precisely by *limiting* the state, and which developed after the earlier form of governmentality and in reaction to it.

Foucault's intention was to investigate liberalism as a means to understanding contemporary biopolitics, the control of population. This explains the title of the lectures, but in point of fact he never gets to biopolitics here, rendering the title he gave the lectures misleading. In fact Foucault left us only scant remarks on the biopolitical – in his 1976 lectures, *Society Must Be Defended*, and in the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*, which appeared in the same year. This has in turn left the ground of biopolitics open to other thinkers, most notably Giorgio Agamben. In light of this fact, the title might have been rethought, for, as it stands, the book may both fail to entice appropriately those interested in liberalism and to waylay inappropriately those whose interest is in biopolitics à la Agamben (although this latter effect may be no bad thing). The German edition circumvents the problem by bundling the 1978 and 1979 lectures into a two-volume 'History of Governmentality', with the series

titles used as subtitles for each volume, and I think we might hope for a similar pattern in any subsequent English edition.

What we actually have in *The Birth of Biopolitics*, then, is Foucault's genealogy of liberalism, albeit one that is more disorganized than his classic genealogies. Foucault seems to have developed the course more or less week by week – the very reason for his failure to get round to talking about biopolitics – although this is fair enough, so to speak, given that the remit for lecturing at the Collège is only to share one's research with the public, and that the lectures were never intended for publication. Foucault begins the lectures where he left off the previous year, by showing how liberalism emerges out of *raison d'état* via political economy, which was initially simply a branch of *raison d'état* concerned with economic prosperity. There are two forms of liberalism, according to Foucault, namely an axiomatic form starting from the rights of man (the Rousseauian, French revolutionary tradition) and a utilitarian form starting from questioning the value of state power apropos of individuals (the English radical tradition). Foucault asserts that the latter form has quite clearly got the upper hand and increasingly dominates, albeit always while coexisting, to some extent, with the other approach.

From here, Foucault leaps to the twentieth century. This leap is the most extraordinary feature of these lectures, representing the most sustained treatment of twentieth-century history in Foucault's entire corpus. The central part of the book, in both thematic and chronological terms, Foucault devotes to *neoliberalism*. Even today, three decades later, this would seem a pre-eminently contemporary theme. Indeed, it is at first sight extraordinary that Foucault, who is neither an economist nor known for direct study of the present, should have been engaged almost thirty years ago in studying something that seems to have come to the fore only recently. While Foucault himself informs us of the intense interest in France at that time in American neoliberal thought, his analysis goes further than any simple interest in American fashion. In the English-speaking world we had yet to see the elections of

Thatcher and Reagan at the time Foucault delivered the lectures (Thatcher won power precisely a month after his last lecture of the year), but Foucault here already argues that neoliberalism is the predominant governmental mode. He specifically claims this in relation to France and Germany, two countries not normally noted for their neoliberalism in the 1970s. Foucault in fact sees the postwar Federal Republic of Germany as essentially founded on neoliberalism in its German form, 'ordoliberalism'. Thatcherism, this suggests, represents a relatively laggardly adoption of neoliberalism and abandonment of Keynesianism. Indeed Foucault argues that the persistence of Keynesianism in Britain, what we deservedly know as the 'postwar consensus', was due to a bargain made with the British population by the government during wartime – fight for us and we'll look after you from cradle to grave – which was of course absent in the continental cases.

Foucault insists on the interplay of the two great governmentalities – the police state (which is the name *raison d'état* has been given by liberals) and liberalism – and argues that neither has been entirely absent from statecraft in the last two centuries. At the same time, however, he insists on the specificity of neoliberalism, which is not simply a return of nineteenth century laissez-faire. Quite the opposite in the German case: ordoliberalism (under the influence, Foucault indicates, of Edmund Husserl!) rejects the naturalism of the old liberalism, which insisted that the market is natural and simply must be left alone. Ordoliberals know that the market is not natural, but insist upon it all the more: they insist that the market must be the very basis of the state, rather than an area left alone by the state, the principle at the basis of our economic, social and political life. Thus, the state is needed precisely to support the market, and must intervene to help fulfil its potential. Where the old liberals were concerned with fair exchange, the neoliberals are preoccupied with the notion of competition. The society they want to create is not that of classical bourgeois values, nor even the society of consumption, but a society based on enterprise. The ordoliberals wanted government policy to encourage the maximum proliferation of individual enterprises, a policy that Foucault astutely observes can only lead to regulation and the growth of judicial power to manage the increasing competition.

Foucault devoted four of the year's twelve lectures to ordoliberalism, followed by a lecture on the subsequent and related coming to dominance of neoliberalism in France. In these lectures a thoroughly unfamiliar picture of neoliberalism emerges. The

neoliberalism we are used to is not this continental European variant, but rather what Foucault goes on to describe as Austrian-inspired American neoliberalism, to which he devotes only the two lectures after his lecture on France. Here it's clear we are dealing with a different beast, an ideology not of the state administrators as in France and Germany, but of anti-state opposition. Rather than promising to use statecraft to support the fragile market mechanism, the American neoliberals apply the market as a grid of intelligibility for all human affairs, including politics. As has been said, they are indeed market fundamentalists.

What does it mean that Foucault spends so much time on the Germans and French rather than the Americans? Well, it makes sense given that he was a French intellectual writing before Reagan and Thatcher came to power. But what does this leave us with today? Lectures about neoliberalism would seem utterly timely. After a period in which much of the Left identified its enemy as 'globalization', it seems the Left has come to name its contemporary enemy precisely as neoliberalism. Yet, this refers to the American variant that has swept the world like a virus, as Samir Amin has it, in the decades since Foucault gave these lectures. Moreover, as Francesco Guala has noted in his review of Foucault's lectures in *Economics and Philosophy*, Foucault fails to distinguish strongly enough between the German and American neoliberalisms, thus potentially leaving readers confused about the nature of the latter. In particular, there seems to be an implication that ordoliberalism is the Ur-neoliberalism, although Foucault does not say as much, and indeed it is not so. Guala pointedly remarks on the unobjectionable nature of Foucault's treatment of the economic texts he surveys, but Foucault's selection is idiosyncratic, where it may be taken as definitive.

Here I think it may be fortunate that the lectures are appearing only now, in 2008. Had they appeared at a time when neoliberalism was less discussed, some may wrongly have taken Foucault's as a definitive account of the phenomenon. Today, however, there can be few indeed who will come to the lectures without some preconceptions concerning neoliberalism. What the lectures will then provide for most readers is a kind of corrective account of neoliberalism, focusing on figures, elements and connections in its history that are missing from popular accounts. We are presented here with a genealogical analysis of neoliberalism that differs from any of the other very important accounts, such as those of Axel Honneth and David Harvey, and raises important questions about the historical assumptions implicit in those accounts.

Left-wing readers may find it relatively difficult to handle the lack of normative judgements that is the hallmark of Foucault's research – his lack of condemnation has been taken to imply approval here, but it should not. The lectures are, in many ways, in fact intended as a confrontation with left-wing thought, including at a methodological level. The entire methodology set out at the beginning is explicitly a corrective to a certain view of the state, namely (although Foucault doesn't name it) that of structuralist Marxism, particularly of Foucault's old mentor Louis Althusser and of Nicos Poulantzas – that is, to state-centred views of the political and ideological that in turn refer back automatically to relations of production in explaining the form of the state. Foucault extends Althusser's thesis of the relative autonomy of the ideological to the point where the ideological is no longer in a superstructural relation to anything, and hence no longer properly ideological at all, but rather simply knowledge. At the same time, he builds on Althusser in attacking dialectical reason in favour of his own 'strategic' approach (where dialectics sees the unity of opposites, he sees multiple tendencies, which occasionally cooperate while remaining distinct).

Some of these methodological reflections achieve a clarity found nowhere else in his work, making them essential reading for Foucault scholars, as well of particular use in clarifying Foucault's divergences from Marxism. For me, the greatest challenge was Foucault's assertion that socialism has not discovered a distinctive governmentality. Thus, Foucault argues, socialists in power are obliged to utilize the governmentalities of

the police state and of liberalism – the former obviously characterizing one-party state socialism, and the latter social-democratic governments. Foucault argues that the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands was unable to take power post-World War II precisely until it had adopted neoliberalism. Clearly, it is imperative for socialists to be able to answer this criticism, either by explaining how their adoption of these governmentalities does not undermine their mission or by articulating a model of a properly proletarian governmentality.

While Foucault is directly critical of Marxism/socialism here, there is another related critical target that is in the background throughout the lectures, namely the fashionable argument of the 1970s that West Germany was essentially in continuity with the Nazi state. This question had come to have personal significance for Foucault in that his disagreement with the analysis of West Germany as fascist had been the occasion of his break with Gilles Deleuze, who up until that time had been a close friend, as is noted at one point in the meticulous editorial endnotes in this volume. The Federal Republic of Germany, Foucault argues, is founded on a reaction precisely against Nazism, in a unique attempt in world history to construct a society based around the market. Foucault's argument interestingly inverts the usual perception of the relation of fascism and liberalism, casting totalitarianism as an effort at eliding the state and the people, while ordoliberalism is in favour of the state as such.

This observation is part of a general critique of what Foucault mostly refers to as 'state phobia', which





consists in an aversion to the state that takes the form of an 'inflationary' claim that state power is always expansive, such that all forms of state tend towards fascism, including liberal states. This clearly describes the position of Deleuze, particularly via Foucault's linkage of state phobia to paranoia (although Foucault does not say to paranoid schizophrenia), while Foucault's caricature of the 'inflationary' state-phobic political analysis that identifies banal forms of state power with the concentration camp foreshadows Agamben's work. Foucault is not, however, seeking to exculpate neoliberalism with this logic. Indeed, if anything, neoliberalism stands condemned here as the original inflationary state-phobic discourse. For the ordoliberals, at any rate, Nazism is the inevitable alternative to a market-based society. The fascinating

paradoxical implication is, then, that the state phobia of Deleuze shares a fundamental kinship with neoliberal governmentality.

After spending most of the lectures on detailed discussions of neoliberalism, rather than returning to biopolitics, Foucault spends the final two lectures exploring the prehistory of neoliberalism, rounding out his study with excellent discussions of Adam Smith and the origins of the notion of civil society, which for Foucault is an essential element of liberal thought, and hence of contemporary political society. This takes him on to more familiarly Foucauldian territory. Moreover, it establishes the trajectory his researches would seem to follow after this point, namely back even further in time, ultimately to the ancient world.

**Mark Kelly**

## Einflußkritik

Lin Ma, *Heidegger on East–West Dialogue: Anticipating the Event*, Routledge, London and New York, 2008. xii + 268 pp., £50.00 hb., 978 0 415 95719 9.

In a gnomic aside on the potential generated through a confrontation between Feuerbach and Levinas, Derrida writes: 'We are speaking of convergences, and not of influences; primarily because the latter is a notion whose philosophical meaning is not clear to us.' 'Influence' is a term that requires careful watch, particularly as it operates in the vexed relation between intellectual history and philosophy. Quentin Skinner sees in the concern to identify influences a 'scholar's game' that is nearly devoid of explanatory power and, although his focus is on a form of quasi-causal relation, he touches upon the essential emptiness of tracing the same words without thought for the transformations wrought upon such terms when constructed into systems. Talk of 'resonances' or 'connections' might merely represent the shallow 'reminiscences' of a reader who has read more than one book.

In the context of Heidegger Studies, there has in recent years been increasing attention to the influence of Asian thought on the author of *Being and Time*. The claims emanating from these studies were the subject of Stella Sandford's article in *Radical Philosophy* 120 (July/August 2003). Crucial here is the status of Reinhard May's *Ex Oriente Lux* (1989), which is firmly positioned in the German *Einfluß* tradition criticized by Skinner. The claims presented there push the subtle code of unacknowledged influ-

ence, manifested in the decision to title the English version of May's book *Heidegger's Hidden Sources*, whose translator, Graham Parkes, suggests interpreting the resonances and congruencies as a model for productive engagement with Eastern thought and the necessity for transcultural dialogue. Sandford rightly criticized the weak comparative analysis that paid no attention to how the comments on Eastern 'philosophy' should be understood within a thinking which held an explicit investment in Europe and more specifically the German–Greek axis. The study of influence is bankrupt without a more robust emplacement within the facticity of Heidegger's output.

Lin Ma's book maintains a similarly sceptical interpretation. Its virtue lies in extending Sandford's comments through thorough philological method – chasing down all references to 'the East', Eastern philosophy and citations of ancient Asian writings. He even locates previously undocumented references to the *Daodejing* in Heidegger's correspondence. In addition, *Heidegger on East–West Dialogue* positions these references within the context in which they occur and within the broader claims of Heidegger's writing after *Being and Time*. From this approach, three key claims are demonstrated.

First, all the references to Asian thought occur within a specific conceptual constellation: Heidegger's

notion of the increasing enframing (*Gestell*) of contemporary life exemplified in an age dominated by consumption and world wars. Analysed into five components, the *Gestell* as an enclosure of beings and a forgetting of Being is marked by: the mathematical science of nature; machine technology; the loss of the gods; universal cultural formations; and the collapse of art into subjective aesthetic experience. It is an inauthentic, hypostatized and bankrupt metaphysics that is instantiated as a global ontic problem.

To be distinguished from 'positive' references to Asia are those that take the following two forms. One, the global inevitability of encounter with Asia at a time when Europe is weakened post-World War II and forgetful of its own cultural inheritance. In 1951, *Was heisst Denken?* worries that Europe may become the 'plaything of the immense, native strength of eastern peoples'. A form of thinking is to be developed which can shield Europe from the power of the Asiatic and, simultaneously, overcome the 'rootlessness of Europe'. This *Kehre*, 'turn', involves as cultural prescription a creative confrontation with its own history: a *Destruktion* of metaphysics and a return to the Greeks for what is currently unthought but which lies at the beginning of Western historicity. Two, Greece originated in separation from the 'Asiatic'. This differentiation involved breaking with a mythic understanding of Fate as an 'abstract, blind, unintelligible power' and introducing a destinal conception of time and history. Bound up with this notion of time and history is the philosophical separation of world-view or outlook from concern for truth and its conditions of possibility (both still unhelpfully named as 'philosophy'). That is, Heidegger repeats the general understanding of 'Asian time' as distinct in that it is an agglomeration of unremarkable passages through the world, as opposed to the Greek event, that must be understood as an event which transforms the sources and milieu in which it occurred; this is the meaning of the *ursprünglich* as transformation of the 'wisdom' gleaned from other sources by the Greeks. Far from being a gesture of syncretism or synthesis, for Heidegger, what we understand as philosophy is launched here in a qualitative leap. Such attention is already a reappropriation of Greece from the perspective of the Enlightenment desire for reasoned truth. The exclusionary, retrospective gesture is the archetypal gesture of canon-formation. The 'return' is not historiography's form of empathetic projection made possible by linguistic connection.

All these features are present in the following extract from 1953's 'Science and Reflection':

Whoever today dares ... to respond to the profundity of the world shock that we experience every hour, must not only pay heed to the fact that our present-day world is completely dominated by the desire to know of modern science; he must also consider also, and above else, that every reflection upon that which now is can take its rise and thrive only if, through a dialogue with the Greek thinkers and their language, it strikes root into the ground of our historical existence. That dialogue still awaits its beginning. It is scarcely prepared for at all, and yet it itself remains for us the precondition of the inevitable dialogue with the East Asian world.

This leads to Lin Ma's second main point: that Heidegger does not believe transcultural dialogue is yet possible. In a letter to Jaspers from 1949, Heidegger writes that the West is 'not yet strong enough' to risk emerging from its introspection and monologue. In its current condition, it is liable to be seduced by a shallow 'take-up' of Eastern thought, whose possibilities for transformation are rejected in the *Der Spiegel* interview of 1966. As things stood, Heidegger was troubled by the persistent translation of key texts through eighteenth- and nineteenth-century images and vocabulary (viz. 'mind', 'body', 'spirit', 'enlightenment', etc.). The dominant idea of the East is internal to Western self-understanding – only a critical, dialectical development is appropriate to overcoming the reception of East thought through Western categories (see his correspondence to Helmuth Hecker).

From these insights, Lin Ma constructs his third argument. Heidegger does not base any admiration for Asian thinking in the latter's lack of Western metaphysical concepts. Rather, it is in the consideration of ontological difference, the secret of Western thinking, covered over by metaphysics and its false opposition with empiricism, that can effect change (albeit over the course of a possible 300 years). The earlier explicit use of phenomenology was intended to recover 'what shows itself in the beginning of Greek philosophy': the difference between beings and Being. *Heidegger on East-West Dialogue* underscores the repeated question as to whether Buddhist writing, Sanskrit scriptures or the *Daodejing* operate with this fundamental distinction: is an insight into ontological difference articulated?

Heidegger's tentative pursuit of the possibility of dialogue is prompted by the well-documented, but still dramatic, interest in his work from Japan (first essay in Japanese in 1924; first monograph on him in 1933; first translation of *Being and Time* in 1939). It is hard to imagine the positive, and immediate, reception of 'What is Metaphysics?' there not motivating certain

ideas of contact with a different tradition. His attempts in 1946 to prepare a German translation of the *Dao-dejing* with the help of Paul Shih-Yi Hsiao, a Christian theologian, were however curtailed. Heidegger expressed his limitations – such an ambitious project would involve the development of language skills felt to be beyond him at that stage and possibly deformed by his forcing intention.

In the 'Dialogue on Language', a dialogue dramatized between Heidegger himself and a 'Japanese', he offers the thought that the languages are so different as to create different 'houses' between which 'a dialogue remains nearly impossible'. (The reticence here finds one exception in his enthusiasm for Japanese art which represents a stage at which Western thinking 'cannot arrive'.) Unlike Levinas, this difficulty faced by dialogue is not owing to the superiority of Western insight. The possibility is left open that non-Western culture, 'Russian' and 'Asian', might return to *their own* points of origination with the possibility that this might enable 'a free relation with technology'. In his 1959 'Elucidations on Hölderlin', he makes reference to 'the few other great beginnings'. It is not that the history of Being is Western, but that the Greeks 'broke through' to a new possibility; that there are other fruitful possibilities is not a question Heidegger himself feels able to answer; the possibility of a robust pluralism is left open. Note, Heidegger does not make Husserl's claim that the Greeks were the *first* to break through to the *essence* of humanity – *entelechy*.

It is somewhat disappointing that, having repositioned the question of influence, in its treatment of Heidegger's 'Eurocentrism' *Heidegger on East-West Dialogue* sanctions the neglect of a more fundamental problem. In seeking to combat the tendencies of 'Einfluß-Studien', whilst being adequate to 'Heidegger studies', the book suffers 'professional deformation' in that it is not able to devote space either to the *philosophical status* of Heidegger's writing after *Being and Time*, where all these references occur, or to the broader philosophical problem at issue: the status of philosophy within a world-historical perspective.

Even if the later Heidegger, in writing for transformation, may appear to have given up on the traditional philosophical problems of grounding, a certain reliance on phenomenological and hermeneutical protocols underpins the portentous creation of figures to direct thinking. The place of interpretation in *Being and Time* already pointed to a deep schism with the description and scientific aspiration of *Logical Investigations*. It is this tendency that is exacerbated in the later writing as interpretation moves towards poetics, but

the inheritance of tradition, along with the central role of language in expression and adequate, intuitive fulfilment, determines the commitment to Europe and Germany. Heidegger must start from 'here', the factic base, and work outwards.

Is philosophy one cultural formation and practice among others or do any of its products have universal validity? The problem is particularly acute for post-Husserlian phenomenology, formed in opposition to psychologism, yet reliant on the description of the reduction performed by the individual. The transcendental status of *evidential* descriptions depends on overcoming particularity through a peculiar form of *repetition*. (Hence the place of 'phenomenological exercises' in Husserl's teaching.) As such, the one performing the reduction is required to establish that 'I myself am the primal norm constitutionally for all other men' (*wie ich selbst konstitutiv für alle Menschen*) (*Cartesian Meditations*). Universality cannot be assumed (this would be merely an alternative form of Eurocentrism): for the description of Dasein's existential structures may only describe a circumscribed cultural group. The structures interpreted in Division Two of *Being and Time* are particularly at issue here since historicity and temporality, different experiences and productions of time, are held to be the decisive differences.

The possibility of linguistic and ethnocentrism has to be addressed in phenomenology as methodological necessity if its insights are to be extended. The problem of universality is the theme of *Origin of Geometry*, where the concern, missed egregiously by Derrida, is to demonstrate the universality of geometry as the fundamental, universal *Einfühlung* (not to be translated as 'empathy' or 'sympathy'). The objectivity of geometry lies not in ideality per se but in its status as universal, an ideality common to all humanity. *Being and Time*'s undermining of Husserlian *Evidenz* is at the heart of the subsequent charge and counter-charge of anthropology and psychologism.

Subsequent to Lin Ma's book, it is to be hoped that this particular sideline of research comes to a stop and that attention is paid instead to the broader issues outlined above. A certain conception of philosophy may be coming to a close, but the virtue of the critical and idealist traditions, of which phenomenology is a representative, lies in the opposition to empiricism and theology, both of which appear to be disguising themselves as philosophy today, though without troubling themselves with the responsibility of warranted assertibility or *Selbstbesinnung*.

**Andrew McGettigan**

# Singularization (again)

Samuel Weber, *Benjamin's -abilities*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA and London, 2008. 358 pp., £19.95 hb., 978 0 674 02837 1.

Given that the practice of translation provides the context for many of the essays in this collection – which, as the author emphasizes, ‘is written throughout at the interface of German and English’ – the nuances of its title’s English rendering of a German suffix can be regarded as more than fortuitous. The ‘-abilities’ of the title indicates not only Walter Benjamin’s practice of adding the suffix *-barkeit* (-ability) to important verbs (a form of conceptualization which Weber associates with a specific process of singularization), but also the singularity of Benjamin’s thought in its ability to anticipate and problematize a number of contemporary theoretical concerns.

These claims are made in the essays collected in the first part of the book, where Weber argues that the particular form that concepts take in Benjamin’s writing reflects a specific kind of naming which, in opposition to the coining of new terminology, reinscribes established terms in such a way that they are implicated in a virtual sequence that is both unpredictable and incomplete. The most famous of these is the concept of reproducibility (*Reproduzierbarkeit*) in the context of works of art, although examples are abundant throughout Benjamin’s writings: communicability, criticizability, translatability, knowability, legibility. Weber describes this process as a nominalization of verbs that involves a transformation of the potentiality adhering to such concepts. In this way, the concept of reproducibility refers not to its actual realization in a future accomplishment – a becoming, in the sense of a coming to *be* – but to the virtualization of a structural possibility which entails the radical alteration of that which it names. Associating this form with the role assigned to concepts in Benjamin’s ‘Epistemo-Critical Prologue’ to the *Trauerspiel* study, Weber argues that the virtual rearrangement of phenomena by concepts simultaneously involves their singularization and (therefore) their salvation; a salvation that does not aim at similarity – either reiterating identity or dissolving into generality – but incorporates difference by driving phenomena to their extremities, to the very point at which they become something else.

Weber’s reflections on the medium in which such singularization takes place allows him to clarify the philosophical intentions of Benjamin’s project. This is particularly evident in the essay ‘Ability and Style’

– originally published as an entry in Oxford’s *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, and in many ways the kernel of this collection – where the Kantian context of Benjamin’s version of dialectics comes to the fore, with its focus on the possibility of a non-synthetic or disjunctive relation between concepts. Here, the contemporary singularization of Benjamin’s thought is explicated as the task of rethinking ‘identity’ outside of the parameters of Hegelian dialectics, with its ultimate exclusion of difference. Whilst for Weber this indicates some affinities with the Derridean practice of deconstruction, his accumulated references to disjunctive synthesis, virtuality, and a repetition that incorporates difference also indicate an anticipation of what Andrew Benjamin has elsewhere called the same ‘generalizable move’ performed today in the name of Deleuze. The inclusion of Weber’s essay on ‘Impart-ability’ therefore provides an opening gesture in the no-doubt-coming academic encounter between Benjamin and Deleuze. It is valuable for specifying the differences that separate their thought, but in doing so it immures Benjamin’s work from any transformation that the staging of such an experiment might promise.

Weber’s motivations for this can be discerned in his own ‘style’. For whilst his practice of hyphenating verbs (in-communicability, trans-lation, ex-cite, extension, di-stance, per-haps...) expresses a Derridean indebtedness, it also serves to emphasize a process of spatialization – into, across, out of, towards and through – which illustrates one of Weber’s underlying concerns here, as in his writings on media. This is to challenge a conception of globalization as a global integration that eliminates local differentiation: ‘an all-encompassing immanence in which singular differences are absorbed into a generalized whole’. Weber’s splitting of words is therefore intended to emphasize spatial movement, but it also indicates the uniqueness of that which doesn’t simply *remain*, but becomes something other in the process – a world of ‘differentiation’ that can only ever produce disintegration, never ‘global integration’.

Weber’s opposition to Deleuze is therefore directed at the way in which Deleuze’s actualization of the virtual is supposedly conceived, ‘in however differential, singular, and heterogeneous a way, as the *global and integrative resolution* of problems’. In expanding on this, the real target of Weber’s objection becomes

clearer. However categorically Deleuze would have rejected such a term, he argues, such a concept of the virtual is amenable to a project of 'humanization' of the kind performed in Pierre Lévy's *Sur les chemins du virtuel*. The strong anti-humanism of Weber's Lacanian and Derridean positioning of Benjamin's singularity always places him on the alert for onto-theological appeals to a unity and wholeness which smuggle in notions of identity and self-presence. It is the vitalist terminology of Deleuze's writings that cause him to blanch here, and it is symptomatic of Weber's privileging of language that such references to nature are too quickly assimilated to a supposed position of dependence on a whole that betrays a residual monotheistic privileging of the human subject.

However, this is to ignore the extent to which there is a concept of nature operating within Benjamin's work that has already been distanced from such conventional associations – no less than in Deleuze's philosophy – through its dialectical entanglement with a radicalized concept of history. Such a concept (which can be traced through Benjamin's writing on Kafka, Kraus and back to Goethe) extends to a preoccupation with the 'creaturely', which – whilst opposed to the self-serving sterility of bourgeois humanism – is not identical with anti-humanism as such. 'Humanity as an individual is both the consummation and the annihilation of bodily life', Benjamin claims in his early writing, but this individuality pertains not to single embodied humans but to the 'totality of all its living members', including to some extent nature and tech-

nology. It is not inevitable that the totality associated with such collectivity be merely the universalized unity of the individual – as Weber has previously accused Fredric Jameson's essay 'Capitalizing History' – just as the historical process it describes is not a teleological one. The movement of annihilation and fulfilment which Benjamin expresses here – elsewhere characterized as a messianic idea of nature – undermines any such assumptions, retaining as it does the conceptual form of the disintegrating body, with its Goethean emphasis on the torso.

What arises from Benjamin's writings, then, is a *different conception of the subject*, which has to be understood within the political context of his work. This is also true of Benjamin's '-abilities' themselves, as a practice of conceptualization constructed with the potential or ability to resist integration into and assimilation by a specific status quo. Weber's focus on presentational form acknowledges the continuity of a philosophical task that spans writings typically divided into early and later periods by Benjamin's turn to Marxism in the mid-1920s. What it tends to obscure is the consistent political backdrop for such a mode of philosophizing, despite the variances in the proposed response.

For Weber, the generalized politics of deconstruction seem to provide enough historical leverage for such consideration, particularly if – as he has previously suggested – Marxism may emerge as the most significant counter-image to US neoliberalism, precisely because it privileges conflict as the medium



of historical activity. But for Benjamin, even prior to the dialectical materialist context of his later works, such a mode of philosophizing is not pursued as an end in itself, but in opposition to the particular historical circumstances of capitalist modernity. His thought emerges out of and takes a stance towards this specific socio-economic context, whether it be circumscribed from the perspective of pedagogical reform, anarchistic nihilism or materialist communism. The conceptual form that his thought takes opposes and resists the movement of subsumption that modernity calls 'progress', and to remove it from this context is to dehistoricize a specific politics of time.

Within the English reception of Benjamin's work, the importance of this study lies in the attention it devotes to, and the skill with which it illuminates, the

presentational form of Benjamin's philosophy. This reinvigorates it beyond the cramped confines of older debates about Benjamin's disciplinarity or more recent interest in his intellectual lineage (although Weber provides persuasive answers for both). Weber is exemplary when this presentational form is the specific concern of both his and Benjamin's attention, most notably where their shared subject is translatability, allowing him to clarify through demonstration both Benjamin's theory of translation and the particular problematic of ignoring it with respect to translating Benjamin's own work. Elsewhere though, too many of these essays rehearse the generality of this form across its various contexts, without thereby producing any distinctive contemporary content, not least of a political kind.

**Matthew Charles**

## Operative history

Pier Vittorio Aureli, *The Project of Autonomy: Politics and Architecture within and against Capitalism*, Buell Center/FORuM Project and Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 2008. 88 pp., £14.99 hb., 978 1 568 98794 1.

Where contemporary architecture claims its autonomy from criticality, the Italian architecture of the 1960s and 1970s considered in Pier Vittorio Aureli's new book, that of Aldo Rossi and Archizoom, sought its autonomy, from neo-capitalism and its technologies, through criticality. In a context where the territory of the city was undergoing a process of extension into a potentially limitless form of urbanism, this architecture pitched itself against the political, economic and cultural forces driving its expansion. At the same time, figures within Operaism, such as Raniero Panzieri and Mario Tronti, attempted to forge a similarly autonomous politics in opposition to the analogous expansion of a proletarianized labour model beyond the workplace and into culture in general – the so-called 'social factory'.

Aureli's purpose here is to propose these two tendencies as joined within a coherent 'project of autonomy' that offers a salutary lesson for theory in contemporary architecture and politics, engaged, as both these tendencies are, in late capitalism's own conditions of extension through networked forms of urbanism and social experience. But Aureli's agenda is also corrective. Where Manfredo Tafuri is conventionally taken as the figure of critical discourse in the period under discussion, he is repositioned here in allegiance with the economic and territorial expansion of corporate

urbanism, and hence his criticism problematized as failing to grasp the significance of architectural form as a weapon against the practice of large-scale urban planning. Equally challenging is the author's claim that Autonomia, following in the wake of Operaism, represented the transition from a genuinely autonomist politics to one reconciled with late capitalist modes of social formation: 'If outside of Italy', he writes, 'the reference to "autonomia" evokes cutting-edge politics, inside it is still associated with the political disarming of the Left and the general depoliticization of post-modern society.'

Aureli opens his argument against Autonomia with an attack on the 'clever' vulgarization of autonomist politics practised by Hardt and Negri in the 'blockbuster' that is their *Empire*, and on its 'disarming' effects. Hardt and Negri's theorizing of 'Empire' and the 'multitude' represents nothing less, claims the author, than a complete accommodation with capital: a 'conformism with the "prevailing trends" of post-modern politics, from "pluralism" and "multiplicity" to the end of the working class'. This conformism, it is argued, is rooted in the origins of Autonomia's rejection of Operaism's workerist and communist politics as a 'grand narrative' which had become utterly unpalatable to postmodern political sensibilities by the 1980s. Autonomia are thus placed squarely and

unproblematically within this postmodern camp at the outset of this essay.

*The Project of Autonomy* does include passages where some of Hardt and Negri's basic premisses in *Empire* are incisively questioned. If, for instance, their political subject had evolved from the industrial worker to the social worker, and from there to the multitude, through the determining forces of capital's changing formations, then where might we locate the impetus for it to challenge the very processes that have shaped it as such? 'What kind of *telos*', asks Aureli, 'constituted the autonomy of this subject from the logic of power that subjugated it?' Elsewhere, and more often, however, Autonomia is straightforwardly dismissed through a Manichaean schema that brackets every position opposing Tronti's strategy of operating within the Communist Party as 'liberal' or 'post-modern'. The Marxist–Leninist position adopted by the editors of *Quaderni rossi* (Red notebooks, 1961–65), around which Operaism was formed, for example, is defended as 'theoretically daring' at a time when others were 'abandoning communism in the name of the liberties offered by liberalism'. Whilst Aureli briefly acknowledges the alternatives to Leninism explored by Cornelius Castoriadis and *Socialisme ou barbarie*, the implication is that all those forms of communism – council, left or libertarian – explored outside of the Leninist model, in the context of Hungary '56, and then May '68, were ultimately moves towards liberalism and 'postmodern politics': communists 'like' Negri and Guattari were not really communists at all, it seems.

Aureli is also able to divide neatly Operaism from Autonomia only by framing the latter as a homogenous movement represented solely through the thought of Negri. Whereas the differences between Panzieri and Tronti are accounted for within the former, similar tensions in the latter, between Negri's optimism and the more sober perspectives of Paolo Virno, for instance, are entirely absent. The division between the two movements also has the effect of obscuring the real continuities that can be found between them in less partisan accounts such as Steve Wright's *Storming Heaven* (2002), or Nick Thoburn's *Deleuze, Marx and Politics* (2005). One unfortunate effect of this forced division is to produce unnecessary, and unacknowledged, contradictions in Aureli's thesis. 'Autonomists', he writes, 'still depended on the logic of capitalism, which in its deepest essence is the stimulus for the unlimited desire of production supported by the mastery of technological development as a way to create and re-create the conditions of its own reproduction. Autonomy was thus de facto transformed by the autonomists into its

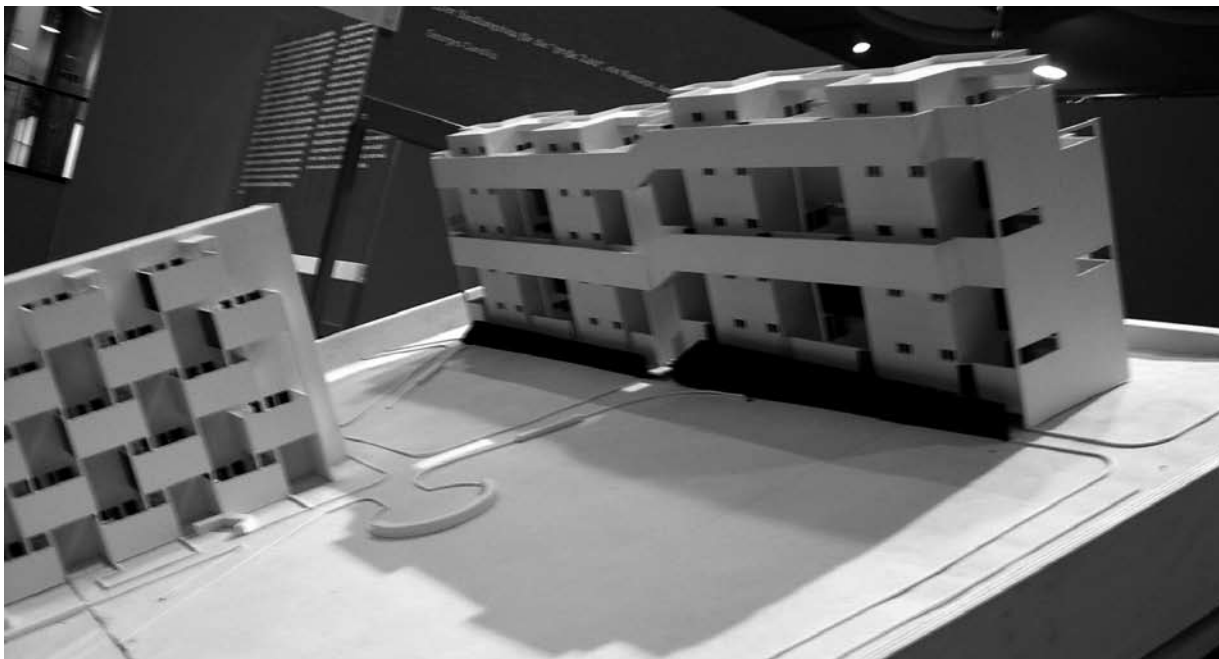
opposite: heteronomy'. Yet, elsewhere, we find given as an example of political autonomy Tronti's strategy, outlined in his *Operai e capitale* (1971), whereby workers make demands of their bosses which are free from any ideological 'content' and stated solely in the economic terms of more money for less work so as to 'make the brain of the system mad'. Where Autonomia attempts to drive the 'logic of capitalism' towards its own dissolution through the production of desire, then, it becomes heteronymous, but where Operaism pushes the logic of purely economic valuation it achieves autonomy. The more pressing question in all of this, of what or who produces the so-called 'logic of capitalism', and how, or even if, it might somehow be driven to produce something beyond itself, as it operates now, is obscured through Aureli's apparently neat separation of the 'good' Operaism from the 'bad' Autonomia.

Where the first half of *The Project of Autonomy* is principally concerned with the political dimensions of its subject, the second is focused on the relations between architecture, urbanism and theory. Aureli observes the correlation between the processes of economic and social restructuring in Italy to which Operaism responded and the impact of these upon architectural practice and theory in the same period.

In the context of postwar Italian architecture the more radical elements of modernism had been tamed and integrated within a neo-capitalist programme of corporate social progress exemplified by firms such as Olivetti. Aureli convincingly identifies this 'nexus of liberalism, democracy, and modernism', associated with figures such as Bruno Zevi and Ernesto Rogers, as a force reshaping the city in its megastructural projects, and extending its reach into a nascent form of networked urbanism that would ultimately dissolve the boundaries between the town and the city. Countering this annexation of architecture to corporate urban restructuring the author identifies the figures of Tafuri, Rossi and Andrea Branzi.

Of the three, it is Tafuri who is most problematic for Aureli. In particular, Tafuri's allegiance to the 'city-territory' model and his exploration of the radical potential in the extension of urbanism renders him, for the author, not the radical Marxist with which are familiar, but a figure of the 'Centre Left':

Viewed within the political framework of the increasing expansion of capitalism to the entire social spectrum, this category of the city-territory – presented by many leftist planners and architects (including Tafuri and Piccinato) as the ultimate destiny of urban evolution – was not politically neutral. Underlying it was an affirmation of the mutated



modes of production created by the transition from a purely competitive to a more organized ... form of capitalism.

Tafuri's implicit 'affirmation' of neo-capitalism's mode of production is contrasted with Rossi's contestation of urban expansion through resistant architectural form and his theory of the 'locus'. In his *Architecture of the City* (1966), Rossi had argued for the autonomy of architectural form from the heteronymous determinants of technology and urban planning. In Aureli's account of Rossi, architectural form stands as a material residue attesting to the historically contested and contradictory nature of the city: 'a concrete geography of places irreducible to the totality and continuity of urbanization'. In contrast, Tafuri was later to critique the purely symbolic mobilization of architectural form as an ineffectual form of urban politics in his account of 'Red Vienna' and its monumental *mise-en-scène* of socialist housing. In response, and joining Rossi's architectural autonomy to its political formulation, Tronti had replied that Tafuri's narrow perspective, in which only the large-scale planning of the city *tout court* could achieve its radical transformation, had missed the symbolic power of the urban fragment to suggest how the socialist city could be built 'within but against the forms of the bourgeois city'. Aureli's purpose in recounting these debates is to side with Rossi and Tronti to suggest that the power of architecture, in the face of the expansive, fluid and networked forms of capitalist urbanization, remains in its resistant autonomy from these processes; of its situation 'within and against' them.

The second example of architectural autonomy discussed here, that of Andrea Branzi and Archizoom,

similarly contests the processes of limitless urban expansion, though its means are an exact inversion of those employed by Rossi. Rather than propose form as a means of architectural autonomy, they abandoned it, and architecture per se, in favour of a purely theoretical strategy. In their diagrammatic representations the city is reduced to a pure grid of infrastructural relations in an attempt to drive this capitalist logic to the point of its logical absurdity: to 'exasperate' the system, to 'make the brain of the system mad'. Though using a diametrically opposed strategy to that of Rossi, Archizoom join him in achieving, according to Aureli, an autonomy that works from 'within and against'.

Ultimately, however, Aureli's insistence upon this 'within and against' model of autonomy, and the castigation of all other modes of engaging with the very real conditions in which capital continues its urban, social and cultural expansion into ever more extended territories, as by definition apolitical, liberal or post-modern, disarms the possibility of finding strategies which are up to the challenge of these conditions as they exist today. It is not enough to recount a certain history of approved architectural and political autonomies, and to point to their superiority over the alternatives in the black-and-white terms of the discourse presented here. To do so obscures the potential to consider the very real insights of the various and numerous thinkers of Autonomia, as well as Operatism, alongside others, as well as the possibility of discovering and inventing new modes of engaging with the conditions, both of architecture and politics, that Aureli laments here.

**Douglas Spencer**



# Zoped

Mastaneh Shah-Shuja, *Zones of Proletarian Development*, Openmute, London, 2008. 354 pp., £15.00 pb., 978 1 906 49606 7.

A common misconception concerning academic work in the old Soviet Union is that it was always held hostage to Stalinism. While this might have been the case with much of the work, it is certainly not the complete story. For it is also the case that a number of intellectual figures were working in the Soviet Union who, in their own ways, developed and applied a sophisticated analysis of Marxism to different areas of social life. One need only think of the theory of aesthetics, language and literature of the Bakhtin Circle, the philosophy of Ilyenkov, the social psychology of Vygotsky, and the legal theory of Pashukanis.

It is to Mastaneh Shah-Shuja's credit in *Zones of Proletarian Development* that she recognizes the important contribution of some of these Soviet thinkers in understanding the link between theory and practice. In particular she focuses on the work of the Bakhtin Circle, Vygotsky, Ilyenkov, and Leontiev in order to examine various social struggles against dominant relationships of capitalist power. But Shah-Shuja also uses the ideas of this set of thinkers in combination with more recent theorists. One advantage of doing so is that the theorists discussed are not simply celebrated and then applied to make sense of contemporary struggles, but, rather, their respective ideas and insights are critically developed and extended. To help her in this line of thinking, Shah-Shuja organizes the various theoretical discourses discussed under three broad strands: Vygotskian psychology, Bakhtinian psychology and Activity Theory.

The book is divided into five chapters. The Introduction maps out what Shah-Shuja argues are the three registers of contemporary global capitalism. First, there is the 'intensive' register, which refers to the modes of surplus extraction from labour. According to Shah-Shuja, Marx's notion of the formal exploitation of labour, in which capital exploits labour in any form it finds, and the real exploitation of labour, in which capital exploits *wage*-labour through advanced industrial technology, has been complemented in recent years by two further modes of surplus extraction. 'Pre-formal' surplus extraction is based on what were once seen as outdated modes of exploitation, such as slavery, child labour, forced prostitution, and so on. 'Post-real' surplus extraction is based on computing,

biotechnology and cyber-technology, resulting in the production of immaterial and hyper-material labour.

Second, there is the 'extensive' register, which refers to the specific form capitalism has taken in our present era of globalization. According to Shah-Shuja, globalization can be defined as a series of capitalist enclosures that have occurred throughout the world since the 1970s, and that have been propelled by three types of primitive accumulation. 'Classic' primitive accumulation refers to the forcible removal of peasants from their land by capital. 'Displaced' primitive accumulation refers to the playing out of 'classic' primitive accumulation in other countries. 'Primitive accumulation revisited' refers to when 'a particular enterprise or sector of the economy has to restart accumulation from scratch'. This might occur, for example, when capital faces resistance from workers in a particular locale, or when new advanced technology is introduced. Globalization, for Shah-Shuja, signals the increasing interrelatedness of these three types.

Third, there is the 'ideological' register. While Shah-Shuja acknowledges the ideological power of neoliberalism, she also integrates this with two other ideological themes that she suggests have become prevalent in the global world. What she calls liberal fascism is associated with a belief in transhistorical principles of humanistic virtuosity combined with the belief that external threats to one's liberty ensure the stability of a political order. Such ideology finds a home in Bush's neoconservative political agenda. This is combined with another ideological theme, that of 'open conspiracy'. Here, it is 'openly' acknowledged by dominant political leaders around the world that they conspire to invade sovereign countries. In the process, however, these very same leaders attempt to influence public opinion by suggesting that invasion of other sovereign territories is a righteous path to take, supported by sections of the media.

Having provided the wider context for her study, Shah-Shuja explains her epistemological standpoint (what might be termed a dialectical monism in the Marxist tradition), her methodology (working from the oppressed) and methods (ethnography, participation action research and discourse analysis). She then proceeds to look at a series of case studies where groups

have come together to resist the overlapping strands of capitalist power relations. Chapter 2 applies Vygotskian psychology to May Day activities by radicals in London between 1999 and 2003. In many respects, Vygotsky's work frames the theoretical parameters of the book as a whole, via the category of the 'zone of proximal development', or 'zoped' for short. Vygotsky originally coined the term 'zoped' to explain the distance between how a child learns through independent problem-solving and how a child learns through problem-solving by guidance or in collaboration with a teacher or with capable peers. Vygotsky favoured the latter route to learning. The zoped should thus be a reciprocal and open-ended learning relationship between a child and his/her teacher or peer. Learning is emergent from this relationship and a child develops intellectually through joint learning with others. Shah-Shuja broadens out the inter- and intra-psychological dimensions of Vygotsky's definition in order to understand London May Day activism. In this respect Shah-Shuja stresses that 'the zoped is not just a space. It is also an activity. The zoped is the creation of an environment or an engagement where emotions, philosophy and consciousness can develop.' When looked at in this way, zoped becomes a useful theoretical device to make sense of how demonstrators at the May Day events facilitated problem-solving among radical activists during the protests themselves, and consolidated existing activist knowledge about the aims and goals of this particular protest. This is a bottom-up process based on collaborative learning across a range of activists.

However, Shah-Shuja does not simply condone all types of radical learning. She is well aware that some learning by and among radical activists is often based upon coercive tactics informed by excessively vanguardist ideas. More importantly, Shah-Shuja introduces a more abstract (normative?) standpoint with which to judge collaborative learning. This revolves around her distinction between 'Zones of Proletarian Development' (ZPD) and 'Zones of Bourgeois Development' (ZBD), a distinction she adapts from Holzman and Newman's book *Lev Vygotsky: Revolutionary Scientist* (Routledge, 1993). The former, ZPD, denote those zopedes that aim 'to negate money, wage-slavery, the state and spatio-temporal abstractions (such as God and nation)'. In other words, ZPD represent collaborative learning among radical activists who are conscious of the need to negate the topsy-turvy fetishisms associated with capitalism. By contrast, ZBD are associated with the hegemony of strictly cognitive acts divorced from real-life activism and everyday

communities, preferring instead to stay within the university system.

Chapter 3 moves into an exclusively inter-psychological dimension by employing the ideas of Mikhail Bakhtin to look at the dynamics of crowd behaviour. The empirical focus here is Iranian football riots. Of particular importance for Shah-Shuja is Bakhtin's notion of the 'carnavalesque'. For Bakhtin, the carnivalesque is a moment when crowds can transgress and invert acceptable and dominant codes of behaviour. There are many ways in which this can occur and typical gestures include bawdy jokes thrown in the direction of authorities, riots, grotesque bodily behaviour, popular music, and so on. The important point is that the carnivalesque represents festive oppositional acts from within popular culture towards and against figures of authority. Shah-Shuja nicely brings out this element in relation to how Iranian football crowds subvert the conservatism of the Iranian clergy's 'etiquette' with their 'mob-like' behaviour (for example, drink binges by football supporters during football marches), although, again, she does not condone football riots in themselves, but rather analyses them within the remit of ZPD.

Following on from this, Chapter 4 places the observations made so far within a wider social context via Activity Theory (AT). Emerging from the work of one of Vygotsky's colleagues, A.N. Leontiev, AT usefully relates intra- and inter-psychological relationships already discussed in previous chapters to a macro-level of collective behaviour. For example, AT is interested in how the object of activity is related to the motives, tools, division of labour, milieu and rules in generating specific outcomes. In this respect, 'activity' is different to 'action'. Whereas 'activity' is interested in the object/outcome of behaviour as this is carried out over time by a number of people learning and sharing knowledge in a specific milieu, 'actions' are relatively short-lived events carried out through clearly defined goals. By focusing on 'activity', AT highlights how long-drawn-out processes of learning enable individuals and groups to talk through, understand and overcome various contradictions within a milieu. Shah-Shuja uses AT to look at how radical social movements develop ZPD through their continuous learning activity within a wider set of circumstances. The final chapter brings the discussion to a close by looking at different types of revolutionary political organizing.

One of the overall purposes of the book, it seems to me, is to provide a link between activist writing and critical academic work. *Zones of Proletarian Development* is peppered throughout with drawings,

cartoons, (reformatted) photographs and diagrams that illustrate the arguments put forward. This lends itself to a style that breaks up the text in a manner similar to that of a newspaper or a magazine, and visually grabs the attention of the reader. For example, many of the reformatted photographs are very funny and momentarily shift attention away from 'just reading' the main text. Images are conjured up that relate the words on the page with the 'real' word. This provides an innovative way of drawing in the reader's attention, and also gives a constant reminder of the link between theory and practice. The various drawings and other images similarly add to the clarity of the writing. Theoretical concepts, for instance, are thus clearly relayed and Shah-Shuja takes time to explain how such concepts can be put to analytical work in making sense of activist case studies. Indeed, one of the real advantages of the book is to introduce the reader to the theories of Vygotsky, Leontiev, and so on, and to develop their respective insights to a wider (non-psychological) field of study. For this reason alone, reading the book provides an intellectually stimulating experience.

Nonetheless, it would have been useful if the discussion of contemporary global capitalism in the Introduction had been more fully integrated with the later

chapters. Sometimes the level at which the various case studies are analysed is too 'concrete' and the various mediations of activity therein, by global capitalism and the state, are not highlighted as fully as might have been the case. Also, Shah-Shuja has a tendency to criticize occasionally other leftist groups and institutions without appropriate examples or evidence. Trade unions are dismissed as being 'reactionary' without saying exactly why. Indeed, this type of rhetorical strategy could in fact be turned back onto Shah-Shuja herself, especially since she utilizes what might be conceived of as some rather 'bourgeois' theories herself. For example, Lave and Wenger's idea of 'communities of practice' is used to make sense of radical activist practices, and yet this particular idea has been applied by others in managerial contexts to foster more compliant working relations in organizations.

Overall, though, Shah-Shuja's novel way of exploring social movements and 'ordinary' radical protest is convincing. Rather than merely apply the ideas of, say, Deleuze and Guattari or Hardt and Negri, as so many social movement theorists do, she demonstrates how the rich legacy from the work of some Soviet writers, in conjunction with more contemporary thinkers, can be developed to provide an innovative and valuable analysis of radical activism.

**John Michael Roberts**

## The touch of the invisible hand

Daniel Heller-Roazen, *The Inner Touch: Archaeology of a Sensation*, Zone Books, New York, 2007. 386 pp., £21.95 hb., 978 1 890 95176 4.

The apparently autobiographical 'Case of George Dedlow' relates the story of a quadruple amputee, who, in the absence of both arms and legs, succumbs to a creeping loss of the sensation of being alive. Initially haunted by the more common sensation of phantom limbs, ghostly hands and feet living on beyond the end of his stumps, in the years that follow, these spectres fade away against the presence of a new sensation. What haunts Dedlow is no longer a surplus of unwanted feeling, but a once unimaginable lack thereof. Deprived of the habitual relations to the outside world, the former civil war soldier – later revealed to be an invention of the American neurologist Silas Weir Mitchell – experiences a dissolution of internal cohesion, which drives him to conclude that 'a man is not his brain, or any one part of it, but all

of his economy, and that to lose any part of it must lessen this sense of his own existence.' The story ends on an insubstantial promise of recovery. Attending a séance, Dedlow is briefly reunited with his legs by a psychic and manages to stumble across the room before his fantastically restored equilibrium gives way to an exorcistic return of reality.

Weir Mitchell's use of the term 'economy' recalls what the stoic Chrysippus called *oikeiosis*, the sense of self-relation and familiarity that, in the words of Heller-Roazen, 'can hardly be distinguished from the subject as such, for the *oikeiosis* of the Portico signifies the process by which a living being comes to be appropriate to its own nature'. But, crucially, 'economy' in this classical sense has less to do with reason and the utilitarian, calculated act of (self-)appropriation than

a simple feeling of existence, which does not equate with modern conceptions of consciousness. Beginning at around the time of Aristotle, who uses the word *sunaisthesis* to describe a kind of 'common sense', underlying yet irreducible to the other five senses, the notion of a 'coenaesthetic' and sensory, as opposed to cognitive Cartesian, basis of existence thrived in both classical and Islamic traditions, but figures only fleetingly in European modernity. The rise of consciousness and the privileging of logical self-relation coincides with the decline and eclipse of an entire paradigm, which is traced quite brilliantly here as a prelude to its putative resurrection.

Heller-Roazen depicts Dedlow as something of a paroxysm, the faltering last stand of a sensation on the brink of collapse. By the time of his story's publication in 1866, the French physician Jules Cotard had already begun to document deliria of 'missing' internal organs, or body parts devoid of all sensation. The nineteenth century bears witness to a normalization of the kind of deficiency of feeling dismissed by Aristotle as nothing less than inconceivable. Later reworked by Pierre Janet as symptoms of depersonalization, 'coenaesthopathic' disorders of the common sense spread from the margins of the madhouses to the heart of working society. In making the transition from medicine to ontology, they never quite lose their sense of pathology, however. (Dis)embodied in Walter Benjamin's workers, who, cut off from all sense of self, experience life in terms of unrelenting and traumatic shock, alienation becomes an enduring philosopheme of industrial society.

Rather than dwell on its multiple variations, played out through Hegel to Heidegger and Levinas, Heller-Roazen looks back to Aristotle, via Agamben, to suggest the sensation of not-sensing as the starting point from which to affirm our anaesthesia. 'Any ethics worthy of the name must confront the promise and the threat contained in the sensation that we may no longer, or may not yet, sense anything at all.' In other words, contemporary ethics must begin with the absence of essential self-sensation and proceed to recognize the idea of an originary economy as the site of the phantasm. Only by accepting the absence of an essential natural economy, of a circuit of sensation running from self right back to self, will we be awakened from our fantastic slumbers, opened onto the non-sensation one can never quite put one's finger on – namely the untouchable feeling of life itself. Turning full circle on the Cartesian cognitivism by which concern for this feeling was superseded, we even glimpse the possibility of a way out of dualism. Is the feeling of not feeling, which is analogous to

Descartes's thought of not thinking, not also the point at which thought and sensation become indistinguishable, the thought of feeling and feeling *as* thought?

The answer is posited as being just out of reach, as it was by Jacques Derrida, whose *On Touching – Jean-Luc Nancy* makes broadly the same point about the supra-haptic nature of existence and the spectrality of matter. Indeed a Derridean language haunts Heller-Roazan's book, offered suggestively to those who know where to find it, but never brought into any explicit or direct exchange. Characteristic of the book as a whole, such suggestiveness translates for the most part into effortless elegance, but occasionally teeters on the frustrating. In the twenty-fifth and final chapter on the 'Untouchable', for example, one is left wanting for the labours of an engagement with Derrida that never quite takes place. Heller-Roazen himself seems almost aware of this, hinting in one of his beautifully gothic subheadings that the conclusion 'may' only 'perhaps' contain what the reader expects to find in it. But if a reluctance to engage is facilitated by subtlety, the same subtlety at least enables the author to avoid the heavier-handed conclusions upon which the less daintily angelic are naturally and problematically inclined to touch.

At the risk of negative teleology and metanarrative, the argument lends itself to a thinking of history as the gradual ungrounding of some *archeo-aisthesis*, a slow reversal of the mirror stage in which the absent unity of sensation is not so much revealed as encountered through in its increasingly discernible fractures. The essential completeness and identity recalled by the spectral limb passes from reality to a neurologically enhanced fantasy concealing the defectiveness of everyday life, to the point where what remains is a promise of feeling to come, a realization that if it isn't intrinsic, our sense of life must stem from others. Can history say more without succumbing to History? More, one suspects, could be made of (Chrysippian) economics. Published just twelve years before the 'Case of George Dedlow', Thoreau's *Walden* serves similarly as a limit case. Espousing a minimalist 'economy' of natural living whose nostalgia is just as tangible as Dedlow's, Thoreau's own brand of (transcendentalist) puritanism stands in contrast to the prevailing (puritanical) belief that the invisible hand of the market substituted for the unknowable touch of the divine. The relation to *oikeiosis* is neither as intangible nor as tangential as might seem. If economics once described the home, the dwelling place of identity and sensation, did it not somehow migrate outwards, externalized in a way that also spells the

externalization of feeling, the shifting of life away from what once passed as its origin? In place of the dualist notion of metempsychosis, the transmigration of the soul, can we not now speak deconstructively of *metemoikeiosis*, the transmigration of the economic, of the *oikos*, whose outward journey vacated and, in so doing, numbed the limbs, before emptying out the very heart of our being-at-home? Reluctant to stray too far beyond the bounds of comparative literature, Heller-Roazen's brief mention of Benjamin is as close as he comes to discussing the economic and technical causes of coenaesthopathy.

Hazarding that the untouchable isn't quite so ungraspable, one less literarily inclined might step in to note the birth of economic man at broadly the time when, through the emergence of capitalism, the classical, Chrysippian economy of sensation is left behind. The tragic – or is it farcical? – repetition of this irony is that economists have now begun to speak, albeit in a very different sense from the stoic, of a living economy, of the economy as a living system – just when it seems to be dying. The latter death (if that is indeed what it is) has been caused in no small part by collective attempts to stretch ever further beyond ourselves, groping at the untouchable, in order to buy back the feeling we can apparently sense, without ever quite managing to reach it. In another confounding of teleology, will the collapse of the outer economy herald a return of some common sense? 'Only the untouchable can be touched with pleasure', Heller-Roazen elliptically states in *The Inner Touch*'s closing paragraph. If so, one dreads to think how boring life would be if self-touchy-feeling came crashing back. The pleasure is nonetheless perhaps more of a *jouissance*, fantastically tinged with what feels like hypochondria.

Gerald Moore

## Bareback

Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips, *intimacies*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2008. 144 pp., £12.00 hb., 978 0 226 04351 7.

'Psychoanalysis is about what two people can say to each other when they agree not to have sex.' Leo Bersani quotes Adam Phillips's aphorism both with a certain relish and reverence ('acute', 'brilliantly truncated') and with a certain dissatisfaction; a dissatisfaction that reflects badly on himself. 'I confess to feeling pedantic', he tells us, after pointing out the limits of such an aphorism. Later, in Adam Phillips's

rejoinder to what turn out to be three chapters written by Bersani, he cites Bersani as claiming that 'love is always the problem', and that it always has to do with 'boundary violations', one of the central preoccupations of contemporary psychoanalysis. *intimacies* (like ee cummings the title's typographical humility draws extraordinary attention) consists of three essays by Bersani where the psychoanalytic encounter is extended outwards as a model for everyday interactions, bracketed by an introduction and a more extended commentary by Phillips, with a final set of remarks by Bersani. But it is also clearly about a certain version of psychoanalytic encounter between two eminent practitioners of psychoanalytic discourse: transference and the unconscious of the session are on display here, even as a certain theoretical production moves on apace. Love (problematic love) is at work here, as well as the boundary violations of genre and author.

Bersani's essays address what we have come to see as his terrain. There is a discussion of a Henry James story about the failure of life turning out to be the life, and of the film by Patrice Leconte, *Intimate Strangers*, where a relationship which is a mistaken 'treatment' serves just as well for the 'real thing'. There is a commentary on a French memoir and an American sociological study of 'barebacking', the practice of gay men having unprotected anal sex. And finally there is a disquisition on Platonic pedagogy, slightly bizarrely emerging from a meditation on Jeffrey Dahmer and the nature of evil. Bersani's essays are mellifluous and provocative, but also somehow deferential. Phillips's commentary is both more wide-ranging and more narrowly focused: his concern is always psychoanalysis itself, but, as with much of his work, a psychoanalysis whose parameters are less clear than they might once have been. In a way for Phillips, psychoanalysis is becoming more and more identified with writing as such, and his production of psychoanalysis is a literary endeavour. Similarly, Bersani's privileged site of development of psychoanalysis is the psychoanalytic commentary on the text. We might see this as a shift from the case study to the essay as the paradigmatic space of writing of psychoanalysis, or, echoing Laplanche, the transference of transference. *intimacies* is, then, an interesting example of the continuing reconfiguration of psychoanalysis as a discourse of culture. Or, as Phillips remarks at the opening of the book, 'psychoanalysis seems [*sic*] to be about the things that matter most to modern people, even to those people who think that psychoanalysis should matter less than it did in the past' – a locution which points to some of the problems of his view.

Indeed, what is compelling about the text is the dissonant yet transformative aspects of the transferential encounter. Increasingly for Phillips, as his star as celebrity psychoanalyst has waxed, the text is where he performs his gaze at himself. His style, with its particular contortions and repetitions, and the white space that surrounds his aphorisms, become a will to style that reveals Phillips as the 'writer'. Bersani, by contrast, has mined a vein of self-demolition within psychoanalysis, inflected by his concern with French *écriture*. He has performed a curious askesis of dissolution that has clearly become theoretically problematic: his anxiety around the topic of 'barebacking' is manifest and he explores it defensively, in mediated fashion, through the texts of others reportedly engaged in it, with a clotted discussion of death, *jouissance* and community. This is a long way from the existential writing of 'Is the Rectum a Grave?' all those years ago.

In their mutual gaze, something interesting happens: Bersani's conservatism and diffidence, hidden by the spectacular rigour of his destruction of self, finds a shape under the 'holding' gaze of his psychoanalytic (Kleinian/Winnicottian) interlocutor; and Phillips, spared the need to establish his own opinion of himself, produces some of his least mannered writing about psychoanalysis, in writing about the limits of Bersani's models. The text is full of the transferences between one and the other and reveals both the possibilities of enlightenment within the psychoanalytic dyad and the ways in which the talking cure can become a specular *folie à deux*.

Two examples, one positive, one negative. Positively, the model of respectful education outside the bounds of parenthood that Bersani hymns in his discussion of Plato is rather gently chided for its occulting of the figure of the mother. Indeed Phillips could have been harsher, and pointed out how, at a theoretical level, Bersani tendentially privileges a masculine subject, echoing Freud's (and how many others'?) engagement with women as addendum or supplement. But, as with all texts whose theme is narcissism, the self-reflexive desires of the subjects engaged in their production are to the fore: the erotics of this contractually non-sexual encounter between Bersani and Phillips are both pedagogic and *jouissant*. More negative is Phillips's vicarious entry into the phantasmatic space evoked by Bersani in his discussion of 'barebacking' and his assertion of ownership of that space. 'Barebacking, whatever else it is, is the attempt to recover, to re-create – but more realistically *in my view* – something of [the] process of impersonal transformation' (my

emphasis). In fact, barebacking becomes Phillips's central example of 'impersonal narcissism', which is the theoretical innovation that emerges unsystematically from the essays.

If Bersani, with his French theoretical and literary exemplars, once saw the ego as the enemy, he now sees the forces needed to dissolve the ego as excessively violent (something previously acknowledged but contained aesthetically). He has become concerned to utilize the ego somehow, in some more productive enterprise beyond its mere reinforcement. The notion of impersonal desire figures this beyond, and 'impersonal narcissism' names its instance. Phillips takes Bersani's idea of barebacking as the askesis that will perform a 'self-divesting discipline' (seemingly in the transference erasing a set of deep anxieties) and he sees it as an extraordinarily prefigurative practice: 'a picture of what it might be for human beings in relation to each other not to personalize the future', an example of 'the most inconceivable thing: to believe in the future without needing to personalize it'.

Here a complex phenomenon, already mythically reduced in Bersani's appropriation of a pair of textual readings, is further appropriated as a univocal confirmation of Phillips's tendentious opinions. He is enjoying the fantasy of what is even for Bersani a deeply problematic practice, while constituting it as an example of a new ethical ideal. Perhaps ethics is once more being invoked to justify the enjoyment of destruction. It is as though the move beyond the ego (which seems incapable of encountering different forms of collective subjectivity) can only arrive at the impersonal, rather than the transpersonal. Phillips finds an example within a collective experience that he only experiences at a fantasy level, suggesting (with an interpretative leap that is only slightly more excessive than Bersani's) that there is also an element of revenge, for threatening theoretical innovation, within Phillips's own transferential relation with Bersani.

What is certainly curious is that Bersani does not challenge Phillips's appropriative animus. He sets up the compound text as an attempt 'to formulate alternatives to the violent games of selfhood', citing Phillips's own definition of the encounter as an 'experience of exchange of intimacy, of desire indifferent to personal identity'. Such simultaneous self-exhibition and self-abnegation is perhaps illustrative less of openness and possibility than the desire and violence evaded and yet always inscribed within the agon of the psychoanalytic encounter, and the strange exchanges of two psychoanalytic doyens.

**Philip Derbyshire**

## Germany this autumn

*The Baader Meinhof Complex*, directed by Uli Edel, 149 minutes, 2008.

Whole film festivals could be programmed on the decade of German political unrest from the riotous demonstrations of the late 1960s to the emergency measures of the 'Hot Autumn' of 1977. From the beginning, film was inseparable from the movement. None more than Harun Farocki's agitprop film from 1968, *On Some Problems of the Anti-authoritarian and Anti-imperialist Struggle in the Metropolitan Areas, Using West Berlin as Example, or Their Newspapers*, which thematized the manipulative role of the Axel Springer newspaper concern. (Springer's press was central to the ideological war of the 1960s. It was blamed for inciting an assassin to target Rudi Dutschke in April 1968, after its calls to 'eliminate the trouble-makers' and 'stop the terror of the young Reds'.)

Farocki's film made parallels between military repression in Vietnam and ideological oppression in Germany. Bombs fall onto the Vietnamese, bundles of newspapers thud onto the streets of West Berlin. A twin assault: violence against Vietnamese bodies, violence towards German minds. At the end of the film activists turn words into weapons, as cobblestones are wrapped in Springer's newspapers in preparation for the street fighting. These were the days in which students occupied the film academy in Berlin, the red flag hoisted above the building, unofficially renamed, in homage to the 1920s' political avant-garde, 'The Dziga Vertov Academy'. Order restored, the occupiers, Farocki among them, were expelled from the film academy, but they continued to make films. Two from 1969, made by the Socialist Filmmakers Co-operative West Berlin, were titled *Untitled or: Nixon Comes to Berlin* and *Instructions For Stripping a Policeman of His Helmet*. Documentary was the chosen mode of accessing the data of social reality. Real demonstrations and debates found their way onto film. This was film as weapon, self-consciously using documentary in a Brechtian fashion, drawing on the resources of modern media with its barrage of techniques, such as montage, selection, distance and foregrounded manipulation or artifice – that which Brecht claimed needed to be obviously constructed in order to be radically truthful. Objectivity and subjectivity, theory and practice were pressed together using violence and humour.

A decade later the movement had stopped moving so stridently forwards and film, beginning perhaps with the multi-authored film, *Germany in Autumn* (1978), half-turned from documentary and partisanship to fictionalization and an emphasis on the problems of subjectivity in relation to political action and demands. The debates that ripped the Left asunder were played out in various scenarios. But overwhelmingly it is failure that resonates. Death – once a catalyst for action, as in the murder of first-time demonstrator Benno Ohnesorg by the police – becomes yet again a Meister from Germany. *Germany in Autumn* opens with the funeral of an RAF victim, industrialist Hanns-Martin Schleyer, and this is answered by the film's closing funeral of RAF leaders Gudrun Ensslin, Andreas Baader and Jan Carl Raspe. A grim balance is presented for contemplation. What went wrong? What might yet be salvaged? These questions demanded and provoked answers and more questions. The film intermingled 'objective' documentary footage and 'subjective' fictionalizing. It was this latter mode that dominated in the rash of films that followed: naturalistic reconstructions of plausible scenarios by von Trotta, Schlöndorff, Petzold and others explored the psychological interior of terroristic individuals and their relation to their intimates. It seemed to be a time for theory and analysis, not action.

Uli Edel's new film, *The Baader Meinhof Complex*, mulches all this past and pumps out another blend of the components, flipping the subjectivism of the previous epoch into its opposite, objectivism, and eschewing theory for practice, in the unreflected sense. It, too, as is by now expected of the mini-genre, is a melange of fictionalization and documentary. Reconstructions of key scenes and re-imaginings of others meld with media and police documentary footage. Hand-held camera and natural lighting are met with Dolby digital and special effects. Identification vies with alienation, invented characters and scenarios with verbatim dialogue and accurate numbers of bullet shots. From all this, the film hopes to concoct something ruthlessly 'objective', with the emphasis on ruthless. On those grounds, as many have condemned it as praised it. Its two and a half hours compress a remorseless chain of

actions and reactions. It is the objectivity of ‘neutrality’ (many reviews use this word), of not taking a position, in order to say something (or nothing) equally to each and all. Hurling along a historical trajectory, it never clearly banners its stance. To make that clear, or to make it possible for the viewer to take sides, the film would need to wrest a moment for contemplation among the incessant stream of actions.

This is the ‘objectivity’ of the impenetrable surface, along which the viewer glides, or rather bumps, hammered by the loud raps of the gunshots or the sudden blows of the policemen and terrorists, the Shah of Iran’s bodyguards or the Stammheim prison guards. Eisenstein invented *Kino-Fist*, cinema as assault on the senses, in a sort of politically sensuous shake-up designed to jerk into being the new Soviet human. Nowadays every Hollywood action film gives us a kicking, just for the thrill of the ride, but here, positioned constantly in the place where the blows hit (in turn, Jürgen Ponto or Benno Ohnesorg), we are shoved around within a historical-political context, battering on its facts, which we sense are significant, but the film cannot or will not allow us a moment to ponder, let alone propose and consider solutions. In line with this, it shuns psychological interiority or exploration of motivation. Baader appears as pure reactive energy – more a hateful embodiment of Benjamin’s ‘destructive character’ than a musing reader of critical theory’s curlicues – while Meinhof’s more fragile constitution is not self-doubt but self-destruction. Fucking and shooting are sibling actions and re-actions of the struggle.

Perhaps it is a relief that it is all action and so the endless talk and tortuous analysis generated by the German Left in those years is not reprised here yet again. (There is just one brief moment of debate in Stammheim, posed as dissent among the ranks,

when the issue arises of who the legitimate targets of violence should be). The group simply bursts out of the generally heightened atmosphere onto the scene: an act of sheer reaction to state-sanctioned violence. It appears to be the only game in town, and one dangerously close to becoming *de rigueur*, especially when headed by such pop stars as these. Is the courtroom scene where Ensslin and Baader provoke the judge by calling him a succession of rude epithets a premonition or an imitation of The Sex Pistols’ notorious appearance on *The Today Programme* with Bill Grundy, or just a product of something in the air? Only the slow-moving head of the Crime Squad, Horst Herold, asserts the need to question, interrupting the flow of the action to ask how we – they – might understand why terror happens, in order to stop it, and not just the current perpetrators, but the future ones too.

Analysis and understanding is not the film’s remit, nor was it the state’s in 1977, for action, in the form of absolute police lockdown in the ‘Hot Autumn’ is what Herold instigates. The consequence of that total mobilization of the police is the provocation of a next, harder generation. Stuck away in Stammheim (with their televisions, radios, books and successful requests for co-prisoners, ruling the roost), we witness the First Generation’s increasing despair as acts designed to free them fail and the tactics change – ‘innocent’ civilians become targets. It is as if they are sorcerers’ apprentices, unleashing something they cannot control. Violence escalates in response to violence. The film ends abruptly on an act of exchange, another balancing act. Schleyer’s body is dumped, a worthless piece of meat, just like the suicided corpses of Meinhof, Ensslin, Raspe and Baader. Everything was for nothing.

**Esther Leslie**

