

studies in

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# social & political thought

Volume 18

Winter 2010

## Report and Selected Papers

Utopia, Dystopia and Critical Theory - Sussex Conference

*R. Phillip Homburg, Leena Petersen, Matthew Charles, Stijn De Cauwer, Owen Holland*

## Articles

The One and the Many: Revisioning Adorno's Critique of Western Reason

*Deborah Cook*

Fetish and Refuge: A Mock Pastoral

*Keston Sutherland*

The Real State of Emergency: Agamben on Benjamin and Schmitt

*Colin McQuillan*

Ideology and Morality

*David Marjoribanks*

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*Global Justice: A Cosmopolitan Account* by Gillian Brock

*First Nations, First Thoughts* by Annis May Timpson

*Engaging Heidegger* by Richard Capobianco

*Derrida: Profanations* by Patrick O'Connor

*The Cultural Politics of Analytic Philosophy* by Thomas L. Akehurst

# studies in social and political thought

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## Editorial Note

This approach really boils down to an attempt to turn the university into a school, a people factory, which produces the commodity of labour power in the most rational possible way and enables people to sell it at a good price. This tendency is necessarily at the expense of the movement towards autonomy (Adorno, lecture, 14 May 1968)

The above sentiments expressed in Adorno’s lecture of 1968 strike an unpleasantly familiar chord with the present onslaught on higher education in the UK (England in particular). The refashioning of universities as short-termist corporatized institutions, designed to fulfill only what is immediately demanded of them by ‘the market’, is deplorable enough on its own. But, sadly, the refocusing of higher education merely forms part of a wider programme of massive cuts to important public services.

In an issue devoted to the concepts of utopia and dystopia, a quote from C.L.R. James captures the dystopian wave of current crises and ensuing cuts. James provides what may be the best description of the trajectory of the economic crisis and the ways in which the many attempts to resolve it have proliferated into further crises and cuts which look set to change society for the worse: “the fact above all which so demoralizes the modern world [is] that the greater the efforts made, the more terrible are the new forms in which the old social problems reappear”. This feeling of helplessness, and the fear of exacerbating existing problems, can lead to political paralysis. But the latter must be resisted.

Since these crises and cuts are manifold, and develop quickly, any attempt to provide a detailed editorial overview of the situation is bound to become rapidly antiquated. Yet, we will not remain silent on the issue.

We proclaim:

- a general and resolute stance *against* the ruinous cuts in education and elsewhere in essential public services;
- a principled *opposition* to the refashioning of higher education into a two-tiered model that provides a corporatized, technocratic finishing school for the debt-laden majority willing to mortgage their future, and a remnant of the post-war model for the privileged minority;
- an *affirmation* of the values which a critical ‘humanistic’ education can provide;
- *solidarity* with the flowering of protests and opposition prompted by these myopic cuts.

We also hope that those engaged in opposition against the brutal instrumentalization and quantification of education will realize their utopian potential of creating new modes of existence and education that not only counteract the cuts and crises but remedy the symptoms that brought about such problems in the first place.

In lieu of extended commentary, we hereby offer links to some of the best commentary on the education cuts so far, as well as sources of up-to-date information on the struggles against the cuts.

## Selected Commentary

'Nothing to do with the Economy' by Ross McKibbin  
[www.lrb.co.uk/v32/n22/ross-mckibbin/nothing-to-do-with-the-economy](http://www.lrb.co.uk/v32/n22/ross-mckibbin/nothing-to-do-with-the-economy)

'Cut the Shock Doctrine, Not University Funding' by Paul Bowman  
[www.ranciere.blogspot.com/2010/11/cut-shock-doctrine-not-university.html#\\_ednref1](http://www.ranciere.blogspot.com/2010/11/cut-shock-doctrine-not-university.html#_ednref1)

'A Faustian Bargain' by Gregory A. Petsko  
[www.genomebiology.com/2010/11/10/138](http://www.genomebiology.com/2010/11/10/138)

'Why Humanities Matter' (audio files)  
[www.backdoorbroadcasting.net/2010/11/why-humanities-conference-page/](http://www.backdoorbroadcasting.net/2010/11/why-humanities-conference-page/)

'Browne's Gamble' by Stefan Collini  
[www.lrb.co.uk/v32/n21/stefan-collini/brownes-gamble](http://www.lrb.co.uk/v32/n21/stefan-collini/brownes-gamble)

'Science Geeks of the World Unite' by Stefan Collini  
[www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/dec/01/science-geeks-unite-higher-education-funding](http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/dec/01/science-geeks-unite-higher-education-funding)

'The End of the Public University in England' by James Vernon  
[www.stormbreaking.blogspot.com/2010/11/end-of-public-university-in-england.html](http://www.stormbreaking.blogspot.com/2010/11/end-of-public-university-in-england.html)

'The Grim Threat to British Universities' by Simon Head  
[www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2011/jan/13/grim-threat-british-universities/](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2011/jan/13/grim-threat-british-universities/)

'Frequently Asserted Fallacies of the Crisis' by Mute Editorial Collective  
[www.metamute.org/en/articles/frequently\\_asserted\\_fallacies\\_of\\_the\\_crisis](http://www.metamute.org/en/articles/frequently_asserted_fallacies_of_the_crisis)

'A New Strategy is needed for a Brutal New Era' by Peter Hallward  
[www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=414573&c=2](http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=414573&c=2)

'The Death of the University' by Terry Eagleton  
[www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/dec/17/death-universities-malaise-tuition-fees](http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/dec/17/death-universities-malaise-tuition-fees)

'The Value of Higher Education Made Literal' by Stanley Fish  
<http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/12/13/the-value-of-higher-education-made-literal/>

'Now That's Research Impact' by John Morgan  
[www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=414764&c=1](http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=414764&c=1)

### **Points of Resistance**

Campaign for public university [www.publicuniversity.org.uk](http://www.publicuniversity.org.uk)

Coalition of resistance [www.coalitionofresistance.org.uk](http://www.coalitionofresistance.org.uk)

National Campaign against Fees and Cuts [www.anticuts.com](http://www.anticuts.com)

Defend the Arts and Humanities [www.defendartsandhums.blogspot.com](http://www.defendartsandhums.blogspot.com)

False Economy [www.falseeconomy.org.uk](http://www.falseeconomy.org.uk)

UK Uncut [www.ukuncut.org.uk](http://www.ukuncut.org.uk)

New Left Project [www.newleftproject.org](http://www.newleftproject.org)

Campaign for Social Science [www.campaignforsocialscience.org.uk](http://www.campaignforsocialscience.org.uk)

Humanities and Social Sciences Matter  
[www.humanitiesmatter.wordpress.com](http://www.humanitiesmatter.wordpress.com)

Education Activist Network  
[www.educationactivistnetwork.wordpress.com](http://www.educationactivistnetwork.wordpress.com)

Liberal Conspiracy [www.liberalconspiracy.org](http://www.liberalconspiracy.org)

Mute Magazine [www.metamute.org](http://www.metamute.org)

Infinite Thought [www.infinitethought.cinestatic.com](http://www.infinitethought.cinestatic.com)

Justice for Alfie Meadows [www.facebook.com/#!/pages/Justice-for-Alfie-Meadows/137723072947484?v=info](http://www.facebook.com/#!/pages/Justice-for-Alfie-Meadows/137723072947484?v=info)

Amid the present uncertainties and darkening skies enveloping the social and political imagination, let this volume stand as a gesture of defiance against those who would make of education a mere instrument and individual commodity. We support the *truly* progressive forces in society and will assist wherever possible in the undermining of these proposed cuts to higher education and other indispensable public provisions.

In solidarity,

Chris O’Kane  
Simon Mussell  
R. Phillip Homburg  
Verena Erlenbusch  
Zoe Sutherland  
Tim Carter  
Arthur Willemse  
Alastair Kemp  
Chris Allsobrook  
Huw Rees  
Elliot Rose  
Angela Koffman  
Thomas Jeffery



# SPT Conference on Utopia, Dystopia and Critical Theory

## Conference Report

by R. Phillip Homburg

On May 13th, 2010, the Centre for Social and Political Thought, and the Centre for Literature and Philosophy, at the University of Sussex held a conference entitled *Utopia, Dystopia and Critical Theory*. A variety of papers were presented including keynote presentations by Keston Sutherland (Sussex) and Nina Power (Roehampton). I have been given the privilege to edit a selection of the papers that were given that day for *Studies in Social and Political Thought*. I will begin with some thoughts on the concept of utopia before introducing the papers.<sup>1</sup>

The concept of utopia is not unique to Thomas More. Traces of this notion can be found in the work of thinkers before him, notably Plato's *Republic*. At the very least, More must be credited with coining the term, which comes from the Greek οὐ and τόπος. More plays with the relationship between *ou-topos* (no place) and *eu-topos* (good place).<sup>2</sup> Two things should be noted here: first, the implications of the play between nothing and perfection; and, second, utopia's geographical or spatial aspect. More's utopia has a specific geographical characteristic: it was an island separated on all sides by a vast, almost impenetrable ocean. More goes to great lengths to demonstrate the illusory character of utopia, while, at the same time, also suggesting the relationship between a better society and technical progress – better ships and navigation could be used to penetrate the depths surrounding the island. The illusory nature of utopia is embodied in the protagonist's interlocutor and visitor to the utopian island, Raphael Hythlodæus, whose last name incorporates *hythlos* (the Greek for 'nonsense'). It is possible to interpret More either as a critic of the utopian notion, or as a holder of utopian ideals. In either case, it must be recognized that More is addressing a specific social and political problem: we can project a more perfect image of society through thought, and it is possible that progress can lead towards this aim.

As Leena Petersen points out in the opening essay in this section, the spatial utopia of More has given way to a temporal model. This has resulted in the

increasingly abstract nature of utopia. As the promise of Enlightenment progress diminished, the more utopia had to be deferred. Discourse on utopia became a critique of the contemporaneous in the name of the future. However, it should be borne in mind that along with these progressive visions there are equally powerful regressive visions. The progressive idea of utopia is often manifested as a form of immanence, in such thinkers as Walter Benjamin and Ernst Bloch, or as regressive in transcendent thinkers like Leo Strauss. This regressive idea of utopia draws from certain aspects of the classicism of Romantic and neo-Romantic thinking. The regressive vision of utopia can be seen at its summit of barbarism in fascism's tenets of *Kultur* and authenticity. However, this regressive tendency can also be viewed in so-called progressive movements that can be broadly placed under the heading of Romantic anti-capitalism. These movements would include strands such as primitivism and certain aspects of the thought of figures such as Geörgy Lukács and Herbert Marcuse. Romantic anti-capitalism rests on the idea that there was a moment in history where humanity's essence as social being was fully realized, and that through the destruction or restructuring of those institutions that block this realization human being's true essence can be rediscovered.

Despite this difference, both the progressive and regressive visions of utopia hold one thing in common: they are, first and foremost, critiques of the contemporary. By moving from a spatial concept to a temporal one, utopia undergoes a qualitative change. It is a concept that is both indebted to and despondent of Enlightenment progress. Utopia is no longer something to be discovered, but something that must be realized.

What becomes obvious when we examine the discourse of utopia in this way is that, as a temporal concept, it is a slippery and abstract notion that has an equally regressive and progressive side. It is a relatively empty vessel of a concept that can be stowed with radically different forms of critique. This problem manifests itself most acutely when the movement from abstract to concrete utopia is attempted. Once utopia moves from abstract thought to the concrete, its critical power is extinguished. This movement necessitates discussion of the various practical intricacies necessary to realize utopia concretely. The best possible situation is one in which discourse on utopia becomes superfluous – i.e. the perfect society is realized – while the worst is a situation in which discourse on utopia must begin anew – i.e. the utopia is imperfect or perverted.

As an abstract concept, however, it is precisely this dialectic of the real and the possible that gives utopia its critical power. This conflict between the

possible and the real, which usually takes the guise of commonsense, can be seen in a variety of contemporary examples. Recently, Nick Clegg offered this statement on the morning of the vote for the trebling of the cap on tuition fees for British higher education students:

‘I would feel ashamed if I didn’t deal with the way that the world is, not simply dream of the way the world I would like it to be’, the Deputy Prime Minister said. ‘In the circumstances in which we face, where there isn’t very much money around, where many millions of other people are being asked to make sacrifices, where many young people in the future want to go to university – we have to find the solution for all of that’ (*The Telegraph*, 09 December, 2010)<sup>3</sup>

Here, Clegg takes the role of the realist, with those who oppose Clegg and his fellow coalition members being cast as abstract utopians. The latter, like Raphael Hythlodæus, are seen as nonsensical and simply not dealing with reality. What recourse does a critical theory of society have in the face of such hard-nosed realism?

One possibility is to think *dystopia*, which in current thinking seems to be a stand-in for reality. Taken from the Greek *δυσ* and *τόπος* (meaning ‘bad place’), it lacks the double meaning and nuance of utopia. Dystopia is the perversion of utopia, it is often represented in literature as a perfect society crippled by a single fatal flaw. Thus, dystopia reveals the essential problem of concrete utopia: the concrete realization of a utopian project has unpredictable results. In addition, dystopian societies are often portrayed as the result of rationalization gone wrong. Humanity is atomized – cut off from its social being – and separated from physical nature. There are irrational and Romantic elements at work here, a flipside to the debt utopia owes to Enlightenment progress. And, in this light, it is not really utopia that dystopia stands against, but contemporary social reality as well. Dystopia is a projection of the present, the worst parts of the present, into the future. Its critical force, however, is more questionable than the concept of utopia, for is not dystopia a form of resignation in the face of the overwhelming power of the present? What can a critical theory of society do without a principle of possibility or hope?

In light of the descriptions of the current reality as dystopia, another possibility is to join in with the realists, throw our hands up and resign ourselves to our fate under the mythic power of the Conservative-LibDem coalition. If this is distasteful, there is always the option of subsuming theory under practice, and attempting to realize utopia concretely as some of the

more vulgar Marxisms advise. It should not be forgotten, however, that Marx's subsumption of theory under practice was predicated on the realization of human essence in the ensemble of human relations, something perhaps only Milton Friedman could ascribe to the contemporary social reality of high capitalism. Discourses on utopia should note Theodor Adorno's enigmatic maxim: "Utopia is blocked off by possibility, never by immediate reality; this is why it seems abstract in the midst of extant things" (1973: 57). As long as utopia is caught in the heteronomous dialectic of the possible and the real it will always be subject to the dominance of the real, but in this dialectic it also finds its critical power. The demand for concrete utopia must end either in its realization or in dystopia. In the first case, utopia has become a superfluous notion, while, in the second, the idea of utopia (if it has survived) must be thought once again, against whatever new form social reality takes. Thus, it is only in the face of reality that utopia serves its critical function. The papers presented here engage with the notion of utopia critically, but they do not 'throw the baby out with the bath water', a sin Adorno ascribed to those more practically-minded thinkers who unreflectively subsume theory under practice.

The section opens with a paper by Leena Petersen (Sussex). Petersen offers both a history of the notion of utopia, and an attempt to come to terms with its present state of unpopularity. Utopia is revealed to be a multifaceted concept: it is not merely something that emanates from the abstract individual as a resistance against universalism, nor is it simply the humanist yearning for a better society. Instead, the post-Enlightenment notion of utopia originates as a critique of the contemporaneous. The traditional spatial model of utopia, held by figures such as Thomas More, is temporally transformed into a concept that stands in dialectical relation to the present: the perfect world of utopia is no longer the remote island called no-where, but a possibility awaiting actualization. Thus, utopia takes on the peculiar role as the mediator between the present and a possible better future. The second half of the paper examines the relationship between concrete and abstract utopia primarily through the relationship between Max Horkheimer and Ernst Bloch, before concluding with a provocative examination of Walter Benjamin's critique of capitalist modernity. Concrete utopia is difficult to locate in a system such as high capitalism that dominates both space and time, but it is the non-conceptuality of abstract utopia that can provide the grounding for a critique of immanent social reality. Thus, the domination of the notion of concrete utopia by capitalism can only be resisted from outside of capitalism's horizon, namely, in the non-conceptual. Petersen's paper demonstrates a shared methodological point among members of the first-generation of the Frankfurt School and Walter Benjamin: they shared a

notion of abstract utopia that maintained the utopian tradition in philosophy while, at the same time, preserving the form of resistance essential to that theory in the form of the non-conceptual.

Matthew Charles (Middlesex) offers a thorough examination of the current recuperation of Ernst Bloch's philosophy, particularly in the burgeoning field of Utopian Studies. Charles locates a renewal of the notion of utopia in literary criticism and Utopian Studies. This field draws extensively on the work of Fredric Jameson who, in turn, drew heavily on the early Frankfurt School and Ernst Bloch. Charles' paper emphasizes the one-sidedness of utopian studies, which originates in an antinomy in Bloch's thought. Quoting Adorno, Charles locates this antinomy in the tension between utopia and utopianism. Bloch's thought contains a concrete notion of utopia (the Soviet Union) which Utopian Studies rejects. The latter is a field of study that contains a utopian impulse, but lacks the political commitment contained in a figure such as Bloch. Thus, Utopian Studies is stuck between the critical power of the notion of utopian, which is essentially outside of history, and the fact that, for Bloch at least, utopia was realizable historically. Utopian Studies, therefore, contains an implicit tendency towards affirming contemporary social reality. Following this institutional critique, Charles engages critically with Bloch, drawing heavily on the thought of Walter Benjamin. Ultimately, the question for Bloch and Utopian Studies is: "How can anything have significance or meaning if one fails to pose the question of totality or fulfilment?" Bloch wants to answer the question by pointing towards the Soviet Union, but he still has to address the fact that his utopian images contain an element of incompleteness at the level of historical significance. Thus, Bloch's utopia is one-sided and constantly deferred since the antinomy between its historical realization and its present incompleteness is never overcome. By simply ignoring this problem of historical signification, Utopian Studies is bound to remain limited in its scope and potential. The answer to this problem can be found in Walter Benjamin's notion of the dialectical image which places emphasis on the mediated relationship between signification and historical significance.

Stijn De Cauwer (Utrecht) follows with an examination of the utopian aspects of Robert Musil's *The Man without Qualities*. Breaking with the Lukácsian reading of Musil, Cauwer reads Musil's unfinished masterpiece in light of what he calls the novel's critical-utopian aspect. This reading of the novel is less concerned with the experimental character of the novel than with the conditions of possibility for the formation of a new reality. For Lukács, the claim by the titular man without qualities, Ulrich, namely that, if he could, he would abolish reality, reveals the emptiness of much cultural

critique prevalent in high modernism. Cauwer wishes to counter this paradigmatic reading. He does so by bringing to light a Nietzschean element in Musil's thought, in particular an underlying critique of petrified morality that characterizes his work before and after *The Man without Qualities*. Thus, Cauwer locates a form of ideology critique in Musil that unites him with Ernst Bloch. Like Bloch, Musil wished to open the utopian potential within the concrete by engaging critically with ideology. In contrast to the Lukácsian reading that views Ulrich's statement as a flee from the concrete into abstract utopia, Cauwer demonstrates that Musil wanted to "increase a *sense of possibility*" through his critical-utopian ethos.

Finally, we close with Owen Holland's examination of Karl Marx's reading of Aeschylus. This examination broadens out to locate the importance of literature in Marx's overall theory. This interpretation rests on the figure of Prometheus, the titan from Greek mythology who gave fire to the mortals only to be punished by Zeus: Prometheus was tied to a rock to have his liver, which would regenerate every day, eaten by eagles. Holland offers a penetrating historical materialist analysis of the relationship between the Prometheus myth and Marx's dialectic of thought and being. Prometheus represents a reminder of past oppression, in that he "demonstrates a historical consciousness capable of uncovering buried narratives". Like Benjamin's reading of *Angelus Novus*, Prometheus looks both forwards and backwards. Prometheus also represents the two sides of progress: he stands for both a provider of the tools of progress, and the latter's cost. Holland makes an excellent case for greater recognition of Aeschylus' influence on Marxian thought, not only through its content but in the literary form itself. This is especially evident in Marx's use of the metaphor of history as the stage of human activity. Based on this analysis, it is unsurprising that the history of Marxist thought is so intertwined with literature.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Chris Allsobrook, Adriana Bontea, Katerina Deligiorgi and Gordon Finlayson for their help in facilitating the conference. I am especially grateful to Simon Mussell, Chris O'Kane and Zoe Sutherland for their help organizing and chairing the various panels. Special thanks to our keynote speakers Keston Sutherland and Nina Power, and to Peter Osborne who was unable to make it to the conference.

<sup>2</sup> The Canadian author, Margaret Atwood, notes this in her essay on Aldous Huxley (see Atwood, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> 'Tuition fees: Nick Clegg says opponents of rise are "dreamers"' Retrieved from: [www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newsttopics/politics/8191113/Tuition-fees-Nick-Clegg-says-opponents-of-rise-are-dreamers.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newsttopics/politics/8191113/Tuition-fees-Nick-Clegg-says-opponents-of-rise-are-dreamers.html)

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# Reconsidering Utopia: On the Entanglement of Mind and History<sup>1</sup>

by Leena Petersen

When considering the concept of utopia, the following quote from Oscar Wilde comes to mind:

A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not even worth glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and seeing a better country, sets sail (cited in Levitas, 1990: 5)

In stark contrast to the relevance accorded to utopia in this famous quote, in 2006, the Metzler Encyclopaedia of Aesthetics states that today utopia is not fashionable at all (Adamowsky, 2006: 400-402). Similarly, critics both past and present highlight utopia's (supposedly) intrinsically 'impractical character', which allegedly makes it less appropriate for the contemporary context. According to these opponents of utopia, the speculations about a better society remain unconvertible. As Levitas notes:

[Their] dismissal may be tolerantly good-humoured, seeing utopia as an interesting if esoteric byway of culture and the utopian as a well-meaning dreamer. It may, on the other hand, be extremely hostile, seeing attempts at instituting utopia as highly dangerous and leading to totalitarianism (1990: 3)

Utopia emanates, as they criticise, from the idea of an abstract individual and also from the "deception of a universalist solution" (Saage, 1991: 338). In contrast to this rather conservative criticism, utopia might possess a particular function in society, as Wilde's quotation indicates. It is regarded as potentially initiating change for the better, usually in the name of humanism (Dierse, 2001: 521). Besides that, however, utopia turns out to be a very diverse idea, which does not necessarily include individuation. Modern utopia not only varies from concrete images of a better place to abstract notions of a future state of freedom, but it also ranges from spatial to temporal models, sometimes blending utopian topos and time. The multifaceted character of the modern concept of utopia reveals itself in its



historical development, which I will explore in what follows.

Initially, Thomas More shaped the term 'utopia' and connects it with Plato's *Politeia*. More's *Utopia* is certainly comparable with other treatments on the best possible state in the beginning of the sixteenth-century. However, it includes an innovation, inasmuch as the idea of a perfect human life is no longer connected with a Christian order of salvation, fall of man and redemption, but instead is to be found in the worldly immanent sphere. Like More's utopia, other earlier concepts were inventing so-called spatial utopia. A different society could exist at the same time, but in a clearly separated and defined space such as an island, for example. The more universal temporal model was developed only later on – during and after the Enlightenment – when the idea of progress came to be central (Koselleck, 1982: 1). It was, however, already the Anarchist French writer, Louis-Sébastien Mercier, who indicated most significantly the change from spatial to temporal utopia. In 1770, Mercier published a 'dream', which he called *L'An 2440, rêve s'il en fut jamais*. Mercier's novel alludes to the frequently libertarian elements in modern temporal utopia. Correspondingly, already in England of the seventeenth-century, and in France of the late eighteenth-century, the concept of utopia becomes politicised. Considering the huge number of novelists who are critical of the current and historical state of affairs and make use of new political models, utopia is no longer necessarily regarded as a mere imaginary hypothesis, but at least as partly convertible. The role as mediator between the present and a better future reality highlights this new feature of utopia, which gains particular influence after the Enlightenment. Instead of being imagined as a remote place – like in earlier literature – utopia here becomes embedded into historical progress as a distant but possible future (Koselleck, 1982: 1-14). This development expands towards the nineteenth-century. Simultaneous with the arising social critique of this period, the modern temporal utopia is evoked, which hopes for a change for the better in due time.<sup>2</sup> Utopian ideas are no more defined as ideas in direct opposition to reality, but as objects of potential historical realisation. Although the term 'utopia' at this time is less common – since it had become rather a derogative denomination – in its place come the terms 'communism' and 'socialism' (Dierse, 2001: 516). This aspect will become important at a later point of the paper. In general terms, utopia at this time becomes regarded as a critique of the contemporaneous.

In the beginning of the twentieth-century, the ambivalence of earlier utopias is referred to frequently. Although they would fail in the light of complex reality, utopias would forestall historical fatalism, an aspect which becomes

important for moderate models. Beyond utopian failure within reality, Hans Freyer in his study, *The Political Island* (1936), concludes that in utopia history comes to a standstill. Here, the temporal aspect – which represents one of the most important modern features of utopia – comes to be part of a potential realisation of utopian ideas. The novelty consists in a combination with history. The futural element of utopia is now regarded as necessary in order to initiate change, while the consideration of the past and present comes to be a fundamental and interrelated reason for transformations.

Utopia as the moment of standstill in history becomes important for various modern theories. Such approaches, which reintegrate the historicised idea as a catalyst for possibly radical change, can be found in the ideas developed by the likes of Ernst Bloch and Herbert Marcuse. Primarily, utopia is now picturing a better future society based primarily on universalism, humanism and disalienation, in contrast to the negative past and present. Gustav Landauer represents one interpretation of utopia, which might be helpful to explain the historical concept of utopia in this period of time in greater detail. Landauer dismisses orthodox Marxism and interprets world history through a distinction between utopia and topos. World history becomes, thus, a progression of stable and revolutionary periods. He defines utopia as vibrant accumulation of individual endeavours and tendencies. In a moment of historical crisis, this accumulation would be united in the creation of a functioning topos. Utopia itself remains to be a thought, which disappears almost entirely during the attempt of its realisation. According to Landauer, utopia is not only referring to the current socio-political context, but can be regarded as memory of all earlier utopian thought. Somewhat corresponding to this historically situated, critical interpretation, the nineteenth-century writer, Moritz Kaufmann, argues the following:

The appeal of utopia is directly proportional to the level of social discontent; and being the expression of popular discontent, utopias are the product of social disharmony, indeed social pathology [. . .] The acceptable function of utopia is, then, the embodiment of an impossible ideal in the form of a description of a fictitious state of society, and inspiration to the continued march of progress (cited in Levitas, 1990: 14)

Thus, the *function* of utopia becomes a crucial issue. Whereas Marx and Engels are generally regarded as rejecting utopia,<sup>3</sup> or at the least only using utopia *negatively*, Karl Mannheim, who follows Landauer's conception, "reverses this judgement and defines utopia [*positively*] as that which transforms the status quo, irrespective of its form" (Levitas, 1990: 6).

Mannheim's definition, then, relies heavily upon utopia's *function*. Since Marxism was often regarded as rejecting utopia, one can locate some attempts to reintegrate the idea as a catalyst for radical social change – as done exemplarily by Ernst Bloch and Herbert Marcuse (ibid.). Moreover, an awareness of crisis and the urge to plan for a better society (in the case of positive utopia), or to point out destructive tendencies (in the case of negative utopia), might arise from a certain critical distance towards the present. Creating a better world, in particular, is related towards a feeling of estrangement or alienation towards the current time. Hence, in utopian thought, one can also find the central concern of *disalienation*.

Frequently, utopia is connected with libertarian ideas, as mentioned earlier, and sometimes with Jewish and Christian messianic intentions. In this regard, utopia became a core aspect of Critical Theory. Yet, the idea of utopia is much debated within the work of the early Frankfurt School. Partially, utopian thought is regarded as necessary in order to initiate change, since, as Fritz Polak points out, utopia represents a mediator between the present and future reality, a constant task of humankind. Following Herbert Marcuse, one can arrive at a partial realisation of utopia, namely, within phantasm and the arts as the free play of possibilities. If the productive forces are enabled for an organisation of a liberated society, one could, as Marcuse claims, speak of the end of utopia.

In contrast to Marcuse, Adorno determines that utopia cannot be conceptually grasped. Utopia cannot be envisioned and remains ineffable – even artworks cannot express or concretise it. However, the notion of cognitive utopia contains a particular quality, namely, that concepts can be used to unseal the non-conceptual. As Rolf Tiedemann explains in his introduction to Adorno's *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*:

This non-conceptual realm [. . .] is not something already given, already available, that existing knowledge somehow fails to reach [. . .] [Instead] it is potentially implicit in the abstract concepts themselves that compel us to go beyond their rigid, would-be conclusive, fixed meanings (2008: xvi)

Hence, utopia's function can be found in a revelation of the non-conceptual out of a flexible combination (or 'constellation') of abstract concepts. In contrast, the dialectic of determinate negation serves to distance itself from concrete utopia in the following way:

Representational thinking would be without reflection – an undialectical contradiction, for without reflection there is no theory [. . .] The materialist longing to grasp the thing aims at the opposite: it is only in the absence of images that the full object could be conceived. Such absence concurs with the theological ban on images. Materialism brought that ban into secular form by not permitting Utopia to be positively pictured; this is the substance of its negativity. At its most materialistic, materialism comes to agree with theology (Adorno, 1973: 206)

Thus, in contrast to the vision of Marcuse's free play of possibilities, Max Horkheimer in collaboration with Adorno evokes a ban on images, which prohibits the concrete envisioning of utopia. Horkheimer and Adorno focus on the radicalisation of the second and third commandment of the Jewish Decalogue and secularize its prohibition against making names or images of the absolute into the driving methodological force of their form of critical theory. Obviously, this approach differs from other critical theorist's take on the vision of a better future.

Ernst Bloch establishes an innovative and optimistic new concept of utopia. This concept bears some similarities with Adorno's and Horkheimer's, as might become apparent later. However, their dissimilarities may well prevail. Without defining the term entirely, Bloch's concept combines philosophy and theology of history, and calls utopia whatever exceeds the given, concluded, and actual, towards a dreamed future. Utopia is the not-yet and the possible. It represents the novelty, which is already disposed in the existing. Similar to Marcuse and in contrast to Adorno, Bloch states that one can find it in the arts, in particular, within music, which, according to him, rises above the empirical. Entailing a Jewish-Christian eschatology and messianic hope, Bloch's Marxism views utopia as inherent in all matter. In Bloch's interpretation, the utopian becomes an essential human characteristic in general. He points out that utopia opens up the path to a disalienated existence. Concrete utopia anticipates reality and acknowledges historical movement through an interaction with empirical reality. Here, the relevance of Bloch's temporal conception of utopia comes to the fore. It is defined by anticipation, which combines the present with the future and engages, as a result, with hope. Its temporality is three-dimensional and embraces past, present and future. Within anticipation of a better future, knowledge is gained through the ontology of anticipation, that is, the anticipation of the not-yet, which points out the progressive element in Bloch's utopia.

However, despite its empirical interaction, utopia is non-synchronic towards the present, due to the contradictions inherent in past and present. The

empirical past and present include the traumatic, negative aspects of the past. Out of these a better future is supposed to be redeemed. Although this might recall the inverse theology of remembrance of the suffering and a longing for Messianic redemption, as developed by Walter Benjamin and Adorno, the related negativity is missing here. Moreover, in contrast and addition to Bloch's concept of temporality, Paul Tillich developed a different but equally eschatologically shaped approach. Tillich, who worked closely with the early Frankfurt School, follows to a large extent Bloch's definition. However, Tillich points out that utopia would be closely related to humanity's finitude and would ignore human's peccability. Thus, he suggests extending the so-called horizontal utopia, which has temporal-spatial qualities, towards a *vertical* utopia concerned with the beyond. Religious socialism would, thus, resist worldly temptations, since, as Tillich argues, each realisation (socialism included) would be on trial before God in the end. The perfection of utopia would, hence, remain for humanity in the invisible. Nevertheless, it would leave an expression in its time. In this world, in the "battling realm of God in history", as Tillich calls it, man would become aware of finitude and vertical utopia (Dierse, 2001: 520). Hence, Tillich insists on the aspect of transcendence, and adds Protestant ethics together with socialist motives to his religiously tinged notion of utopia.

Returning to Bloch's conception of utopia, the historico-philosophical aspects may prove problematic. The universality of Bloch's utopia is particularly challenged by its allusion to Hegelian motifs. The universal approach within the Hegelian philosophy of history can be put into question. Since Hegel criticised the demarcation of moral obligations and the historical situation, he located moral reasoning in the philosophy of history. He integrated a universal morality into his system, when he thought that within the French Revolution values like equality and liberty would provoke a world historical breakthrough. However, by positioning moral reasoning within the philosophy of history, Hegel induced an unavoidable historical injustice between generations.<sup>4</sup> The equality of rights in the present becomes related to the inequality of the past. However, a moral which regards equality as a right only for a certain generation, namely, the coming generation in the future, becomes particular instead of universal. Thus, the present claim of equal rights happens to be limited. The critique of embedding the humanist ideas into a philosophy of history is also criticised within the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. The introduction of humanist ideas diminishes not only their innocence, but also risks transforming them into their opposite (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2003: 255). Within such philosophies of history, the present failures of society can only be explained by embedding them into a process towards a potential better future. The wish for a meaningful and progressive

structure is understandable, however, and Bloch's hopeful anticipation of utopia can be detracted from its universal ambitions. Therefore, in the following, I will outline Horkheimer's dissimilar approach, which lacks this very temporal component as well as the embedding of ethical ideas into history. Although he shares Bloch's approach to move from the individual experience to the whole of society, Horkheimer's critical and temporal perspectives on utopia, ethics and politics differ fundamentally. To pre-empt the conclusion somewhat, their different approaches can be found in their divergent models of critique. While both are concerned with a connection of politics and ethics or aesthetics, respectively, Bloch considers ethics/aesthetics as an implicit rationale. Bloch elaborates this rationale hermeneutically, while Horkheimer does not consider it inherent to the sphere of values and instead appends them as independent categories of critique.

In bourgeois philosophy, as Horkheimer criticises in his famous study, in contrast to utopianism, utopia functions as glorification of the given society, and, thus, represents extant categories as eternal. So, if attempts to create a happy present for everyone fail, a philosophy of history has to evolve. This very philosophy provides a benevolent meaning for every chaotic incidence of life and death. Regarding the idea of historical progress, Horkheimer states that it represents a fact that history has realised a better society out of a worse one. However, as he critically remarks, it is also a fact that the path of history moves on the grounds of the suffering of the individual. Between those two facts, one can find some explanatory connections but no justificatory meaning. Rather, the modern psychological reception of history points out the contrast between ideology as producer of semblance, and utopia as dream of the 'true' and just order of life. Ideology and utopia can be considered, moreover, as mindsets of social groups arising from the whole of social reality (Horkheimer, 1987: 179). Hence, their examination becomes not only important, but, at the same time, the analysis of utopia and ideology indicates the problems of concrete utopian thought itself.

The elements of phantasm, which might be also found in Bloch's moment of anticipation, are critically examined by Horkheimer as to their potential to alter and resist reality. According to Horkheimer, utopia leaps in time, namely, from the desires which arise from the particular state of society, and the actual alterations within contemporary culture. Here, in this 'leap in time' (or, as Bloch calls it, 'rupture'), utopia wants to build a perfect society upon the sources found in the present society. Utopia does not acknowledge the gap between the historical stage from which it is thriving, and the plan

of its nowhere-land. However, this historical context has material conditions of its becoming, being and decaying. Utopia, as Horkheimer points out, aims to reduce the suffering of contemporary society, and, thereby, maintain the good of its current state. But, thereby, it would be easily forgotten that the good and the bad are only different aspects of the same status, since they rely upon the same conditions. For utopian thought, an alteration of the existent is not related towards a laborious and devotional transformation of the foundations of society, but displaced into the minds of the subjects. As such, the utopian doctrine appears to contain a logical problem: the human imaginations – which are affected by the present and negative institutions – are not only expected to work patiently on the present reality, as might be reasonable, but they have to picture a most detailed ideal image of a perfect society in the future. Here, Horkheimer detects the same arrogant conception of general reason as in bourgeois philosophy. In the function of this philosophy, in contrast to utopianism, this very concrete utopia is assigned to transfigure the present society, and to claim their categories as eternal ones.

Following on from this, it might be interesting to consider Horkheimer's distinctions within utopian thought further. One central difference consists in his idea that, in abstract utopianism, politics and ethics are combined. Utopia plays, according to Horkheimer, a significant role within each philosophical judgement of human society. Regarding the combination of ethics and politics, reason comes to be a fundamental principle. In programmatic essays, such as 'Traditional and Critical Theory' (1937), Horkheimer concludes that in lieu of viable progressive politics emancipatory ideals have sought refuge in the concept of reason. The utopian dimension can be found by following philosophy's mission to adumbrate and project humanity's highest aspirations and goals. Metaphysics delineated conceptions of 'truth', 'beauty', 'justice', and 'goodness', which, at a later point, an informed citizenry would try to realise in practice. During the 1930s, Horkheimer was perturbed by the anti-intellectual theoretical currents that rejected metaphysics outright. Such theories, along with metaphysics, seemingly renounced all prospects for human betterment. Logical positivism, as exemplary of this position, sought to reduce valid knowledge to what could be specified in so-called 'protocol sentences'. Meaning in general was narrowly reduced to circumstances that could be empirically verified. All else – poetry, morality, the *summum bonnum* or 'highest goods' – was dismissed as essentially meaningless: the "stuff of human reverie on a starry night" (Wolin, 2006: 2). Regarding the role of utopianism, here, Horkheimer acknowledges its function of critique

by including the *summum bonnum*. Utopia itself is a critique of the existent and a representation of what should follow. Utopia represents a radical renunciation of the historical situation, which ought to be changed in order to move toward a more desirable and free world. However, in 1947, ten years after the publication of 'Traditional and Critical Theory' and subsequent to the Shoah, Horkheimer's conclusion is necessarily disillusioned. Since it explains his theoretical approach, and his repositioning of critique, in the following I quote at length from the respective paragraph from *The Eclipse of Reason*:

At one time humanism dreamed of uniting humanity by giving it a common understanding of its destination. It thought that it could bring about a good society by theoretical criticism of contemporary practice, which would then shift over to the right political activity. This seems to have been an illusion. Today words are supposed to be blueprints for action. People think that the requirements of being should be reinforced by philosophy as the servant of being. This is just as much of an illusion, and is shared by positivism and neo-Thomism. The positivist command to conform to facts and common sense instead of utopian ideas is not so different from the call to obey reality as interpreted by religious institutions, which after all are facts too. Each camp undoubtedly expresses a truth, under the distortion of making it exclusive [. . .] One tends to replace autonomous reason by the automatism of streamlined methodology, the other by the authority of a dogma (Horkheimer, 1947: 90)

Beyond a search for truth, and instead of aiming at the highest goals and independent thought, current considerations focus, according to this pessimistic account of Horkheimer, either on empirically verifiable certainty or dogmatism. As a result, both currents are excluding history and ethics, as well as hope.

In 1950, however, Horkheimer came to reconsider the utopian element in critical philosophy. In Horkheimer's view, consciousness is both immanent and transcendent. As an aspect of human material existence, consciousness is immanent and dependent upon the present stage of society. Yet, since it possesses a utopian truth-content, projecting beyond the limits of the present, consciousness is also transcendent. Consciousness insists upon this utopian dimension and remains faithful to the utopian content of the philosophical tradition. Hence, the union of politics and ethics attempts to comprise original historical experience, through philosophical critique, to a model of enlightened thought.



Although it also indicates hope and an ethical dimension, Horkheimer's critique of utopia differs from Bloch insofar as it neither becomes a methodology nor accepts concrete utopia. Quite the reverse, if one bears in mind the ban on images and the integration of ethics into historical progress. Following from this, the main difference between Bloch's and Horkheimer's respective approaches towards utopia lies in their distinct forms of critique mentioned above. While Bloch seeks the not-yet in the arts and orients his methodology along the lines of messianic redemption, Horkheimer targets philosophical reason against the currents of time. For Horkheimer, utopia – as well as ideology – requires interpretation as a constituent part of both past and present. Modern philosophical reason contains ethics, that is, the materialist humanist ideals of a free, self-determining society. Here, within the critique and dialectics, one can find also the negative utopianism beyond a positive utopia of the existent. However, the main element of Horkheimer's approach consists in both the *interpretation* and *critique* of the existent, which might – due to patient work on reality and the mind's entanglement with history – provoke a transformation. In contrast, Bloch's model contains a revolutionary impulse, signified by the moment of *rupture* within his temporal model of utopia. The utopian anticipation is an element of change. Yet, the positive utopia negates a transformation due to an affirmation of the existent.

Next to the present absence of utopia, the critics of utopia – and also recent trends of dystopia – ignore the ethical and political moment within abstract utopia. But it is precisely this ethical and political moment wherein the utmost potential for contemporary critical philosophy lies. Furthermore, contemporary thought often relates critical theory mainly to aesthetics, as this might include both aspects of alienation and reification, and also utopianism. Yet, aesthetics does not necessarily include the analysis of political and social institutions, and, thus, often neglects the research of normative elements. This, however, means that a thorough researching of ethics will be excluded, and the subsequent examination will not be historical critique. This represents a problem for both critical theory and contemporary theory, namely, how can the present reality be researched without excluding their fundamentals of normativity? Moreover, how can a positivistic and rational approach into the norms of a society include their ideas, hopes and fantasies (i.e. their utopian content), which are inherent to aesthetics? As a consequence of these issues, in order to examine and criticise the current state of the world, a different perspective appears to be lacking for the present, which will be neither positivistic nor pragmatic, but might also include historical experience and ethics.

Following from this, one might reconsider two points: (1) the form and function of utopia in Horkheimer's approach of abstract, negative utopia; and (2) the historical materialist context of the phenomenon. Firstly, I would like to shed some further light on the particular approach of Horkheimer's resistance towards reality, and his claim of combining politics and ethics. This approach is in need of more explanation, in particular with regard to its relation to ideology and the modern role of subjectivity, which I will sketch out in what follows. The new questions of interpreting modern reality provoked varied responses regarding the new importance and inclusion of subjectivity. Horkheimer explains this move by elucidating a modern philosophy of the subject. In a radio feature on 'Ideology and Value Transfer' in 1950, he argues that at the end of metaphysics, when the belief into an objective system of truth had already vanished, Nietzsche established a unity in the realm of the subject. In other words, the subject was now regarded as the source of a crucial historical determination. Horkheimer describes objective knowledge as gained by historical force, which expresses the image of human society within its language. This image, as he sums up, can be either related to a practice, or be put up into a heaven of ideas. However, there will always remain a moment of subjectivity. We can only attempt to progress this knowledge as independently as possible, both on the subjective and objective side – and, following from this, act on the basis of this knowledge. 'On the basis' here does not mean that a certain action would be undeniably prearranged. Theory is no recipe. Practice contains an element that does not correspond completely with the contemplative figure of theory. But, still, there might exist a kind of necessity between thought and action, theory and practice, arising from the contemplation of the historical situation. The situation and the knowledge of it speak a language, the ideas of which are relevant to action. However, if only the ideas are taken into account, and not the historical context and the original experience of the situation, then reference towards the ideas becomes helpless. The good, true and beautiful, all that represents the culture of historical ideas, can only be truly loved if the negative – which calls for its overcoming – will be experienced. Otherwise, the ideas degenerate into ideology. The concept of freedom of the individual contains this very negative moment more than others. Hence, it is the most actual in the contemporary situation.

The fragmentary state of the philosophical systems and the ideological condition of traditional morals lead, according to Nietzsche, to the experience of human supremacy: the discovery of liberating oneself from suppression by acknowledging oneself as originator of all respective illusions and producer of the human goals. The subject becomes the source of objective truth. The responsibility of the human who is liberated in such

a way from responsibilities grows for Nietzsche into the immeasurable. Horkheimer points out that the misunderstanding, to which Nietzsche himself fell victim, can be found in the content of his theory. Since humanity came to be the pretext for inhumanity, now inhumanity is supposed to be maintained. Since Christianity did not transform everyone into Christians, the anti-Christ is supposed to rule. These ideas became ideology. Instead of urging his ideas towards realisation, Nietzsche transformed them through indignant denomination into their opposition. And reality did not hesitate for a long time to permute this ideology – meaning this inhumanity – into a horrible practice. With this account, Horkheimer clarifies that the mind is actually entangled in history, that it is unavoidably connected with the real determinations, ideas and interests of humanity. The disengagement from the historical situation, or, quite the opposite, as a result of historical entanglement, which leads to the viewing of the world in mere randomness and nihilism, is itself an ideology. In critical theory, by contrast, consciousness is both immanent and transcendent. As mentioned previously, as an aspect of human material existence and dependent upon the extant conditions, consciousness is immanent; meanwhile, since it possesses a utopian truth-content which projects beyond the limits of the present, consciousness is transcendent. Scientific analysis becomes thereby only a step towards a better society. Thus, critical theory preserves the intention of practical philosophy to rationally articulate a more adequate form of human existence and to enlighten them as to its attainment. Consequently, philosophical knowledge experiences itself as mediation of its contradictions.

Returning to the historical context, one might reconsider the shift from spatial towards temporal utopia. As I noted at the beginning of this paper, modern utopia varies from concrete conceptions of a better place, to extremely abstract notions of a better future. They also range from spatial to temporal models, sometimes blending utopian topos and time. Next to this, another phenomenon occurred simultaneously, namely, a spatialisation of time. Not only do spatial phenomena become temporal, but materiality enters both the subject as well as temporality. This dualism particularly arises in the age of high capitalism.<sup>5</sup> It inhabits both temporal and spatial utopia. Central concepts in this context include the modern concept of experience, memory and individuation, as well as, more specifically, the role of concreteness. Instead of interpreting the still recent subject-object dichotomy as a historical phenomenon, some approaches just reflect this issue by developing, for example, methods of subjective immediacy in order to gain knowledge of the world. Here, the borders between concreteness and subjectivity become blurred and mystifying. This relates to capitalism's

inhabitation of both space and time, and their interrelatedness. So it is also with utopia. Walter Benjamin's complex study of early capitalism provides a revealing elucidation of its temporal aspects. Utopia is transferred in the concrete, which in return enters as remembrance of inner life. Hence, the history of human individuation in capitalism can be retraced. In the course of secularisation, the manifestation of the world becomes substituted by materialisation. The catastrophes as well as the utopian content of human life deliver the material for the visualisations of modern reality and, thus, reproduce substitutes for meaning (and ethics).<sup>6</sup> Beyond a passive synthesis of this very capitalist inhabitation of utopia, abstract utopia as an element of critical philosophy remains non-conceptual and thereby preserves the opportunity of a dialectical research programme and critique of contemporary reality. Following this perspective, the content of concrete utopia can be found in constellations, the kind of approach mentioned previously in relation to Adorno.

In conclusion, following Horkheimer's approach as a potential path to a solution, critical philosophy insists upon the utopian dimension, and remains faithful to the utopian content of the philosophical tradition. This happens, however, not beyond social sciences, which represent a 'step' in this process. Instead, comprehension has to occur beyond the concrete picture of a better future, namely, in critical relation towards the past. Historical comprehension, in short, means consciously examining our responsibilities, which history – and, in particular, the last century – has placed before us. Yet, in response to these responsibilities, we must neither deny history's existence nor passively submit to its significant weight. This, then, might be the most crucial task for the humanities today, namely, a historically related, ethical, critical stance and resistance towards reality.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>2</sup> In accordance with this modern tendency, Oscar Wilde pointed out: "Progress is the realisation of Utopias" (cited in Levitas, 1990: 5).

<sup>3</sup> Beyond a pure rejection of Marx as non-utopian theorist, there are elements of utopian vision in his thought which bear some comparability with Horkheimer's subsequent work. The latter will be explored later. On utopian vision and its intersection with insight into communism (i.e. the fusion of real and ideal as central motive force) in Marx's doctrine, see R. N. Berki (1983). I thank Nick Gray for this recommendation.

<sup>4</sup> In this regard, see also Gross (2010).

<sup>5</sup> I would like to thank Sami Khatib for highlighting this aspect.

<sup>6</sup> While in Baroque times, the inner life reacted towards the concrete, in the nineteenth-century the allegory cleared the world and settled itself into an inner existence. This observation leads to a significant methodological consideration, since both in the Baroque period and in modernity, one can find the everlasting as well as the ephemeral reserved in imagistic concreteness. For a more detailed discussion, see Petersen (2010) *Poetik des Zwischenraumes. Zur sprachlichen Kulturkritik und physiognomischen Historizität am Beispiel von Walter Benjamin und ausgewählten Schriften seiner Zeit*, Heidelberg 2010.

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# Utopia and Its Discontents: Dreams of Catastrophe and the End of ‘the End of History’

by Matthew Charles

The early Anglophone reception of Ernst Bloch’s utopian philosophy in the 1960s was undertaken primarily by liberal, left and existential theologians in North America, and the first English translations of his work were, accordingly, sustained reflections on theology from his mature writings, *Man on His Own* and *Atheism in Christianity*, translated in 1971 and 1972, respectively. Until the republication of the latter in 2009, both texts were out of print for many years. This early theological reception can be distinguished from a more recent and distinctly aesthetic Anglophone recuperation of Bloch’s work that began in the 1980s. Although Fredric Jameson’s *Marxism and Form* (1971), and his edited collection of exchanges from the 1930s, *Aesthetics and Politics* (1977), provided a crucial stimulus for this reception, it is with Tom Moylan’s *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination* (1986) that the contours of this emerging field can be traced.

*Demand the Impossible* draws on Jameson and Bloch, as well as Herbert Marcuse, to construct an account of the utopian imagination in order to analyse American science-fiction of the 1970s as offering examples of ‘critical utopias’. Such texts are marked, Moylan argues, by “the awareness of the limitations of the utopian tradition”, rejecting “utopia as a blueprint while preserving it as a dream” (1986: 10). This feature is also characteristic of much of the work that follows Moylan in the field of utopian aesthetics, which has over the last decade become institutionalised as the discipline of ‘Utopian Studies’.

This emergence can be traced back to the publications of Moylan’s *Demand the Impossible*, the first English translation of Bloch’s *The Principle of Hope* in 1986, and a collection of Bloch’s essays in *The Utopian Function in Art and Literature*, which appeared two years later. In the following two decades, a slew of further books and collections on utopia, dystopia and science fiction have appeared, culminating in Jameson’s own return to this theme in his *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*

(2005). Since 2000, we have seen English translations of Bloch's *Spirit of Utopia* and *Traces*, the inauguration of the Ralahine Centre for Research in Utopian Studies (which has to date published five volumes under its 'Utopian Studies' imprint), the launching of a Masters in Research degree in Utopian Studies at the University of Plymouth, numerous journals and conferences organised by both the European and American societies for Utopian Studies, and research on utopianism in contemporary art emerging from cultural studies and art departments such as Goldsmiths and Chelsea.

This discipline of Utopian Studies remains relatively small, but it is worth examining because the historical and political landscape under which it has emerged imposes, I want to argue, a kind of discontent or uneasiness upon the contemporary recuperation of Bloch, one which masks a deeper philosophical problem. For the resurgence of utopianism in the last few decades is premised upon both the collapse of existing socialist alternatives to Western capitalism, and a liberal rejection of those specific forms of actually-existing socialism in their associations with Stalinism in particular, and the Party and State in general. This produces the appearance of stasis and closure, or what Mark Fisher has dubbed a 'capitalist realism', which the appeal to the utopian imagination seeks to circumvent. At the same time, its broader opposition to any neo-Hegelian 'end of history', in either its right or left formulations, is internalised as an imperative against all concepts of closure and totality. This is perhaps reinforced by the institutional location of Utopian Studies, to the extent that theology – as opposed to aesthetics – tends to be more comfortable with philosophical and metaphysical reflections upon infinity, totality and fulfilment.

To give some brief examples, in *Archaeologies of the Future*, Jameson notes how, in the wake of the Cold War, the concept of Utopia becomes synonymous with Stalinism, and with political programmes that involve a commitment to closure and thereby to totality (2005: xi; 4). This commitment is, virtually by definition, lacking in what he distinguishes as an obscure yet omnipresent Utopian impulse, associated with Bloch's work (*ibid.*: 1-9). For Moylan, the utopian impulse recovered in contemporary science-fiction is one that resists closure and systematisation, for which there are utopian expressions but no Utopia (1986: 28). Similarly, Lucy Sargisson, writing in the first volume of the Ralahine Utopian Studies series, argues that perfection, finality and stasis should not be taken as defining features of Utopia, and that contemporary science-fiction is politically exciting precisely because its utopias are incomplete. Instead, they "lie on the horizon, or, as Ernst Bloch puts it, in the 'Not Yet'" (Sargisson, 2007: 37).



What unites these writers is the advocacy of a 'Utopianism without Utopia': for Sargisson, this takes the form of a pluralism in which no single utopia can become *the* Utopia (Sargisson, 2007: 37); Darko Suvin refers to a horizon of unlocalised possible worlds (Suvin, 1997: 132-137); Jameson invokes the idea of a federalism of utopias (Jameson, 2005: 224). This critical utopian impulse has a longer heritage, of course, but its affirmative commitment to open-endedness, partiality and plurality registers the more explicit and direct lineage of Bloch within contemporary Utopian Studies. Indeed, it is Bloch's failure to properly resolve the theoretical tension between these two aspects – between Utopianism and Utopia – that makes his work so amenable to the kind of jettisoning of the Utopia in its *historical* form that is currently being performed. For, as Jameson and Moylan point out, Bloch's utopianism, even at its most generalising and ahistorical, already had a concrete historical Utopia, namely, the Soviet Union (Jameson, 2005: 3, n. 3). In *The Principle of Hope*, that which Adorno describes as the innermost antinomy of Bloch's thought is stretched so wide that it appears as if one problematic half can simply be lobbed off, and the other half uncritically taken up by Utopian Studies (cf. Adorno, 1991: 213).

We are now educated to be suspicious of the linear, teleological – 'Christian' – aspect of Bloch's utopianism, of the Enlightenment tropes of maturity, freedom and perfection coded into his evocation of the 'upright gait' (accepting there are other, more nuanced and interesting aspects of Bloch's work, including his work on history, that are important and worthy of further consideration). But what is philosophically problematic about Bloch's thought is not resolvable by simply *omitting* the optimistic faith in communism in general or the Soviet Union in particular. Indeed, too much is lost by throwing out any specific attention to the content of the political in order to embrace the empty formalism of a 'pan-utopianism' in which the imaginative surplus of the fantasy-principle triumphs over the capitalist reality-principle. Still required is a rethinking of the theoretical relationship between communism and history, not the rejection of history altogether.

Furthermore, because the problem relates to the phenomenological hermeneutics underlying Bloch's utopianism, uncritically adopted by much of Utopian Studies, this cannot be resolved by simply ignoring his own political and historical Utopia. While David Kaufmann claimed (echoing Jürgen Habermas' criticism of Bloch as a 'Marxist Schelling'), that there is "too much Schelling and too much Stalin" in *The Principle of Hope* (Kaufmann, 1997: 35), the institutionalising of Bloch over the last few decades perhaps too easily ignored the Stalin and too readily embraced the Schelling.

## The Phenomenology of Utopianism

I want to elaborate upon this point in specific relation to Bloch's concept of 'anticipatory illumination' [*Vorschein*], by considering it in relation to the utopian element of Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*. The darkness of the lived moment is illuminated, for Bloch, by the daydreams of the not-yet-conscious. This is a supplement to Freud's methodology for the interpretation of dream-symbolism, one which is necessary in so far as Bloch seeks to overcome the limitations placed on the interpretation of the cultural superstructure by Marx's narrower reflections on ideology. Just as Freud's concept of the unconscious would encourage him to dismiss the psychotic fantasies of the schizophrenic as a purely regressive collapse of the reality-principle – unanalysable and therefore unredeemable – Marx's concept of ideology led him to dismiss the utopian fantasising of the 1849 revolutionaries as comparable to those of the madman in the asylum, caused by a past, obsessive and regressive fixation (cf. Freud, 1995: 69-70; Marx, 2002: 21).

Bloch's Marxism sought to secure the 'objective element' of utopian presentiment by distancing it from the pathological implications associated with a place in the Freudian unconscious. Because the not-yet-conscious is *not* the unconscious, anticipatory illumination may contain its own kind of anticipatory symbols associated with consciousness, reason and freedom. Bloch compares this to the "cultural surplus" Marx describes when the interests of a rising class are expressed in terms of the needs and aspirations of humanity in general (Bloch, 1988: 111). The meaning of the utopian has an implicit futural dimension, produced by a surplus of intentional expectation, whose significance overshoots the ideological workings of false, mystified consciousness.

Wayne Hudson's *The Marxist Philosophy of Ernst Bloch* charts the philosophical influence of Brentano's recuperation of the scholastic theory of the intentional object, Meinong's work on intentional inexistence, as well as Husserl and Scheler's development of phenomenology on Bloch's formulation of the 'not-yet-conscious'. Bloch made contact with the latter via his study of empathy psychology under Theodor Lipps at the University of Munich in 1905, but from 1907 onwards, Hudson claims, Bloch's emphasis "fell on the directedness of consciousness to objects and its intentionality to future possibilities", extending "Brentano's doctrine that all thought acts were directed to objects to cover intentionality towards objects which were 'not yet'" and utilising Meinong's *Gegendstheorie* as "a model for a theory

of directedness towards non-existent objects" (Hudson, 1982: 6; 22-24).

This intellectual movement from phenomenology to a concern with intentional inexistence is reflected in Bloch's discussion of phenomenology in *The Heritage of Our Times*, where he argues that *Gestalt* theory should be detached from the "scholastic-objectivist component in Husserl" (Bloch, 1991: 278). Husserl, Bloch argues, mistakenly augments the subjectivity of the (bourgeois) ego with the objectivity of a 'contemplative' construction derived from scholastic and neo-Platonic mysticism. This sought a graphic intuition of essences in which, following the initial bracketing of existence, the "bare species of intention [. . .] is 'fulfilled'" (ibid.: 275). Bloch proposes that, in contrast to phenomenology, *Gestalten* should be conceived not as fixed laws but "figures of tension, as tendency shapes, as experiments of the unknown life-shape". This accords, he says, with Meinong's understanding of melody as a "quality of shape" (ibid.: 278).

### The Epoch as Catastrophe

Bloch's anticipatory utopian consciousness reflects the attempt by intellectuals of his generation to overcome the narrowness of the orthodox Marxist account of ideology, and its influence can be seen in some of Walter Benjamin's early formulations for his method of constructing dialectical images of history in the *Arcades Project*. For Benjamin, the 'dialectical – the Copernican – turn of remembrance' represents a "revolution in historical perception", granting politics a primacy over history by transforming the *completed* 'facts' of what has been into the *incomplete* experience of "something that just now first happened to us, first struck us" (Benjamin, 2002: 388-389). Comparing this "new, dialectical method of doing history" to Bloch's anticipatory illumination, Benjamin notes that what "Bloch recognises as the darkness of the lived moment is nothing other than what here is to be secured on the level of the historical, and collectively" (ibid.). For there is a "not-yet-conscious knowledge of what has been", and "its advancement has the structure of awakening" (ibid.). The 1935 exposé of *The Arcades Project* consequently speaks of the "utopia that has left its trace in a thousand configurations of life, from enduring edifices to passing fashions", and assumes as its motto the utopian slogan, borrowed from the historian Michélet: "Each epoch dreams the one to follow" (ibid.: 4).

This concern with the perceptibility of a historical 'epoch' – in this instance, that of nineteenth-century Paris – is fundamental to the dialectical materialist presentation of history practiced in the *Arcades Project*. In this respect, it may

be regarded as a critical response to the (undialectical) materialist presentation provided in Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire*, dramatically expanding and ultimately reversing the work's historical and cultural perspective. Indeed, part of Benjamin's project is to demonstrate how the Marxist concept of ideology itself expresses the ideological limitations of this epoch, in accordance with Marx's political radicalisation in mid-nineteenth century Paris. Adorno's critical response to Benjamin's 1935 exposé is therefore notable in this context. He singles out Michélet's motto as that around which everything *undialectical* about Benjamin's theory of the dialectical image crystallizes (cf. Benjamin, SW3: 54). This concerns (1) Benjamin's identification of the dialectical image with the content of consciousness; (2) the dialectical image's linear relation to the future as utopia; and (3) the resulting conception of the historical 'epoch', which entails an immanent, rather than theological, version of the dialectical image.

The problematically undialectical conception of the 'epoch', which follows from Michélet's motto, in part derives from the 1935 exposé's understanding of the temporal relation of the representation of the past to the future (i.e. of the bringing of the past into its (future) present). Admittedly, both Bloch and Benjamin sought, in various and often comparable ways, to rethink these relations outside of chronological linearity. But the futurity of Benjamin's concept of the 'epoch' remains problematic here because it attempts to think the significance of historical phenomena, in accordance with Bloch's anticipatory consciousness, by analogy with the phenomenological structure of the wish.

Adorno's correction to Benjamin's motto – 'the recent past always presents itself as if it had been annihilated by catastrophes' – is not therefore to be understood as some dystopian inversion of Benjamin's Blochean progressiveness, since that would retain the temporal linearity of which he is so critical (*ibid.*). Nor should Benjamin's adoption of this reformulation into the structure of the project be understood as a reference to some empirical possibility (cf. Benjamin, 2002: 397). There are elements of such a productive pessimism in Benjamin's mature writings, just as there are elements of a simplistic utopian optimism in his earliest essays on the politics of the Youth Movement, but the function of the catastrophic cannot be reduced to this. "Each epoch dreams of itself as annihilated by catastrophes" (cf. Benjamin, SW3: 58) – in this reformulation of Michélet's slogan, the concept of the catastrophic functions as a dialectical correction to Benjamin's method of epochal construction.

Consequently, in his 1937 essay on Eduard Fuchs, Benjamin's (dialectical) historical materialist is now charged with the task of "blast[ing] the epoch out of its reified 'historical continuity', and thereby the life out of the epoch, and the work out of the lifework" (Benjamin, *SW3*: 262). "Yet this construct", he continues, "results in the simultaneous preservation and sublation of the lifework *in* the work, the epoch *in* the lifework, and the course of history *in* the epoch" (*ibid.*). An identical formulation from a presumably contemporaneous remark in *The Arcades Project* concludes that the homogeneity of the epoch is in this way "interspersed with ruins – that is, with the present" (Benjamin, 2002: 474). The catastrophic signifies the dialectical intrusion of the whole of history (including the present in which it is represented) *into* the epoch, and by extension the whole of the epoch into the life of the artist, and the whole life of the artist into a particular work. In this way, the intrusion of the historical Absolute contributes to the *ruination* of the work. This theological reference to the totality of history constitutes the basis of Benjamin's messianism, conceived as a specific relation between the historical particular and the historical Absolute.

As Adorno suggests in his 1935 critique of the non-theological version of the dialectical image, this conception of the catastrophic does not represent a specifically 'Adornian' correction to Benjamin's utopianism but encapsulates his own earlier theory of primal history [*Urgeschichte*], given its fullest explication in "the most audacious passage in the *Trauerspiel* book" from 1924-5 (cf. Benjamin, *SW3*: 55). Indeed, a good example of such epochal construction can be found in Benjamin's essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities* from the early 1920s, where the tensions of the whole 'Age of Goethe' are condensed into the structure of the novel, such that the work itself becomes a Goethean "primal phenomenon [*Urphänomen*]" in which the epoch can be perceived. The Paris Arcades would similarly concretely express the configurations of capitalist modernity in such a way that the entire course of history (including Benjamin's present) could be read from their structure. In this monadological conception of historical construction, the linearity of progress (or decline) is therefore overcome.

### The Non-Intentional

At the heart of Benjamin's understanding of the dialectical construction of the epoch, and the new method of historical representation it entails, is a critique of the scholastic and ultimately Aristotelian theory of intentionality. In the *Arcades Project*, this reincorporation of the catastrophic, in its dialectical relation to the utopian, ultimately stands for the rejection of the account of

signification inherent to the utopian phenomenology of Bloch's anticipatory surplus of intention. Adorno's introduction of the catastrophic back into Benjamin's mature account of wish-symbols as collective, historical dreams is a *dialectical* correction to Marxist historicism in order to stave off the *idealism* of Bloch's utopian phenomenology.

Convolute N of *The Arcades Project* distinguishes Benjamin's dialectical images from phenomenological essences on the basis of their 'historical index'. This 'index' indicates that the image belongs to a particular time in the past and attains legibility at a particular 'now' in the future. Truth is charged to the bursting point in this indexical conjunction, and the point of explosion is "the death of the *intention*, which thus coincides with the birth of authentic historical time" (Benjamin, 2002: 463). The perceptibility of such an image "bears to the highest degree the imprint of the perilous critical moment on which all reading is founded" (*ibid.*). The imprint of the historical index on the image (the intensifying conjunction of the past to its particular present) takes on the appearance of the catastrophic. According to this principle, the growing significance of historical phenomena is apparent from the conversely diminishing status of the intention attributed to them.

The kernel of this semiotic critique of the intentional is contained in Benjamin's aborted plans for a critical *Habilitation* on Duns Scotus and signification (based, like Heidegger's own thesis, on a misattribution of Thomas of Erfurt's thirteenth-century work on *Speculative Grammar, Or the Modes of Signifying*), and a consideration of this critique contributes to an understanding of his reference to a non-phenomenological 'historical index' at the basis of the dialectical image. Truth, unlike knowledge, is concerned not with the coherence of the object established in consciousness, but with the immanent self-representation of the object, devoid of all intention (Benjamin, 1998: 36). The Aristotelian-scholastic schema of words signifying concepts denoting things is unable to account for how something possesses the capacity in the first instance to be taken as a sign of something else. That is, how do signifiers originally signify their signifying function? Without an explanation, the theory of intentionality – and any epistemology founded upon it – not only suffers an infinite regress, but is also sundered from the possibility of fulfilment and therefore the experience of truth.

Benjamin's solution is to assume that everything possesses an essential semiotic nature (words, concepts and things), entailing a linguistic ontology comparable to that of J. G. Hamann's metacritique of Kant's transcendental

idealism. The realm of significance belongs neither to the consciousness of the knowing subject nor to the object, but extends as a “critical medium between the realm of the signifier and the signified”: “We may say, therefore, that the signifier points to the signified and simultaneously is based on it, insofar as its material determination is concerned” (Benjamin, *SW1*: 228). The signifying element within the signified itself concerns its immanent self-signification (or self-representation), what Benjamin elsewhere extrapolates in relation to Early German Romanticism and to a theological conception of Naming as the primal element of signification, “the analogue of that knowledge of the object in the object itself” (Benjamin, *SW1*: 90). But the Name, as the linguistic essence of a thing, is the totality of its historical determinations or significations.

Every aspect of relation, including that which takes place between a ‘subject’ and ‘object’ of perception, is to be understood as a form of language or signification. Benjamin’s theory of the perceptibility of phenomena extends this model of signification into the experience of history. In a discussion of the ‘now of recognizability’ from 1921, what Benjamin later calls the historical index of the image (the mark of its significance) is explained according to a ‘medium’ or a ‘nexus between existing things and also with the perfected state of the world’ to which truth belongs. The metaphysical immanence attributed to the theological name is here incorporated into the ‘meaning’ associated with historical events themselves, including the ‘significance’ of great works of arts.

Whereas ‘intentionality’ describes significance as a relationship holding between the subject and the intentional inexistence (or conceptual kind of existence) of the object of consciousness (i.e. the concept), the catastrophic redeems the objective element by liberating it from the human *knowledge* of history. Benjamin’s messianic account of the experience of *truth* imposes the theological concepts of the infinite, fulfilled and perfected state of the world into the immanence of finite, particular, existing phenomena.

## Conclusion

What is surprising about Bloch’s concept of ‘anticipatory illumination’ is how commonsensical and idealist is its grounding in intentional surplus, how its substitution of the valorization of the ‘just-then’ for the ‘not-yet’ performs the inversion of historical conservatism. Bloch’s theory of signification ends up abandoning any qualitative content within historical significance: objectivity resides in the mere futurity of things. Even if Utopian Studies

rejects the true historical meaning and implication of Bloch's utopianism – Soviet socialism itself – it nonetheless inherits Bloch's failure to resolve this problem at the level of historical signification. This uneasiness over the 'end of history' imposes a critical self-limitation upon contemporary utopian theory, which as a result jettisons the concept of history which is required for the genuine critical purchase it espouses. For, to repeat the standard hermeneutical problem, how can anything have significance or meaning if one fails to pose the question of totality or fulfilment? Bloch's utopian images are as undialectical in their futural incompleteness as Jung's archaic images are in their past completion.

The contemporary interest in utopian aesthetics, reflected in the proliferation of forums discussing the topic of utopianism, is useful for registering the general impasse in the possibility of political change, but its specific reception of Bloch's work – devoid of his particular political commitment – merely reinforces the inverted conservatism of political and cultural liberalism.

In conclusion, I want to suggest that the dream of catastrophe which underwrites Benjamin's concept of the dialectical image provides a more philosophically attentive and useful resource, not least because it formulates itself precisely in relation to this question of signification and historical significance that, I suggest, remains unresolved in the recuperation of Bloch. To the extent that it seeks to reject the positivist representation of historical 'facts', it opposes the view of history produced by the present ruling class. In common with much of contemporary Utopian Studies, it therefore opposes any quasi-Hegelian, empirically foreshortened 'end of history' which merely serves to reinforce the eternalization of the present moment. But, unlike the recuperation of Bloch in the field of Utopia Studies, it does not simply jettison reflection upon the problem of historical significance, but rather replaces the Hegelian Absolute with an Early German Romantic and Goethean one.

### **Coda: Science Fiction and Utopian Studies**

There is a further condition of the institutional emergence of Utopian Studies, which remains unaddressed here. As indicated in the introduction, this institutionalization is predicated not only on (1) a theoretical recuperation of a phenomenology of utopian consciousness derived primarily from a reception of the work of Ernst Bloch, and (2) a postmodern suspicion of the totalizing project of historical meta-narratives (on both the



Left and Right), formulated as a discontent towards any 'end of history', but also (3) a literary and cultural attentiveness to science fiction, conceived as a sub-genre of 'critical utopian' writing, and drawing on a body of literature which emerges in the 1970s out of the experience of counter-cultural America. At this point, I am only able to offer as a conjecture the suggestion that the affinity between Utopian Studies and science fiction is a reflection of their comparable disciplinary emergence – their recuperated 'respectability' – in the historical and political conditions of the late 1970s and 1980s. But I would suggest that this affinity can also be extended to the phenomenological temporality inherent to the form of much science fiction, in the way that its anticipatory structure – which is precisely the condition of its 'realism' – reasserts rather than disrupts historical continuity. The dialectical conception of catastrophe expounded above would have the appearance not of some utopian or dystopian possibility, but the immanent and violent intrusion of the Absolute into the space of the present. This manifests itself not in the appearance of the new, but of the archaic and primal. It would, presumably, possess the theological or supernatural simultaneity of horror. A rejection of science fiction's anticipatory structure would therefore push its realist form into the domain of surrealism. Admittedly, some of the greatest works of science fiction have extended the boundaries of the genre in precisely this way.<sup>1</sup>

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Dan Smith for drawing my attention to examples of such science fiction writing.

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# The Critical-Utopian Project of Robert Musil's *The Man without Qualities*

by Stijn De Cauwer

Few critics nowadays would deny the great literary value of Robert Musil's immense novel *The Man without Qualities*. Musil explicitly conceived his modernist masterpiece as a critical intervention in the cultural climate of his time and as an exploration of utopian alternatives. While few would dispute the intellectual pyrotechnics and the stunning writing talent of Musil, it is on the precise nature and value of *The Man without Qualities* as a critical-utopian project that opinions differ widely. The complexity of the ideas explored, and the fact that Musil was unable to finish his novel, leaving behind several hundreds of pages of fragments and possible continuations of the novel, add further complications.

## 1. Georg Lukàcs' paradigmatic critique of Robert Musil

One of the harshest critics of Musil was Georg Lukàcs. In his article from 1956, *The Ideology of Modernism*,<sup>1</sup> Lukàcs formulated his objections to the writings of authors such as Joyce and Beckett, but especially Robert Musil. In the view of Lukàcs, these authors rejected all connections to reality or history, valuing stylistic and formal experimentation for its own sake and not as a means to describe the social conditions of their society. The result of this was that reality in their works took on a ghostly aspect, the personalities of the characters seemed to disintegrate, and the authors lost themselves in the explorations of purely abstract possibilities. Lukàcs makes specific reference to a statement by Ulrich, the protagonist of *The Man without Qualities*. When questioned as to what he would do given all the power for a day, Ulrich replies that he would abolish reality. What this ultimately leads to, according to Lukàcs, is the emptying out of all cultural critique. The rejection of reality is wholesale and the author loses himself in mere subjective speculations and abstract possibilities that cannot provide any form of direction to the critique. In the words of Lukàcs, "Its content – or rather lack of content – derives from the fact that such a view of life cannot impact a sense of direction" (1995: 197).

These accusations have become paradigmatic for the later criticisms of Musil's work.<sup>2</sup> On the one hand, there is the reproach that Musil's negativity

is total and indiscriminate. On the other hand, Musil is accused of losing himself in infinite abstract speculations, withdrawing from reality to create his own private aesthetic utopias, accumulating ever more possible continuations of his novel without moving towards a conclusion. What we learn here from Lukàcs is that an assessment of Musil's critical-utopian project not only has to formulate precisely what constitutes these critical and utopian aspects, or how these relate to each other, but also will need to formulate the finality of this project. If Musil saw his work as utopian – and he certainly did – then what goal was driving his utopian project?

## 2. Musil's critique of reified morality

*The Man without Qualities* is set in 1913 and depicts the attempts of the so-called Parallel Campaign to gather ideas from a group of elite members of Austrian society, intellectuals, artists and businessmen, to organize a jubilee for their Emperor Franz Joseph, after having heard that the Germans will give a similar tribute to their Emperor. As the meetings of this Parallel Campaign turn out to be completely chaotic, with no consensus forthcoming with regard to what great idea Austria should support, the reader is of course aware that the jubilee will never take place and that the empire will find its demise amid war instead.

Musil was of the opinion that the times in which he lived lacked the concepts to properly assess the huge complexities of the beginning of the twentieth century. It was as if the intellectual, artistic and moral discourses were stuck in a rut, caught in outdated, ideologically shaped patterns that made people perceive the present as a degeneration or decline of a presumed previous order or fullness. Central to Musil's analysis of his times is the notion of reified – or, as he liked to call it – petrified morality. Not only in his novel, but also in his rich essays and notebooks, the problem of morality holds a significant place. According to Musil, human beings were in essence shapeless beings who adopted the prevailing moral patterns and guidelines in order to avoid a constant existential crisis or an overload of impossible life choices. By identifying oneself with the prevailing moral rules, institutions, roles, customs and values, people took up readymade identities and social positions provided by society. In his analysis of morality, Musil reveals the influence of Nietzsche who wrote the following of the *morality of custom*: "Morality is nothing other (therefore *no more!*) than obedience to customs" (Nietzsche, 1982: 10).

Morality has a tendency to become rigid, allowing no reflection upon its validity or meaningfulness, portraying itself as the natural order of things.

Throughout *The Man without Qualities*, several characters – such as Ulrich’s father – express the opinion that morality represents the best of what humanity has been able to produce, and the slightest deviation from the moral rules will cause the individual to lose its grip on its impulses, sliding down a slippery slope towards never ending excess, confusion and insanity. They believe in the principle: “Give a fellow a totally free hand and he will soon run his head into a wall out of sheer confusion”. As Ulrich ironically remarks, to lead a meaningful and valuable life “a man’s possibilities, plans, and feelings must first be hedged in by prejudices, traditions, obstacles, and barriers of all sorts, like a lunatic in his straightjacket” (Musil, 1995: 15-16). In this way, morality becomes a set of rigid rules that one adopts simply because it is the dominating moral system into which one is born, and, moreover, these rules are felt to be the most probable, and even natural, guidelines as to the conduct of one’s life.

Such a petrified morality, as I have described it here, has two important consequences. The first is that adopting moral rules like a set of police regulations, where ethical decisions become simply a matter of whether they fit under this or that obligation, shuts down all moral reflection or imagination in the individual. It is as if the ‘germ cells’ of moral imagination wither away. The second consequence is that all moral agency is relayed to abstract, idealized entities, which Musil called ‘mystical fetishes’, such as nation, state or race. One only has to allow certain presumed, innate essences to prosper in order to tap into the fictitious virtues these essences are supposed to provide automatically. Relaying all moral agency to such an abstract entity amounts to the shutting down of all moral reflection. In the light of these ideals, reality can only seem hopelessly impure, while the ideals themselves become all the more reinforced in their ideality. Musil wrote: “One should finally realize that it is not that life fails to conform to ideals out of disobedience, as in school, but rather that the mistake must lie with the ideals” (Musil, 1990: 113).

By the end of the nineteenth century, the prevailing moral system had become hopelessly outmoded and inadequate to meet the complex demands of the rapidly changing times. The literature of the beginning of the twentieth century is filled with characters no longer able to take up their supposed position in life, unable to find any consolation for their concerns within the moral system into which they were born.<sup>3</sup> These characters *would like* to find solace in the prevailing moral guidelines for their confusions, but the moral code has become incongruent with their needs. Musil called the crisis that began at the end of the nineteenth century a crisis of belief, which is not merely a religious matter, but includes the secular realm as well. There

was a sudden lack of faith in the existing moral order, the symbols and institutions of society, which irrevocably disrupted the people's identities, values and roles with which they were supposed to identify. As Musil phrased it in his diaries, "Morality was not undermined but proved to be hollow" (Musil, 1998: 287). People were in desperate need of new guidelines and a sense of fullness which led to a veritable whirlwind of opinions and ideas, which, in Musil's view, never really moved beyond the same recurring patterns.

The combination of outdated models that people could not move beyond, and the relaying of all moral agency to idealized fetishes, could only lead to an incapacity to face the challenges of the present and, ultimately, to develop a deep resentment for the present. In this view, we can begin to understand why people seemed to greet the outbreak of the First World War – a war on a scale of apocalyptic proportions – not with horror, but with a festive joy. It is in this sense that we should understand Musil's controversial claim that the First World War was not caused by Germany's immoral citizens, but rather by its *moral* citizens.

Musil not only gave morality a Nietzschean psychological explanation, but in his essay, *The German as Symptom*, he unambiguously situated petrified morality within the need for commodification by capitalism. Petrified morality also served to keep the dominant powers in place and to provide the capitalist market with manageable, quantifiable entities. Money had become the measure of all things. This imposing of a rigid system on the soul can only be done by means of violence: "This need for the unequivocal, repeatable, and fixed is satisfied in the realm of the soul by violence. And a special form of this violence, shockingly flexible, highly developed, and creative in many aspects, is capitalism" (Musil, 1990: 182).

The crisis of belief that developed at the turn of the century is that the old moral guidelines proved to be inadequate, but that people had lost the capacity to see beyond these outdated guidelines and to develop new and better models. Because they perceived the present in terms of their outmoded moral frameworks, they could only see the present as a decline or degeneration of an old presumed order or fullness, and as a result sought solutions in the past. What was needed was a way to overcome the limitations of the present, the reified moral models, and explore the possibilities for ethical renewal, instead of hysterically rejecting the present and turning towards the past.

In one of his last public speeches, in Vienna, 1937, shortly before he had to flee to Switzerland, Musil commented on the political situation under the guise of a talk on stupidity. At the same time, it was an implicit attempt at formulating his view on critique. In this speech, he described a form of stupidity that had become institutional, a stupidity of the body politic, and this was the merely hysterical, affective reaction to a situation, which reveals an incapacity to act appropriately in that given situation. It indicates “the lowest level of a judgment that has not crystallized enough to be formulated, a criticism that is still completely undifferentiated, which feels that something is wrong but is not able to indicate what” (Musil, 1990: 278). Musil was alluding to the mass hysteria that led people into the arms of the Nazis, seeing this as a symptom of the incapacity to face the challenges of modern society. Musil makes a distinction here between a purely affective judgment and a critique that goes beyond the taken-for-granted terms of the debate in largely the same manner as Judith Butler in her recent essays has insisted on the difference between criticism and critique: “Criticism usually takes an object, and critique is concerned to identify the conditions of possibility under which a domain of objects appears” (Asad *et al.*, 2009: 109). Critique is not concerned with deciding under what category a phenomenon belongs, but rather to problematize these taken-for-granted categories. It is Musil’s aim to look at the conditions under which certain phenomena – including the taken-for-granted evaluative categories – appear, and to find new and better criteria for evaluation. Such criteria have to be flexible and constantly readjusted so as to be the most fitting for the changing demands of the present. Critique is a productive rupture of the reified forms in which the debates are stuck.

### 3. The ideology critique of Musil and Bloch

‘Ideology critique’ in Musil’s work should not be seen as a dismissal of all ideologies from a presumed neutral ‘outside’. He did not believe in the ‘free floating intellectual’, as proposed by Karl Mannheim, who would have the proper perspective to see beyond all ideologies. It is tempting to view Ulrich as just such a ‘free floating intellectual’, who retreats from society to achieve a perspective supposedly uncontaminated by ideological trends, providing critical comments from the sidelines, but this would be a misreading of the critical strength of *The Man without Qualities*. Musil is not seeking an ‘outside’ of ideologies, but rather a different way of relating to them. Instead of taking the terms of the debates for granted, or worse, to consider them as ‘natural’, Musil wants to break open ideological debates from within in order to reconfigure the stakes of the debate and to unleash the latent utopian potential therein. He argues for critique as a constant process of reflecting

on the coordinates of a debate, to problematize them so that new possibilities and figurations are free to arise. Musil does not believe that the prevailing intellectual or artistic trends merely have to be dismissed as unambiguously wrong, but that the issues at stake in them have to be reconsidered in order for potentialities that lay dormant in existing trends to be better formed and formulated.

By seeking the utopian potential within the ideological and not in some presumed 'outside' of an epistemological and ideological purity, Musil shows a lot more affinity with his contemporary, Ernst Bloch, than with the likes of Mannheim. The task of ideology critique is not to deny an ideology, but to decipher the potentially emancipatory utopian impulses within the ideological present. The utopian drive, for Bloch, is the impetus that could break the "continuing spell of static living and thinking" (Bloch, 1986: 139). The utopian is an awareness of the 'not yet', the capacity for 'venturing beyond' the limitations of the present. Musil wanted to break this spell of static living and thinking by a critical ethos or attitude,<sup>4</sup> which he derived from his background as a scientist, in which the naturalized base of ideologies is displaced and de-petrified so that they become more flexible and open to a constant process of modulation and reformulation. Thus, what is valuable and significant in these ideologies could be further explored. For him, what defines a scientific approach is not the search for laws, but a sense of indeterminacy combined with precision. Empirical facts are always provisional, partial, falsifiable, and never complete. This 'scientific' ethos was inspired by Nietzsche:

Everyone who is still caught up in the net of belief in which he first became entangled is suspect [ . . . ] [Nietzsche] calls these spirits 'unscientific'. As soon as they find the first hypothesis for some matter they attach themselves firmly to it. To have an opinion means to them: becoming fanatical about it and, henceforward, to take it to heart as a conviction (Musil, 1998: 254)

What happens in *The Man without Qualities* is by no means a withdrawal from the prevailing debates, but a critique which is entirely immanent. Ulrich takes up the prevailing ideas of the Parallel Campaign, but he gives them a crucial twist: they become displaced, comical, problematic, taken to absurd conclusions. He emphasizes the cracks and fault lines in their arguments. He criticizes them from within, exposing their situated character by taking them out of context or by putting the arguments in the mouths of unlikely characters.



#### 4. Musil's utopianism: From the explorative to the conditions of possibility

Next to this critical activity, Ulrich proceeds to formulate a long series of puzzling utopian suggestions for people to lead their lives differently and better. From the utopia of Essayism, or the utopia of a secular mystical state, to living hypothetically or inductively – these utopian proposals have always bemused critics and readers alike. Musil scholars have often tried to deal with these proposals by seeing them as a sequence or a hierarchy, with one utopia succeeding and surpassing the previous one.<sup>5</sup> In this way, the question arises as to what the final utopian proposal in the novel would have been. Which utopia would have been the great normative conclusion of the novel? But there is no way to discern an unambiguous answer. In fact, Musil saw his novel as a moral laboratory, a “vast experimental station for trying out the best ways of being a human being and discovering new ones” (1995: 160). This aspect of the novel, what I call the *explorative-utopian* aspect, is by definition never completed. There can never be finality to this experimental process. But the utopian project of Musil can neither be reduced to this nor to a particular utopia that could serve as the final normative conclusion of the novel.

Next to this explorative-utopian aspect of the novel, there is also a more primary utopian aspect running through Musil's work, and this I would like to call the novel's *critical-utopian* element. This element is not so much concerned with the novel as an experimental station to infinitely explore new and better ways of living, but rather with the *conditions of possibility* of new formations of reality. Ulrich's statement – that reality should be abolished – should not be seen as a fleeing of reality into an idealized sphere, whether aesthetical or mystical. Instead, it should be taken as the attitude of no longer seeing reality as an unalterable state of affairs, thereby actively disrupting the tendency to naturalize a certain figuration of reality. With his critical-utopian ethos, Musil wants to increase a *sense of possibility*, a sense that reality could also be different, and that other and better ways of configuring things are possible.

Early in the novel, Musil pleads for a “conscious utopianism that does not shrink from reality but sees it as a project, something yet to be invented” (1995: 11). And further into the novel, he defines utopianism more precisely:

Utopias are much the same as possibilities; that a possibility is not a reality means nothing more than that the circumstances in which it is for the moment entangled prevent it from being realized – otherwise

it would only be an impossibility. If this possibility is disentangled from its restraints and allowed to develop, a utopia arises (Musil, 1995: 265)

Musil's critical-utopian activity is an exploration of these restraints in order to find ways to move beyond them. Here, the critical and the utopian moments are no longer separate, but perfectly coincide. The utopian is the possibility opened up by the critical. The different particular utopian explorations that run through *The Man without Qualities* could only arise within the openness created by this critical-utopian aspect of the novel. Musil was never interested in what he called "the irresponsible and half-baked quality of thought known as subjectivism" (Musil, 1995: 273), or a wild flight into the imaginary, far from real and actual possibilities. Early on in the novel, he distinguishes two forms of precision: the precision which sticks to the facts, and what he calls the pedantic kind of precision that adheres to imaginary constructs (Musil, 1995: 267). Reality remains the source of possibilities, or, to paraphrase Musil scholar Michael Schmitz, what matters is not the reality of a possibility, but the possibility of a reality (Schmitz, 1998: 152).

### 5. Similarities and differences with Lukàcs' analysis of reification

Despite his harsh condemnation in the later phase of his life, there are a lot of similarities between Musil's view and the analysis of reification that Lukàcs developed in *History and Class Consciousness*. In this classic text, Lukàcs famously declared the commodity-structure described by Marx as the fundamental structure of capitalist society, causing a widespread reification that extended well beyond the merely economic, but also to the legal sphere and culture in general. The result of this is the division of society into atomized parts, each with their own dualistic concepts and seemingly rational, objective and quasi-natural laws. The prevailing 'bourgeois consciousness' is capable of describing this phenomenon of reification, but it can never truly grasp the material substratum of society. Lukàcs agrees with the classic sociologists of his time – such as Max Weber and Georg Simmel – on the profound impact of what he calls 'formal rationality', the need of a capitalist society to have measurable, quantifiable entities. However, in his view, they could never really see the root of all these problems. Lukàcs radically claimed that 'bourgeois consciousness' can only remain stuck in contemplation, and is incapable of seeing the true causes of reified society. Each atomized subpart was stuck in a rigid reified system, which they could only see as immutable, quasi-natural, and following strict causal laws. In this way, dealing with a problem, such as in law, becomes

only a matter of seeing how it fits in relation to ready-made laws. Anything that does not fit into this rigid system of pre-established laws can only be perceived as pure chaos or as a threat to the reified mind. For Lukàcs, it is no surprise that someone like Kant could write such an awkward comment regarding marriage, seeing it as a contract between partners over mutual use of the reproductive organs: a perfect example of the reified legalistic thinking in philosophy.

So far, many similarities could be seen between Musil and Lukàcs. Both saw society as stuck in rigid patterns, which were seen as pseudo-natural, turning every problem into permutations of the same set of taken-for-granted laws. Like Lukàcs, Musil held that reified morality and the prevailing ideological patterns came out of the need for quantifiable and measurable entities in capitalist society, an increase in bureaucratization that turned the killing of a human being into the mere pressing of a button or the sterile decision of a court. Musil also saw the prevailing 'fetishes' of his time – such as race or nation – as concealing the true interests of the people, claiming that a German farmer has more in common with a French farmer than with a German city dweller. Both Musil and Lukàcs believed that these reified structures were incongruent with life, in a permanent state of eccentricity with respect to life, inadequate for successfully describing or directing the lives of the people, which became most apparent in times of crisis. Lukàcs wrote that reified society will always be in a conflict with a lived substratum, which constitutes the actual material conditions of the people. While the subparts are regulated by rigid formal-rational laws, this will paradoxically lead to an extreme irrationalism at the level of society as a whole, precisely because of the inadequate and illusory aspect of the laws governing the subparts. In *The Man without Qualities*, the attempts of all the different subparts to find a common goal leads to a cacophony of misunderstandings and confusions, ultimately culminating in the total collapse of society amid World War I.

Although Musil by no means gave as central a place to the commodity structure as Lukàcs, they clearly shared certain features in their analyses of reified society. However, they absolutely diverge in their views on the manner in which reification would be overcome. Lukàcs believed that bourgeois society had lost all perspective on the whole, and as long as this consciousness reigned it was simply impossible to perceive the real material basis of society. The attempts of bourgeois intellectuals – and Musil would for him fall in this category – to go beyond merely describing the effects of commodity-culture were structurally bound to fail. Lukàcs compares 'criticism' in bourgeois society with the legend of the Indian critic who heard

that the world rests upon an elephant. When he asked what the elephant was resting on, he was told 'on a tortoise'. Neither the Indian critic nor the bourgeois critic would ever be able to go beyond the illusory explanations and see the true causes of the problem. For Lukàcs, the lived substratum was the proletariat, the true subject of history; the practical and epistemological Archimedean point from which reality could be unhinged, reification overcome and the totality of society perceived. He inscribed the formal rationality of reified society into a teleological and dialectical scheme which would be surpassed by a socialist dialectical reason, as successive stages in the history of rationality.

For Musil, any return to a sense of 'wholeness' or a full perspective was no longer possible. Nor did he believe in some kind of teleologically unfolding scheme. He saw it as the task of the artist to disrupt the state of the reified mind that could only see a certain constellation of reality as the one and only possible way of the world. It is clear that Lukàcs would see in Musil's ideal the confirmation of his belief that Musil was one of the many who were incapable of truly surpassing reified consciousness. But the greatest difference perhaps lies in the finality of their critiques. For Lukàcs, history followed a strict teleological path. There was a clear finality for criticism and art. Reified society was in conflict with the living substratum of society, and it was only from this particular lived substratum, the proletariat, that reified society could be undone. Musil, by contrast, emphasized the fundamental shapelessness of this lived substratum,<sup>6</sup> which allowed for far more flexibility and future unpredictability. His ideal was not a particular society, but precisely the opening up of this flexibility; the indetermination which allowed for greater creativity and novelty to meet the ever changing demands of society. Musil wanted a critical ethos, which would constantly problematize the taken-for-granted categories of evaluation and debate, in order to allow for more creativity, imagination and flexibility. In this way, new and better solutions would emerge, while allowing for the exploration of these solutions with precision and the chance to permanently readjust them.

## **6. The critical-utopian ethos of Musil: Beyond mechanism and finalism**

In his review of *History and Class Consciousness*, Bloch criticized Lukàcs for having a reductive and homogenous view on political and historical agency.<sup>7</sup> Bloch stressed the importance of the incomplete nature of reality. Utopian longing was oriented towards a point in the future where all fragmentation would be resolved, and it was the drive and directionality of this utopian longing that could break the limitations of the present. Bloch wanted to

reinsert a religious eschatology into Marxist thought. In the words of Martin Jay, the “Archimedean point of longitudinal totality was thus in the future, not in the present, which lacked plenitude and substance, and certainly not in an imagined fulfilled past” (1984: 183).

For Musil, the aim of his utopian project was neither trying to find a true basis of society, nor some idealized point in the future. Both a fixed, homogenous substratum and a teleological conception of temporality or continuity were, for him, aspects of the spell of static thinking that had to be interrupted in order to free up the utopian potential. Instead, he wanted to increase the sense that both the human subject and the future of society are much less static than people tend to believe, but open to possibilities for transformation and reconfiguration, and not merely in an abstract sense but as concrete possibilities. Influenced by the philosopher of science, Ernst Mach, Musil radically rejected all historical determinism. The necessity certain people accorded to real historical events was simply something read into them *post factum*. The causal connections did not form one straight line but rather a complex chain. He did not accept any form of meaning, direction, purpose or simple causality in the unfolding of history. For Musil, there simply was no fixed point from which the fragmentation could be undone and the totality of society perceived, neither by a certain historical subject nor in some idealized point in the future.

With his rejection of linear history as well as all forms of teleology, Musil once more reveals the influence of Nietzsche. Foucault has described Nietzsche’s notion of ‘effective history’ eloquently as follows:

History becomes ‘effective’ to the degree that it introduces discontinuity in our very being [. . .] ‘Effective history’ deprives the self of the reassuring stability of life and nature, and it will not permit itself to be transported by a voiceless obstinacy toward a millennial ending. It will uproot its traditional foundations and relentlessly disrupt its pretended continuity (Foucault, 1977: 154)

In *Daybreak*, Nietzsche describes what we gain by rejecting all teleology or conceptions of an afterlife: “We have reconquered our courage for error, for experimentation, for accepting provisionally [. . .] We may experiment with ourselves!” (1982: 501). The disrupting of a linear teleology opens up the possibility for readjustment and experimentation.

Precisely because such an Archimedean point, from which one could see beyond all fragmentation, does not exist – neither now nor in some point in

the future – Musil insists on a critical ethos that can never reach a final point, but aims at the permanent reevaluation, readjustment, and the reinvention of one's goals. His critical-utopian project was not aimed at one particular norm, but by critically engaging with the limitations of the present, at increasing the capacity for normative creativity. Thus, Musil wanted to achieve a form of improvement and advancement without always ending up in new rigid or dogmatic patterns. New norms for better ways to organize society should constantly be invented, modulated, readjusted, and experimented with, in a never-ending critical process. Musil's cultural critique, which according to Lukàcs was lacking a clear direction, was not aiming for a certain ideal place, a point in time, or one particular norm. Instead, Musil's aim was the deployment of a critical attitude – a constant critical involvement with the present with its overly formalized conceptions of temporality or subjectivity, in order to enlarge the capacity for conceptual and ethical creativity. This is a process that can never reach a final point, but always has to be recalibrated and continually taken up anew.

### 7. 'Woman yesterday and tomorrow': the creation of new ideals

To conclude, let us give an example of the way in which Musil adopted his critical-utopian project, as I have described it here in general terms, to a particular case, namely, his attitude towards the growing Viennese feminist movement, which he defended in an article of 1929. His writings often feature women who no longer feel like taking up the roles demanded of them by society. They refuse to embody what men desire them to be. In an early play with the ironic title, *Vinzenz und die Freundin bedeutender Männer*, a parody of Wedekind's *Lulu*, the main female character, Alpha, refuses to fulfill the role laid out for her by men:

I'm an anarchist [...] And now you ask me to take this world seriously, a world made by these men. That's what you're asking me, that I should respect the world! Then I would much rather become a suffragette! (translation in Jonsson, 2000: 184)

In Vienna at the turn of the century, it was the trend to equate femininity either with a threatening form of irrationality or with an idealized form of divinity. Musil saw the struggle of women against fixed thought patterns as a crucial part of the new ethics he wished to develop. In line with his critical ethos to displace the ideological patterns prevailing in society, Musil wanted women to create something new, freed from the forms desired by men, and, almost as important, he wanted to emancipate both men and women from traditional patterns of eroticism. In *The Man without Qualities*,

he mocks the proliferation of sex manuals that talk of the 'sexual problem', and which were nothing other than manuals aimed at keeping people happily married. There is a clear theme of androgyny running throughout the novel that has to be seen as the problematizing of stereotypical gender roles. With the many important female characters in *The Man without Qualities*, Musil did not want to give yet another representation of 'femininity', but to displace the prevailing narratives of and on 'femininity'. In his article, *Woman yesterday and tomorrow*, Musil wrote: "She no longer wants to be any ideal at all, but wants to make ideals" (1990: 213). He did not want to create another normative ideal for women, but instead wanted to displace the reified patterns of (predominately male) sexuality in order to open up the possibilities for women to create new norms of their own. In this desire for openness and enhanced possibility, it is clear that Musil's work exhibits a poignant and provocative critical-utopian edge that is, in my view, deserving of greater attention and appraisal.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The original German title of the essay, *Die Weltanschaulichen Grundlagen des Avantgardeismus*, is much more precise.

<sup>2</sup> For a good overview of the reception of *The Man without Qualities* and the different debates around the novel, see Mehigan (2003).

<sup>3</sup> Rilke's Malte Laurids Brigge, Thomas Mann's Hans Castorp and Hermann Broch's Pasetnow are some of the best known examples.

<sup>4</sup> I use 'critical ethos or attitude' here in the manner in which Foucault used it in his article on the Enlightenment. There is a striking resemblance between the critical ethos Musil developed and the way Foucault defined the critical spirit of the Enlightenment as "a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them" (Foucault, 1997: 319).

<sup>5</sup> Most recently, such a view has been taken up by Patrizia McBride (McBride, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> In *The German as Symptom*, Musil calls this idea the “theorem of shapelessness” (1990: 163).

<sup>7</sup> In his article, ‘Ad Hominem: Antinomies of Radical Philosophy’, Alberto Toscano explores this important debate at length (Toscano, 2008).

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# Marx, Aeschylus, and the Possibilities of Indeterminacy in Historical Materialism

by Owen Holland

Marx had a voracious appetite for literature. His major theoretical work *Das Kapital* (1867) contains a plethora of literary allusions and quotations. However, the nature of the relationship between Marx's writings and what I will tentatively call 'the literary' is complex. We can be certain, for example, that Marx read Aeschylus very closely. As Paul Lafargue attests in his 'Reminiscences of Marx', "[e]very year [Marx] read Aeschylus in the Greek original" (1977: 152). It is surely no coincidence, then, that the suffering body of Prometheus, as represented in Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, aesthetically (pre)figures a guiding Marxian *idée fixe*: the notion of the fundamental antagonism between the forces and relations of production, with the former acting as a debilitating restraint upon the latter under a capitalist mode of production. Prometheus, according to myth, was responsible for a great leap forward in the annals of human progress. His punishment for such an unsanctioned transgression against the Olympian gods' monopoly on Creation was to be fettered for eternity to a rock (Aeschylus, 1964: 34-35).<sup>1</sup> Identifying such homologies, however, is not an assurance of a synthesised or integrated totality. Indeed, Marx's comments on literature and art are fragmentary and disparate. Thus, when seeking to specify the status of the literary in Marx's theoretical oeuvre, we should be careful to recognise the relative autonomy of the aesthetic. I will seek to do so with special reference to the mythic character of Prometheus.

In response to Oceanus, who comes to counsel premature reconciliation in the face of Zeus' threats, Aeschylus' Prometheus quips back: "Be what you are!" (1.393) – as Phillip Vellacott's translation has it. It is instructive to compare David Grene's rendering of this reproach, without the same exclamatory force: "Keep your present mind" (1991 [1942]: 326). The juxtaposition of these two translations posits an unexpected relationship of identity between thought and being, suggesting that, for Oceanus, things *are* what they seem. If such a worldview were to be internalised, this would spell the death of critical thought because all things would be taken at face value. Such a situation, generally applied, would suit those who – like Zeus

– occupy a position of usurped power, since there would no longer be any obstacles to their subjects identifying the status quo with the horizon of futurity. For liberal critics, like George Steiner, the determination of consciousness by being is often one of the central tenets of a reductively characterised Marxism. In his discussion of Georg Lukács, Steiner is content to assert the “primary Marxist law that being determines consciousness [. . .] [predicated upon] the materialist axiom that all human understanding mirrors objective reality” (1990 [1967]: 374). This imputation of mechanical materialism is not a charge from which the Marxist tradition can be entirely exonerated given the vulgarity of the Second International. The correspondence theory of epistemology on which Steiner bases his allegation, however, has been helpfully expounded by Franz Jakubowski:

Nothing has obscured our understanding of Marx’s problematic more than the habit which both Marxists and critics of Marx make of quoting one paragraph from the *Preface to ‘The Critique of Political Economy’* along with a few other similar passages, while ignoring the question of where Marx and Engels found that problematic and how they developed it from that point (Jakubowski, 1978: 14)

In the *Preface* to which Jakubowski refers, Marx makes the notorious statement, to wit: “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness” (1992: 425).<sup>2</sup> As Jakubowski goes on to show, however, although Marx sees a relationship of correspondence between thought and being, this relationship is *dialectical*, not dualistic. It is a relationship of unity *and* distinction; the unity of thought and being does not imply their absolute identity or preclude the existence of contradiction. Moreover, thought and being can be non-identical without undermining the epistemological possibility of knowledge.

The sense of identity illuminated by the diverging translations of Prometheus’ response to Oceanus – the notion that identity is always constant and self-transparent – is more akin to the stance of Hegelian idealism than a truly materialist dialectic. For Hegel, the realm of ethical choice is precluded from Greek plastic characters and therein lays their strength: “they do not choose but throughout, from start to finish, *are* what they will and accomplish [. . .] It is the honour of these great characters to be culpable” (Hegel, 1975: 1214-1215). In the case of Oceanus, however, such an identification of character as fate, of thought and being as absolutely identical, is *not* an attribute of greatness: his present state of mind can be identified with the essence of his being because he is slavishly devoted to

Zeus. His servility is the reason why his consciousness and his being can never diverge or stand in a relationship of contradiction. But such unquestioning devotion is precisely what provokes Prometheus to rebuke him. In an altogether anachronistic manner, Oceanus anticipates what Theodor Adorno would spot as the bourgeois illusion of genuineness:

Among the concepts to which, after the dissolution of its religious and the formation of its autonomous norms, bourgeois morality has shrunk, that of genuineness ranks highest. If nothing else can be required of man, then at the least he should be wholly and entirely what he is (Adorno, 1974: 152)

In attempting to *be* what he *is*, the contemporary bourgeois is a pale imitation of the Greek tragic hero, but he does share something in common with Oceanus. Both overlook the “ungenuineness of the genuine [which] stems from its need to claim, in a society dominated by exchange, to be what it stands for yet is never able to be” (Adorno, 1974: 155).<sup>3</sup> Prometheus’ reproach to Oceanus condemns him for mistaking the festering stasis of his proto-bourgeois being – too uncritical in its servile narrowness to catch sight of its own limits, which are consequently identified as universal, ‘natural’ norms – for the growth and flux of Promethean becoming. This Promethean stance is also the basis of Brecht’s statement, in his discussion of literary realism, namely, that “[t]here is not only such a thing as *being popular*, there is also the process of *becoming popular*” (2007: 85). It is no coincidence that when Marx’s daughters convinced him to play the Victorian parlour game ‘Confessions’ in the mid-1860s, his three favourite poets – “Shakespeare, Aeschylus, Goethe” – were also dramatists (Wheen, 2000: 387). For a dialectician like Marx, the emphasis on processual becoming embodied in dramatic dialogue was surely part of the source of his enjoyment of Aeschylus; the fast-paced stichomythic turns of argument in which thesis and antithesis run up against one another in the cut and thrust of an antagonistic dialogue unfold a kind of dialectical motion. Oceanus’ craven capitulation to power, meanwhile, is an attempt to repress humankind’s creative potential – locking humanity into a horrific condition of eternal sameness, perpetual repetition.

This is precisely what Prometheus stands in revolt *against*. As he later reminds Hermes, he has seen “[t]wo dynasties already hurled from those same heights” on mount Olympus, and warns that he expects to “see the third, today’s king, fall to earth | More shamefully than his precursors, and more soon” (Il.956-9). In remembering a past which those in power would rather have us forget, Prometheus demonstrates a historical consciousness

capable of uncovering the buried narratives of oppression which haunt the ruling class. Such a consciousness sets out to rescue the dead from the “enormous condescension of posterity” (Thompson, 1991: 12). The Olympian project of historico-racial cleansing is recounted by Prometheus: “Of wretched humans [Zeus] took no account, resolved | To annihilate them and create another race” (ll.234-5). But Prometheus forestalled Zeus’ plan. In stealing the gift of fire and bestowing it upon an otherwise forsaken mankind, he can be identified with the forces of progress (ll.442-505) as well as memory. This Promethean duality – which looks both forwards and backwards – bears a certain similarity to Marx’s own view of historical progress. In his ‘Speech at the Anniversary of the People’s Paper’ (1856), he stated:

On the one hand, there have started into life industrial and scientific forces, which no epoch of the former human history had ever suspected. On the other hand, there exist symptoms of decay, far surpassing the horrors of the later times of the Roman Empire. In our days everything seems pregnant with its contrary (Marx & Engels, 1969: 500)

Marx’s materialist conception of history meant that he understood history to follow a certain inevitable arc of progress, but he did not see a correspondent teleological inevitability that such ‘progress’ would entail benefits for humankind. As Neil Davidson warns, “the working class may simply continue to be defeated, as it has been until now, until it is too late to prevent the planet becoming uninhabitable” (2009). The certitude that time will not stand still can be just as much of a cause for despair as hope.

Walter Benjamin conceptualises this twofold vision of history famously utilising the figure of the *Angelus Novus* (1920) from a work by the Swiss-born painter, Paul Klee. Under a capitalist regime of production, decisions are not made with a mindfulness of human needs, but instead are taken on a monadic, individualistic basis. Consequently, ‘progress’ is always the result of systemic irrationality which leaves in its wake an array of injustices which constitute its accidental debris.

The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress (Benjamin, 1973: 259-260).

Like Prometheus – whose name means ‘Forethought’, as he is mockingly reminded (ll.82-8) – Klee’s angel is a mimetic embodiment of contemplation precluded from intervention. Just as Prometheus is bound to a rock, the angel can no longer control his flight but must instead struggle helplessly at the storm’s mercy. In the face of such powerlessness, history may simply continue to mount injustices skyward. The recent image of the prisoner in Abu Ghraib, whose enforced pose bears an uncanny likeness to Klee’s angel, is but one example which must speak for many. Benjamin’s passage is undeniably poetic at the same time as it draws upon Marxian themes. The angel’s apparent impotence in the face of history’s onward march is reminiscent of Marx’s observation in the first chapter of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1851-2) that “[m]en make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please” owing to pre-existing circumstances “given and transmitted from the past” (Marx & Engels, 1969: 398).

It is significant that Benjamin re-conceptualised this weight of historical debris in response to an aesthetic work. The ‘angel of history’ is not a conceptual tool, in the strictly instrumentalised scientific sense. Rather, it is a synthesis of the theoretical and the non-conceptually imaginative. There is a similar sociological poetics at work in much of Marx’s writing, which frequently weaves literary tropes and metaphors into its warp and weft. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, for example, history is metaphorically likened to a stage on which actions are played out, first time as tragedy, second time as farce (ibid.). In *Capital* (1867), the eponymous central character is likened to a vampire that “lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks” (Marx, 1946: 216), while *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) contains an arresting image of the hapless bourgeois sorcerer who has conjured up proletarian spirits from the netherworld that now threaten to escape his control (Marx & Engels, 2008: 41). Both these images seem to be drawn from the world of nineteenth-century Gothic horror fiction, indicating the extent to which Marx had recourse to a wide array of literary resources across the whole breadth of his writing life.

With such literary resonances in mind, we should not overlook the extent to which Marx’s reading of Aeschylus may well have subtly informed and influenced his historical insights in a way which the duller compulsions of economic theory are not so apt to do (although one could hardly claim that Marx did not have a peculiar flair for such intensely theoretical labour as well). Acknowledging the aesthetic moment in Marx’s thought, however, should not lead us into the temptation of assuming that Aeschylus – or Prometheus – are somehow ‘proto-Marxist’. Such a counterintuitive

manoeuvre would overlook the simpler fact that Marx repeatedly and compulsively read Aeschylus. Marx concludes the Foreword to his doctoral dissertation using a different Promethean reproach from the one previously cited in order to make a substantive claim about the task of philosophy. He quotes: "Be sure of this, I would not change my state | Of evil fortune for your servitude. | Better to be the servant of this rock | Than to be faithful boy to Father Zeus'. Prometheus is the most eminent saint and martyr in the philosophical calendar" (Marx, 2006: 90). Marx's quotation of these lines has received critical attention. Prawer takes them to suggest that, for Marx, "the great literature of the past [. . .] speaks across the ages to all men" (1978: 23). Less often remarked is the fact that Marx places himself at odds here with most recent translations of the Greek original, which transcribe these lines as a passage of dialogue, attributing the latter two lines to Prometheus' interlocutor, the "faithful boy" Hermes.<sup>4</sup> The translations of David Grene and Philip Vellacott both reflect this.<sup>5</sup> While it is possible that Marx simply misremembered this passage, it is unlikely given what we know of the attention with which Marx read Aeschylus. Marx, in his youthful exuberance, may well have adapted this passage of dialogue – gesturing towards the theoretical infinity of 'texts' available in performance – making the content go beyond the phrase, by imagining a context in which the Promethean reproach would ring out with fuller force since the bounded conditions of Hermes' servitude would have been overcome.

It is perhaps more likely that Marx had read an edition of the play which had been 'corrupted' in transmission, or which adopts an eclectic approach to a textual crux. The problems, or opportunities, presented by the existence of competing manuscripts, and the editorial task of collation, go some way towards qualifying Prawer's assertion about "great literature of the past" imbued with the power to speak "across the ages" because they imply that literature is not in fact a stable vessel for the transmission of eternal verities. If the text itself is not unitary, then there is no secure epistemological base upon which to ground one's interpretations. There is a peculiar urgency about textual cruces of this kind when they occur in dramatic texts because they cannot afford to remain unresolved if the text is to be translated into performance. (Marx's ludic redistribution of Hermes' lines to Prometheus, meanwhile, would not be beyond the bounds of possibility in a contemporary production of Aeschylus' text). The performance of a text necessitates the resolution, or temporary suspension, of the epistemological problem posed by a crux because those who act are forced to make a wager. With reference to Marx's famously agitational eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, it is possible to appreciate the choices facing 'actors' – in every sense – are of

the utmost importance to Marx. This allows us to see Marx's fondness for making use of the stage as a metaphor for the historical process in a new light (Prawer, 1978: 59; 117; 138; 178-179).

The incomplete nature of the *Prometheia* trilogy – *Prometheus Unbound* and *Prometheus the Fire-Bringer* exist only in fragments – can be read as a textual parallel for the problem of choice in political praxis. Such indeterminacy is an invitation to action. There is a problem, however, of knowing how or when to make the tiger's leap given the burdensome knowledge that one's actions will reciprocally influence the situation into which they intervene. Promethean foreknowledge is not a gift which is readily forthcoming. When Perry Anderson, writing in 2000, argued that "religious doctrines [can be discounted] as largely inoperative archaisms" (Anderson, 2000), he was unable to foresee the events of 11 September 2001. While making a claim to epistemological certainty, Anderson's hypothesis was necessarily speculative: a manoeuvre which always risks failure. Percy Bysshe Shelley volunteered himself to supply a speculative reconstruction of the lost *Prometheus Unbound* (1820), which figures forth the defeat of Jupiter at the hands of a spirit conjured from the netherworld:

Detested prodigy!  
Even thus beneath the deep Titanian prisons  
I trample thee! . . . Thou lingerest?

Mercy! mercy!  
(III.ii.61-64; Shelley, 2002: 276)

The blank space of silence in which Jupiter reaches recognition of his defeat can be filled only in performance. One might think here of the Romanian dictator, Nicolae Ceaușescu's downfall: after he stumbled once, the rest was silence. In Shelley's text, it is the aptly named Demogorgon – yoking together the Greek words *demos* (people) and *gorgon* (monster) – who disturbs the place of power, challenging the received interpretation, based on the surviving fragments, that Zeus and Prometheus achieve reconciliation. It is difficult to know what Marx thought of Shelley's play. Prawer finds that Shelley is "never mentioned [in Marx's published writings] at all" (1978: 397). We can risk an extrapolation, however, from Marx's comments elsewhere.

In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx states that the "conditions of bourgeois society are too narrow to comprise the wealth created by them" (Marx & Engels, 2008: 42). Socialism, we might deduce, must therefore imply a kind of widening, which we could potentially associate with birth-pangs. The task of those who act is to play to the maieutic role of midwife to this birth.



Although the constraints of social being provide the relatively fixed coordinates into which we find ourselves born, such dead weight does not negate the capacity of consciousness to act as a quickening element in the historical process. The inspirational aesthetic figuration of success in struggle, however, can soon ossify into a consoling palliative. There is an attendant risk that the autonomy of aesthetic form will simply be subjugated to the demands of a didactic content. Marx's appreciation of Balzac should alert us to the fact that he saw more to the mimetic function of literature than the mere representation of a radically moralizing *Weltanschauung*. The status of the literary, for Marx, can be cognitive, but not primarily in the straightforward sense of tendentiousness.

Underlying Marx's famous comparison between Milton and a silk worm, or between the work of an architect and that of a bee – alike except inasmuch as the architect “raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality” (Marx, 1946: 157) – is a conception of aesthetic production redolent of an innate, essential human capacity. In Chapter 7 of *Capital* on ‘The Labour Process and the Process of Producing Surplus Value’, Marx states that by engaging in the labour process, man “develops his slumbering powers” (ibid.). For some Marxists, seeking to develop a Marxian approach to art, the putatively non-instrumentalised nature of aesthetic production affords a special status to the awakening power of such activity. Concerned with autotelic attributes of symmetry, proportion and harmony, it is labour which develops man's sense of beauty: “By [. . .] acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature” (ibid.).<sup>6</sup> If mankind is imputed to possess an intrinsic creative impulse which manifests itself through the labour process, then the arrival of socialism – no small matter in itself – is taken as the basis for the extension and general fulfilment of those potentialities. Trotsky, for example, is able to end *Literature and Revolution* (1924) on a note of utopian buoyancy, predicting that in Communist society,

Man will become immeasurably stronger, wiser and subtler; his body will become more harmonised, his movements more rhythmic, his voice more musical. The forms of life will become dynamically dramatic. The average human type will rise to the heights of an Aristotle, a Goethe, or a Marx. And above this ridge new peaks will rise (Trotsky, 1991: 284)

The material advancements brought about by the changed productive relations will, Trotsky presumes, correspondingly unleash latent human qualities. Likewise, developing the spiritual side of his being will have a

corresponding influence on man's material capacities (strength, movement and voice). Art which holds out the hope of non-alienated life under alienated conditions of existence will surely come into its own when those conditions are superseded.

One does not need to adhere to Louis Althusser's theory of an unbridgeable 'epistemological break' between the early humanistic and later scientific Marx in order to identify some problems with this reconstruction of a Marxian aesthetic (Althusser, 1969: 33). Prawer, for example, draws attention to Marx's criticism of Arnold Ruge in his pamphlet *The Great Men in Exile*, where humanism is derided as a "hollow term which has served all the confused minds of Germany [. . .] as a cloak for their perplexity" (Prawer, 1978: 193). If aesthetic production were to be identified solely with the resources of human potential, this would overlook the truth of Benjamin's claim that "[t]here is no document of civilisation which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (1973: 258). This dialectical insight would not have been lost on Marx who was influenced by Hegel's view of the transition from classical to modern art, as can be seen from his notes on Greek art in the *Grundrisse* of 1857-61 (McLellan, 1973: 55-57). In the Athenian polis, the theatre was a social institution with a consequent bearing on art's claim to possess a cognitive function in dynamically (rather than passively) reflecting ancient Greek society; in modern times, meanwhile, plays are produced for an anonymous marketplace with only an accidental, opaque relationship to wider social or political communities. For moderns, Greek art represents the afterglow of that organic unity in which essence and appearance were integrated in the art object, but that which has been lost cannot be recovered by an act of individual artistic will.

As regards the artist himself [. . .] the whole spiritual culture of the age is of such a kind that he himself stands within this reflective world and its conditions, and it is impossible for him to abstract himself from it by will and resolve, or to contrive for himself and bring to pass, by means of peculiar education or removal from the relations of life, a peculiar solitude that would replace all that is lost (Hegel, 1993: 13)

This is one sense in which social being might be said to determine an artist's social consciousness, because art is seen to be necessarily bound up with underlying structures of social and historical experience. As Hegel intimates, it is futile nostalgia to see potential for recovering what has been lost in a voluntaristic act of will or an escapist retreat into the imagination, dreaming about what the "beautiful days of Greek art, and the golden times of the later middle ages" (ibid.: 12) might have been like. Marx, in his movement

beyond Hegel into the realm of collective political praxis, pointed towards a way in which this crux might achieve a revolutionary resolution.

Prometheus' suffering body is a stark representation of the 'bad side' of that progress which leads an innocent mankind out of the village-womb and, eventually, into the capitalist metropolis. Aeschylus' play is simultaneously a document of civilisation – Athenian democracy – and barbarism – the slave-labour that formed the economic base of ancient Greek society and which blinded Aristotle to the true source of value: human labour (Marx, 1946: 28-29). The "eternal charm" which Marx ascribes to the artistic relics of the "childhood of human society" should always be read in the context of such a dialectical qualification (McLellan, 1973: 56). The infantile fascinations held out by Greek art cannot be kept in isolation from the weightier burdens of Promethean foreknowledge. Prometheus himself can be identified with the proletariat insofar as Marx identified the proletariat with "universal suffering" (1992: 256). The proletariat, for Marx, have nothing to lose but their chains, because they have nothing to give but their bodies in labour, or the bodies of their offspring (*proles*). Prometheus, chained to his rock, is a mimetic embodiment of the 'price' humanity must pay for the gains bought by expansion, innovation and technological advance. Because capitalist growth is inherently self-limiting in Marx's analysis, structured around the cycle of returning, destructive crises, its pretensions to progress are only ever a grim self-parody: the boom before the bust. Meanwhile, in the well-known passage from volume three of *Capital*, the "true realm of freedom" is described as the "development of human powers as an end in itself" (Marx, 1991: 958-959).

Such self-directed, non-purposive development is analogous with the aesthetic pursuit of the beautiful: one pursues it for its own sake. This is not to deny the use-value of the literary though. If Marx's penchant for literary quotation is to represent more than just an ostentatious accumulation of nineteenth-century cultural capital, we should force the contradiction through. *Poesis* is also a constitutive activity of (re)making worlds, with language as its 'matter'. Such flights of linguistic fancy may one day precipitate the tiger's leap from facts to values, changing the staid world as it is into the bright world as it ought to be. It is in this sense that socialist poetry is always poetry of the future. The literary must be viewed diachronically, synchronically and proleptically. The caches of cultural treasures that trail in the wake of historical development have a lineage which cannot be contemplated "without horror" by Marxists (Benjamin, 1973: 258). But the gaze must be unflinchingly maintained (Adorno, 1974:

25). Aesthetic creations retain a lingeringly negative capacity to pre-figure a non-alienated existence. While they are bound by the fetters of their commodified status under capitalistic relations of production, they continue to look inconsolably forward with a minimally utopian foreknowledge. The angel's wings, like the prisoner's, are held in suspension.

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Prometheus recounts a list of his gifts to mankind at ll.442-505. All further references will refer by line-number to this edition and will be given in the text.

<sup>2</sup> In German, the phrase reads: "Es ist nicht das Bewußtsein der Menschen, das ihr Sein, sondern umgekehrt ihr gesellschaftliches Sein, das ihr Bewußtsein bestimmt" (Marx, 1859). Livingstone translates Sein as 'existence', which is also frequently translated as 'being'.

<sup>3</sup> The same applies to the 'economic stage' as Marx extends this metaphor throughout *Capital*. The "two antithetical transmutations of the commodity" (C-M, which is also, already, M-C) ensure that the "characters of seller and buyer are therefore not permanent" (Marx, 1946: 84). If anything is revealed by the *dramatis personae* of *Capital*, it is that the only real 'identity' under capitalism is non-identity.

<sup>4</sup> F. D. Allen's 1891 edition of the original text gives: "Προμηθεύς: τῆς σῆς λατρείας τὴν ἐμὴν δυσπραξίαν, / σαφῶς ἐπίστασ', οὐκ ἂν ἀλλάξαιμ' ἐγώ. / Ἐρμῆς: κρείσσον γὰρ οἶμαι τῆδε λατρεύειν πέτρα / ἢ πατρὶ φῦναι Ζηνὶ πιστὸν ἄγγελον. / Προμηθεύς: οὕτως ὑβρίζειν τοὺς ὑβρίζοντας χρεῶν" (ll.966-70). See Aeschylus (1891: 133-134).

<sup>5</sup> See Vellacott (Aeschylus, 1964: 49); Grene and Lattimore (Aeschylus, 1991: 347).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Marx's comment in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*: "just as society produces *man* as *man*, so it is *produced* by him" (Marx, 1992: 349).

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# The One and the Many: Revisioning Adorno's Critique of Western Reason

by Deborah Cook

The problem of the One and the Many has a long history; it can be traced all the way back to the pre-Socratic philosophers who were seeking a single principle that underlies reality. Even Heraclitus, who is perhaps better known for the view that nothing remains the same, postulated the fundamental unity of things. In one of the remaining fragments of his thought (Fragment 50), Heraclitus urged: "It is wise to hearken, not to me, but to my Word, and to confess that all things are one". Unity is alleged to be real; all things are one in an ontological sense. Nor does unity exclude diversity. For Heraclitus, "it is essential to the being and existence of the One that it should be one and many at the same time, that it should be Identity in Difference" (Copleston, 1962: 56-57). Of course, Parmenides placed even greater emphasis on unity. Consigning difference or otherness to the realm of non-being, Parmenides asserted that Being alone – the One – exists.

Jürgen Habermas offers an important psychological gloss on this perennial theme of the One and the Many in his essay 'The Unity of Reason and the Diversity of its Voices'. Here, he remarks, in an explicitly Adornian vein, that with his abstract conception of a "universal, eternal, and necessary being", Parmenides tried to break the "spell of mythological powers and the enchantment of demons". With Parmenides, the "fear of uncontrolled dangers that displayed itself in myths and magical practices now lodges within the controlling concepts of metaphysics itself". The dangers that the notion of Being was supposed to avert also expressed themselves in "deep-seated fears of death and frailty, of isolation and separation, of opposition and contradiction, of surprise and novelty". By reducing the Many to "mere *images*" of the One, Parmenides not only demoted diverse particulars to the realm of mere appearance, he made them reassuringly "univocal, the surveyable parts of a harmonic order" (Habermas, 1992: 120).

Three problems beset this conception of the unity of all things. First, how can the One be everything if the universe is composed of many different

things? Second, how can we do justice to the uniqueness and individuality of things if all is ultimately One? And third, how should matter be conceived? (ibid.: 121-123). While the first two questions interested Theodor Adorno, the third question about matter preoccupied Friedrich Schelling. But Habermas also thinks that Schelling marked a breakthrough in the conception of the One, Being, or unity. If the unity of all things was regarded for millennia as an ontological postulate, Schelling broke with this tradition when he denied that the “unity of the many” is “an objective whole prior to the human mind”. Rather than existing objectively, unity is “the result of a synthesis executed by the mind itself”. In fact, Habermas alleges that Schelling revolutionized “the basic concepts of metaphysics”. When he stated that reason is the sole “source of *world-constituting* ideas”, and that “history is the medium through which mind carries out its synthesis”, Schelling formulated problems that would eventually “set postmetaphysical thinking in motion” (ibid.: 124).

For his part, however, Adorno charges that Schelling succumbed to identity-thinking. Yet, he follows Schelling to the extent that he also views the postulate of unity as a function of thought. In thought, we strive compulsively to range particular things under abstract universals, even as we confront a world that literally teems with individuated things. Disregarding the concrete singularity of things, thought, in its abstract generality, is animated by a unifying, totalizing impulse: it attempts – as Friedrich Nietzsche once put it – “to *make* all being thinkable” by forcing things to “yield and bend” under the yoke of abstraction (Nietzsche, 1982: 225). By pressing natural things into the mould of universal laws and totalizing conceptual schema, we reassure ourselves that all is one, that unity triumphs over diversity, that there is nothing new under the sun.

When he criticizes the unifying impetus of thought, Adorno also asks why unity has superseded diversity. He raises this question in his lectures on the *Critique of Pure Reason* when he observes that, for Kant, the concept of unity is “the canon by which everything else can be judged”. The idea that the one has “primacy over the many” is the unquestioned “metaphysical premise” that Kant shared with “the Enlightenment in the broadest sense, as [. . .] with early Greek thought and with Christianity in its entirety”. Moreover, this premiss is not “a mere homogenization that results from depriving a mass of diverse varied things of their differentiating features, while retaining the one thing they have in common”. Rather, this premiss is modelled after the unity of consciousness itself. As a result, the emphasis on unity at the expense of diversity is not “so much the product of knowledge, as its essence” (Adorno, 2001: 196-197).



In a psychological explanation for the primacy of the One over the Many, Adorno argues that the primacy of the One or unity can be traced back to human prehistory when reason and its agent, the ego, emerged during the transition from magic to myth. Reason served as a means to the end that all human beings seek: self-preservation. In this respect, reason can be compared to the teeth on a bear since both “serve the same purpose”. Reason is just a more effective instrument of adaptation to the natural world because it has made us “animals with more far-reaching powers” (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1972: 222-223; 2002: 184-185). To survive, we began to subdue fearsome nature in thought by identifying natural things with our concepts of them in order to predict and control them. This subsumptive mode of thought persists today. Calling this offshoot of our own natural history ‘identity-thinking’, Adorno often complained that the persistence of identity-thinking shows that human beings “are still imprisoned in the natural context”, even and especially as organisms that assert themselves “against the organic” (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1972: 54; 2002: 42). “In fear”, Adorno wrote, our “bondage to nature is perpetuated by a thinking that identifies, that equalizes everything unequal” (1973: 172).

Given thought’s propensity to subordinate the Many under the One, Adorno wants philosophy to think critically about substituting unity for diversity, simplicity for complexity, permanence for change, and identity for difference. For the cognitive ascent from particular things to unifying concepts, principles and laws obscures the differences between things; it fails to do justice to their “qualitative moments”. Now that reason has been equated “*more mathematico* with the faculty of quantification”, it has also become “weakened and at odds with itself” because quantification actually presupposes the “ability to discriminate”. In the absence of the ability to make qualitative distinctions between things, “the synthetic function of thought – abstract unification – would not be possible” (Adorno, 1973: 43).

Since our ability to perceive difference, dissimilarity, has atrophied, reason is now “pathic” (ibid.: 172). To cure us of this pathic form of reason, however, Adorno neither abandons reason nor dispenses with concepts. Instead, he insists that reason alone is the “organon” of progress. Praising Kant for preserving the unity of reason, Adorno argues that “a nature-dominating and a reconciling level do not exist separate and disjunct within reason, rather both share all its determinations”. Nature-dominating reason can invert “into its other” by reflecting critically on itself, by applying reason to itself in such a way that, “in its self-restriction,” it finally “emancipates itself from the demon of identity” (Adorno, 1998a: 152). In fact, Adorno’s

alternative cognitive paradigm, nonidentity thinking, involves this “self-reflection of the concept”. Such thinking tries to penetrate “the wall that the concept erects around itself and its concerns by virtue of its own conceptual nature” (Adorno, 2008: 62-63) in order to reveal the lack of identity between concepts and objects even as it discloses their affinity, or the embeddedness of concepts in the material world (Adorno, 1973: 12).

With nonidentity thinking, Adorno attempts to address the cognitive dimension of the problem of the One and the Many. However, this problem has a social dimension as well: can society accommodate itself to the diverse individuals who comprise it? In fact, the two dimensions of this problem are linked because late capitalist society and identity-thinking are “akin” (*verschwiert*) (ibid.: 316). Where identity-thinking compulsively subsumes objects under concepts, late capitalist society reifies individuals, expunging their idiosyncrasies by subsuming them under abstract exchange relations. Like identity-thinking, which ignores the particularity of things, treating them as mere instances of more general kinds, exchange relations make “nonidentical individuals and performances become commensurable and identical” (ibid.: 146). Adorno explains why identity-thinking and exchange are “akin” when he examines the claim that “knowledge really just repeats what has always existed in the actual process of human labour”. Here, he agrees with Marx: “when consciousness reflects upon itself, it necessarily arrives at a concept of rationality that corresponds to the rationality of the labour process” (Adorno, 2001: 172).

Frequently referring to society as the ‘universal’, Adorno stressed its virtually irresistible power over individuals. Over the course of history, the “real total movement of society” – in the form of increasingly abstract exchange relations – became independent of the living individuals who created it and continue to sustain it. These relations now operate over their “heads and through their heads” and are therefore “antagonistic from the outset” (Adorno, 1973: 304). Today, individuals are not “just character masks, agents of exchange in a supposedly separate economic sphere” because exchange relations have become so widespread, affecting so much of human life that, even where individuals “think they have escaped the primacy of economics – all the way into their psychology, the *maison tolérée* of uncomprehended individuality – they react under the compulsion of the universal” (ibid.: 311). Since individuals are now mere appendages of society, “the One takes precedence as the identity of the system that leaves nothing at large” (ibid.: 315).

Adorno emphasizes the gravity of our predicament when he declares that the primacy of volatile economic forces over individuals has its vanishing point in the death of all" (ibid.: 320). We may well end by annihilating all life on this planet because late capitalism now shackles us to the pursuit of our own individual survival as bearers of exchange relations; it obliges us to focus exclusively on our egocentric interests all the better to advance its own (ibid.: 343). But the death of all will have a related cause. For our survival also depends on the continued viability of the *natural* world. Like the individual, however, nature too is moribund. As Samuel Beckett foresaw in *Endgame*, we now face a catastrophic situation in which "there's no more nature" (Beckett, 1958: 10). Commenting on Beckett's play, Adorno states that "the complete reification of the world . . . is indistinguishable from an additional catastrophic event caused by human beings, in which nature has been wiped out and after which nothing grows any more" (1991: 245).

By turning individuals into lifeless objects of exchange, reification is already tantamount to "permanent death" (Adorno, 1973: 370). In turn, however, the moribund individual reduces nature to "a residual *caput mortuum*" (Adorno, 2006: 151). We ensure our own survival by destroying the natural world on which our very lives depend. Echoing social ecologist Murray Bookchin – who rails against our death-oriented society – and ecofeminist Carolyn Merchant – who charts the course of the 'death of nature' – Adorno is concerned that the primacy of the capitalist process of production will result in the extinction of all living things because it forces us to disregard the more rational interests of our species. In *Negative Dialectics*, he speaks of "a universal feeling, a universal fear, that our progress in controlling nature may [. . .] help to weave the very catastrophe from which it was supposed to protect us" (Adorno, 1973: 67).

However, Adorno also believes that prospects for emancipation remain open. Freedom "has always been possible, [. . .] it has been possible at every moment" (2006: 181). For Adorno, moreover, freedom depends, at least in part, on recognizing our own affinity with nature. He imbues the Socratic maxim, 'Know Thyself', with psychological, social and moral force when he asserts that one of the keys to initiating transformative change is critical self-awareness. Rational insight into our own natural history "is the point of a dialectics of enlightenment" (Adorno, 1973: 270). In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno revives the central thesis he and Horkheimer put forward in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, namely, that a thorough critique of our instinctually driven subjugation of nature may "prepare the way for a positive notion of enlightenment which will release it from entanglement in blind domination"

(1972: xvi; 2002: xviii). Enlightenment requires that we acknowledge that our unceasing attempts to dominate nature, which account for the rise and fall of entire civilizations, were impelled by nature itself in the form of the instinct for self-preservation. An outgrowth of its natural drives, the mind is “not what it enthrones itself as, the Other, the transcendent in its purity, but rather is also a piece of natural history” (Adorno, 1998a: 156).

At the same time, however, it is important to note that our affinity with nature does not mean that we are identical with it. Adorno develops a non-reductive and non-dualistic conception of humanity’s natural history (see O’Connor, 2004: 97-98). To be sure, reason grew out of instinct: we acquired our capacity to abstract from nature owing to our affinity with nature when we opposed ourselves to nature in the struggle for survival. Nature itself – in the form of the instinct for self-preservation – called “for something more than conditioned reflexes” (Adorno, 1973: 217). But Adorno also insists that what communicates through affinity must be differentiated from what it resembles. The affinity between mind and nature should not be understood as positive; it does not authorize a foundational conception of nature because the human mind partially extricated itself from nature in its attempts to dominate it. The mind became ‘something else’, something other than instinct, by virtue of “reflecting existence” with a view to ensuring its survival (Adorno, 1974: 243). Consequently, reflection on nature in ourselves involves both acknowledging our resemblance to nature as instinctual, embodied beings, *and* respecting nature’s heterogeneity.

In an argument that may initially appear contradictory, Adorno states that “we are no longer simply a piece of nature” only “from the moment that we recognize that we *are* a piece of nature” (2000: 103, my emphasis). The mark of an enlightened mind, sustained mindfulness of nature in ourselves is the one capacity that actually does distinguish us from non-human nature. Although we continue to behave like other animals to the extent that survival instincts motivate our behaviour, we can deliberately change this behaviour because we have acquired the, as yet only partially developed, capacity to differentiate ourselves from nature by becoming more fully aware of our own entwinement in it. This is why Adorno considers mindfulness of nature to be one of the harbingers of freedom: freedom depends on “nature becoming conscious of itself” (ibid.: 104).

This critical self-awareness holds out the prospect of leading more autonomous – more fully human – lives because it may eventually free us “from the blind pursuit of natural ends”, and free us for “alternative actions”

(Adorno, 2000: 104). Reflecting on our own natural history, we may eventually transform self-preservation by redirecting this instinct towards more rational ends. In fact, Adorno asserts that reason should retain and strengthen its links with self-preservation because our behaviour can be deemed rational only “in so far as it serves the principle that has been regarded [. . .] as the true fundamental principle of every existent being: [*suum*] *esse conservare*, self-preservation” (ibid.: 137). As David Kaufmann also remarks, it is not self-preservation *per se*, but the “limited rationality of self-preservation [. . .] that leads to the irrationality of a reason devoted entirely to means, to *how* things should be done rather than to *what* should be done” (2004: 175).

Since reason can rise above nature only by reflecting on its own instinctual basis in self-preservation, individuals must first improve their capacity for self-reflection (Adorno, 1998b: 273). In fact, Adorno declared in ‘Education after Auschwitz’ that the “only education that has any sense at all is education toward critical self-reflection” (1998c: 193). But sustained and critical self-reflection would also reveal that our individual survival depends upon orienting the instinct for self-preservation towards the goal it implicitly contains, namely, the preservation of the species as a whole. Citing Max Weber, Adorno declares that, once it emancipates itself from “the contingency of individually posed ends”, the “subject of *ratio*, pursuing its self-preservation, is itself an actual universal, society – in its full logic, humanity”. For Adorno, moreover, the “preservation of humanity” is “inexorably inscribed within the meaning of rationality”. Emphatically conceived, reason “should not be anything less than self-preservation, namely that of the species, upon which the survival of each individual literally depends” (ibid.: 272-273).

We must abandon that stubborn attachment to our egocentric interests which is fostered under late capitalism because this attachment has become, not just destructive of nature, but self-destructive. Paradoxically, perhaps, it is no longer in our interest to be self-interested. Our interest in our own survival would be better served if we were to embrace the needs of all members of our species. Adorno is not reviving the crude rhetoric of self-sacrifice here. Instead, he endorses the goal that every rational human being seeks: self-preservation. Rather, he believes that the survival of individuals – not to speak of their *flourishing* as individuals – requires that they develop a far more profound sense of solidarity with all other individuals on this planet. Our survival depends upon sympathy with the human, with embodied and finite individuals who are all too vulnerable to pain and

suffering. Adorno even sounds a Hegelian note when he states that “the fixation of one’s own need and one’s own longing mars the idea of a happiness that will not arise until the category of the individual ceases to be self-seclusive” (1973: 352).

Still, Adorno also warns against hypostatizing the species for reasons that echo his concerns about the plight of individuals under late capitalism. On the one hand, it is “part of the logic of the self-preservation of the individual that it should [. . .] embrace [. . .] the preservation of the species”. On the other hand, the ‘embrace’ of the species is problematic because “there is an intrinsic temptation for this universality to emancipate itself from the individuals it comprises”. Even on the condition that “species reason” is liberated “from the particularity of obdurate particular interest”, the species may subsequently “fail to free itself from the no less obdurate particular interest of the totality”. Since this ‘conundrum’ concerning the relationship between the individual and the species has not yet been resolved, Adorno considers it to be “a problem of the greatest possible gravity” (2006: 44-45).

Adorno also argues that the preservation of humanity requires the transformation of society: self-preservation has its end in “a reasonable organization of society” (1998b: 272). In fact, Adorno claims that late capitalist society is irrational because it continues to increase “all apparatuses and means of quantifiable domination at the cost of the goal, the rational organization of humankind” (1998d: 138, translation modified). Here, the pressure of negativity, of damaged life, makes itself felt: the prospect of establishing humanity as the subject of its own history has really opened up only “in the face of its extinction” (1998a: 145). Since late capitalism now threatens to destroy all life on earth, we are compelled to think about how society might be rationally organized to ensure the preservation of all nature, including ourselves. Progress is dialectical because “historical setbacks, which themselves are instigated by the principle of progress [. . .] also provide the condition needed for humanity to find the means to avert them in the future” (1998a: 154).

Adorno often described human beings as prisoners. Progress depends upon breaking out of the prison of survival instincts (Adorno, 1973: 180) and the subjective prison of identity-thinking (*ibid.*: 172). But it also requires that we break out of the “objective context of delusion” that identitarian exchange relations promote because this context serves as “the authority for a doctrine of adjustment” (*ibid.*: 148). Once we have burst out of the prison of cognition, concepts would reach beyond themselves to apprehend the

qualitative differences that distinguish natural things *qua* particular, “de-ifying the ability to discriminate, the ability without which reason cannot exist” (Horowitz, 2007: 212). And, once we have escaped from the prison of survival instincts by acknowledging our own affinity with the natural world, and reflecting on nature in ourselves, we may finally establish freer intercourse between mind and body, ego and instinct. This awareness of ourselves as inextricably entwined with nature would also encourage us to put an end to our destructive and self-destructive behaviour by improving the metabolism between ourselves and non-human nature.

Finally, to break out of the delusive context that exchange relations promote when they treat all things as identical or One, we must abolish the “vicious system of compensatory exchange” (Adorno, 1973: 299). Exchange relations must make good on the promise that is contained in the very idea of an exchange of *equivalents*; they can be made more rational by satisfying the more emphatic notion of “free and just exchange” (ibid.: 147). For Adorno, progress is not “merely an Other in relation to exchange, but rather exchange that has been brought to itself” (1998a: 159). A society in which exchange were truly free and just would ultimately transcend exchange because no part of workers’ labour would be withheld from them (ibid.). No longer the mere pawns of exchange, individuals would also shape the social institutions and practices that in turn shape them. In their social relations, they would learn to respect and appreciate difference, not primarily in the generic straitjackets of age, sex, and race, but in the form of the diverse, the many, the diffuse and ambiguous (Adorno, 2001: 196). Social solidarity would be transformed. New forms of solidarity would emerge that permit differences between individuals to flourish even as they pursue common goals. In short, reconciliation, or the communication between what has been differentiated (Adorno, 1998e: 247) – nature, society, and human and non-human particulars – would “release the nonidentical”. It would disclose the “multiplicity of different things” (Adorno, 1973: 6) by substituting “for the principle of unity and the primacy of the superordinated concept the idea of what would lie outside the spell of such unity” (ibid.: xx). Adorno aims to foster reconciliation by overcoming the tyranny of the One to reveal the infinite profusion of the Many.

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# Fetish and Refuge: A Mock Pastoral

by Keston Sutherland

In his English translation of *Minima Moralia*, E.F.N. Jephcott deletes an important reference to *Das Kapital*. Section 77 of Jephcott's *Minima Moralia* includes the following passage:

[A]mid universal fungibility happiness attaches without exception to the non-fungible. No humane exertions, no formal reasoning, can sever happiness from the fact that the ravishing dress is worn by only one, and not by twenty thousand. The utopia of the qualitative – the things which through their difference and uniqueness cannot be absorbed into the prevalent exchange relationships – takes refuge under capitalism in the traits of fetishism (Adorno, 1987: 120; 2003: 136)

That last sentence significantly twists its German original, which begins like this: “In den Fetischcharakter flüchtet sich unterm Kapitalismus die Utopie des Qualitativen”. “Fetischcharakter” is the famous word from Marx's part 1, chapter 1, section 4 of *Das Kapital*, “Der Fetischcharakter der Ware und sein Geheimnis” (“The fetish-character of commodities and its secret”). Because of his preceding comment about the ravishing dress, Adorno seems to be making a point about sexual fetishism, or the fetishism implicit in a specific sexual object relation; but his aphoristic conclusion means something else (it must in any case, because it is aphoristic). “In den Fetischcharakter flüchtet sich unterm Kapitalismus die Utopie des Qualitativen” (“Under capitalism the utopia of the qualitative takes refuge in the fetish-character”). After the dress, we expect an insight into sexual fascination; we get switched into the lexicon of Marx's analysis of the commodity form. The ravishing dress worn only by one is not, in Adorno's *Minima Moralia*, a generic or unspecified fetish object, but the universal one, the commodity, as defined by Marx in *Das Kapital*. If “the utopia of the qualitative” can be rehabilitated into life, or figuratively, inducted from its conceptual refuge back into social safety, it is in the fetish-character as speculatively conceived by Marx that we will have to look for it.

Adorno shows that Marx's *Fetischcharakter* is a speculative concept by literalising it into a sexual object we must strain to keep single. The dress is

worn by only one. If only identity thinking were possible.

This is a startling suggestion about Marx's *Fetischcharakter*. Adorno suggests with his aphorism that the full analysis of the "very mysterious thing" the commodity must unconceal not only the violence of capitalist production, but also and at the same time its opposite; that is, not only the dominant relations of exchange (Jephcott writes "prevalent exchange relationships", again obscuring the Marxism of Adorno's original "herrschende Tauschverhältnis"), but the freedom they make impossible. The commodity is not however a display case for these opposites, but the value of one and the refuge of the other. All value is comprehended in the commodity and all value is quantitative for capitalism, whether *Wert*, *Tauschwert* or *Gebrauchswert*; and the commodity is the refuge for the utopia of the qualitative.

How obstinate is this contradiction? It might be argued that use value (*Gebrauchswert*) was not quantitatively conceived by Marx, since the use value of a book for example may be its idea, or of food its nourishment; and on that basis, that many commodities (if not yet all of them, so possibly not yet the "commodity form") simply are the refuge for the utopia of the qualitative, because we enjoy them with an experience that no one has yet found a reason to quantify (it might be bliss, or an orgasm); but that many other commodities simply are not the refuge for the utopia of the qualitative, because we do not enjoy them. If commodities were all use value and nothing else, this would be a way out of the contradiction in Adorno; but it would be a way into natural theology. William Paley wrote in his chapter called 'Of mechanical arrangement in the human frame' in his *Natural Theology* of 1802, a book Wordsworth loved:

Now observe what would have been the inconveniency, i.e. both the superfluity and the defect of articulation, if the case had been inverted; if the ball and socket joint had been at the knee, and the hinge joint at the hip. The thighs must have been kept constantly together, and the legs have been loose and straggling. There would have been no use that we know of, in being able to turn the calves of the legs before (Paley, 2006: 63)

Readers of Samuel Beckett's *Watt* will recognise from this passage that Beckett is the opposite of a natural theologian. Adorno's contradiction made by an aphorism is not that everything already of use to us, the sum of all use values, is in principle utopia (or better, God), but, unfortunately, their being comprehended together with exchange values in the *Fetischcharakter* of the

commodity form makes use values too non-identical or heteronomous or ideological to be utopia in practice; the contradiction is rather that the utopia of the qualitative, from which the quantitative is banned, has nothing to do with use values either: it is the world for which (in Paley's phrase hilariously parodying scepticism) "there would have been no use that we know of". The *Fetischcharakter* of the commodity is the refuge of that world, not of use value.

But from the perspective of the theory of value in *Das Kapital*, every pleasure ever owed to a commodity was a use value. To enjoy a commodity is to realise its use value. The scholastic consequence is that unless there are pleasures that *may never* be owing to a commodity, pleasures that no commodity could ever generate, every human pleasure experienced on earth is inadmissible to the refuge in the *Fetischcharakter*, since the possible participation of any pleasure in use value disqualifies it from having "no use that we know of". The problem then is that any pleasure that at one stage *may never* be owing to a commodity is at a later stage the compulsory object of fetishization; the breast is merely the paradigmatic use value. In *this* world, as Marx called it, the commodity cannot be escaped; but then nor can its refuge for utopia.

The commodity is not only a very mysterious thing but a metaphysically heterogenous one too. It is a refuge for utopia comprehended together with dead labour or human *Gallerte*, a single object. Or rather, it is quasi-metaphysical, since *Gallerte* is the opposite of metaphysics.<sup>1</sup>

The non-fungible, the qualitative that has no exchange value or use value and that cannot be exchanged or used, adopts the *Fetischcharakter* for a refuge. Or if the *Fetischcharakter* is the subject of the proposition, it protects the utopia of the qualitative, even by being itself the damage to life of which *Minima Moralia* (subtitled "reflections from damaged life") is the antipanegyric.

It protects happiness from us. In 'On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening', Adorno wrote:

Masochism in hearing is not only defined by self-surrender and pseudo-pleasure through identification with power. Underlying it is the knowledge that the security of shelter under the ruling conditions is a provisional one, that it is only a respite, and that eventually everything must collapse (2002: 311)

He continues, now surely invoking masturbation explicitly:

Even in self-surrender one is not good in his own eyes; in his enjoyment one feels that he is simultaneously betraying the possible and being betrayed by the existent (ibid.)

The problem for Adorno is not how individuals might achieve liquidity of identity; the individual has already been liquidated. The problem is that all hearing is masochistic, since any more temperate estimate of the extent of masochism would be a compromise with the reality that inflicts it (the reality in which I am forced like a slave to hear “the unspeakable horn melody from the slow movement of Tchaikovsky’s fifth” (ibid.: 294), or the screaming of Iraqis on newsreels). The person who lives like this, “defined by self-surrender and pseudo-pleasure”, knowing that “everything must collapse” but not making it collapse, “not good in his own eyes”, “betraying the possible and being betrayed by the existent”, is himself the damage to life that makes necessary the refuge provided by the *Fetischcharakter*. He identifies himself as this person not by criticism, but in his pleasures; his ontology glows in use values, whereas at least exchange values positively misidentify him.

It is because this person exists that the utopia of the qualitative takes refuge in the *Fetischcharakter* of the commodity. His pleasure is the damage outside the refuge, breaking against its fringe.

If it were nothing but a verbal matter of setting happiness over against pleasure, as we might be prompted to do by theology for instance, then this contradiction in Adorno’s aphorism would again be easy enough to get out of. We could have it that the refuge is for happiness and that outside the refuge is for pleasure, and rather than a quasimetaphysical object, the commodity would be a topographical one, a diagram of the hierarchy of affect (natural or perverse, as we like, but in either case implicitly a class hierarchy). Happiness is fragile and needs protecting whereas pleasure is rough and ready and may go and play in the gutter by itself: *Oliver Twist* and the *Artful Dodger*. But this would be Heideggerian, the stabilization of concepts achieved by abandoning philology to the bidding of hermeneutics; and “happiness” is not ever simply a concept for Adorno, not even in the making of a conceptual argument about happiness, but also what we do already find. Hence the superficially pyrrhic formula toward the end of section 77 of *Minima Moralia*: “no happiness without fetishism” [“kein Glück ohne Fetischismus”]. There *is* fetishism, so that happiness *is* a possible

participant in use value that does not have “no use that we know of”. Happiness is here and now, outside the refuge and comprehended in the commodity; happiness itself damages life.

Rather, our happiness.

Our happiness is of course not happiness. In section 139 of *Minima Moralia*, where Adorno compares aesthetic relationships to difficult art with difficult sexual relationships, he writes:

The decline of giving is today matched by a hardening against receiving. What this adds up to is the renunciation of happiness itself, and it's this renunciation that alone permits men to cling to *their* sort of happiness (1987: 217)

I have changed Jephcott's English here. Jephcott writes “the denial of happiness”, and in this case I think he obscures another reference, this time to Freud. Adorno's word is “Verleugnung”, an important concept in Freud translated as “renunciation” by Strachey in his standard English edition of Freud. Renunciation of happiness permits men to cling to their sort of happiness. Adorno evidently intends the possessive pronoun “their” in this aphorism to be the trigger of paradox. *Their* kind of happiness: the pronoun shudders with innuendo, as if what Adorno meant by it must be obvious but unmentionable in company like ours. In section 33 of *Minima Moralia*, Adorno mentions “the vacuum between men and their fate, in which their real fate lies” (ibid.: 55). Our kind of happiness is not happiness, our fate is not our real fate.<sup>2</sup> The grammar of possession expresses a deeply false relation that revalues the possessive pronoun as a euphemism. Our kind of happiness is the kind we get on with, even thinking we enjoy it, while happiness, possible only in the utopia of the qualitative, remains in the protective custody of the *Fetischcharakter*. “All happiness is but a fragment of the entire happiness men are denied, and are denied by themselves” (Adorno, 2005: 404), says *Negative Dialectics*, but this seems a too easily formal version of the idea, since it makes our happiness and happiness come from the same metaphysical stuff, as if in concession to a universalism it can't go along with: our kind of happiness is the kind that renunciation limits to a fragment, which only means that it is never enough, not that it is not the right sort. But in truth it is not the right sort.

Why not?

Adorno is not the first philosopher of the wrong life to make a drama out of grimacing over the possessive pronoun. The great modern example is that famous moment in *The Communist Manifesto*, when in reply to the apocalyptic bourgeois accusation that the communists would destroy freedom, Marx says yes, he would destroy freedom: *your* kind of freedom. In what he pretended to think would be his “last reply” to the critics of his infamous prize-winning discourse on the sciences and the arts of 1750, Rousseau in high vituperative mode tarried with the genitive in French:

Before those dreadful words *thine* and *mine* [ces mots affreux de *tien* et de *mien*] were invented; before there was the cruel and brutal species of men called masters, and that other knavish and lying species of men called slaves; before there were men so abominable as to dare to have superfluities while other men die of hunger; before mutual dependence had forced all of them to become deceitful, jealous, and treacherous; I should like to have it explained to me wherein those vices, those crimes with which they are so insistently being blamed, could have consisted. I am told that men have long since been disabused of the chimera of the Golden Age. Why not add that they have long since been disabused of the chimera of virtue? (Rousseau, 2008: 71)

In Rousseau’s natural history of last resort, the invention of the possessive pronouns, that is, metonymically, but also literally, the invention of modern individuality and its pursuit of individual interest, is a moment of original corruption. But to be disabused of the chimera of the Golden Age (“désabusé de la chimère de l’Age d’or”), is not yet to sublimate or abandon or even really to ruffle the individuality whose mere existence is sufficient reason for the existence of chimeras. We may disabuse ourselves of chimeras, but our endurance guarantees theirs. Like the *Fetischcharakter*, the chimera too is a refuge: Adorno’s for the utopia of the qualitative, Rousseau’s for the Golden Age. Disabuse, defetishization, demystification, disenchantment, none of these activities is even a short step toward the impossibility of the person who Marx argued must be made impossible; instead they are collectively the discursive *Ersatz* of our impossibility, ways of making the fetish or chimera conform with our insights into ideology by promoting it from the status of an uninterrogated phenomenal object to the status of an ironic cognitive object. The critique of political economy called *Das Kapital* promotes the commodity to the status of an ironic cognitive object by its analysis of the *Fetischcharakter*, and so decontextualises it from the happily uninterrogated phenomena of the marketplace; but as Pierre Bourdieu has observed in *Distinction*, the propensity for and enjoyment of that sort of conceptual or ontological promotion of a debased object to the status of a

very mysterious thing is a special accomplishment of the bourgeois aesthetic attitude (2006: 251).<sup>3</sup> It is *we*, with *our* taste in epistemology, who promote the commodity from “a very trivial thing, and easily understood” to “a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties”. But we promote it “in reality”: the *Fetischcharakter* is no less real or obdurate for being a satire. The utopia of the qualitative takes refuge in an object promoted by criticism itself to the ironically cognitive role of fetish; but just as a piece of kitsch cannot be recontextualised back into an object of thoughtless, unironic pleasure for the bourgeois who sophisticatedly enjoyed reinventing it as mockery, so the commodity with its immanent *Fetischcharakter* cannot be released back into the market in the guise of empty and naked exchange. It cannot, because the *Fetischcharakter* is the refuge for happiness. If the *Fetischcharakter* could simply be deleted, Adorno suggests it would be at the catastrophic expense of deleting happiness and the utopia of the qualitative, too.

But why should happiness take refuge in a dead end at enmity with the living relations of production? Is that not the most unlikely refuge, or even the most stupefying, for happiness? One problem with this question is that it is not one: it is a reproach. The echo of a lover’s complaint. In *Minima Moralia* 139, Adorno writes: “That one should be *given something*: what seems like a demand for substantiality and fullness in actuality cuts off both and impoverishes giving” (1987: 217). Substantial and full happiness in the utopia of the qualitative cannot be demanded, or even asked for. As soon as we complain – But why should happiness be *there*? – we are again asking for *our* kind of happiness.

In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno writes:

[T]he utopia anticipated by artistic form is the idea that things at long last ought to come into their own. Another way of putting this is to call for the abolition of the spell of selfhood hitherto promoted by the subject (1984: 195)

For things to come into their own and out of the refuge: but the refuge of utopia is sealed shut by a magic spell, the spell of our bourgeois individuality in its dead objective reflex. The *Fetischcharakter* will be abolished when we are abolished. We will not get into the refuge or get happiness out of it, because all the badly infinite possibility of *our* kind of happiness and *our* fate blocks the way in. “Utopia is blocked off by possibility, never by immediate reality”, Adorno famously wrote at the end of the introduction to *Negative Dialectics* (2005: 57). This famous formula rests, I think, on a Hegelian



distinction. Our immediate reality, Hegel teaches in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, is not immediate: the immediate was already the mediated. We have no immediate reality that is simply immediate. But in this our possibility is not like our immediate reality. Immediacy may really always be mediated, but possibility has not yet been made impossible. There is still, disastrously, a possibility that is singularly *ours*: our kind of possibility. Utopia is blocked off by possibility, never by immediate reality, because possibility is *our* kind of possibility, whereas immediate reality by definition cannot ever be ours. Utopia is blocked off by us. The *Fetischcharakter* protects utopia from us: it is the logic of our objective impotence to abolish the spell of our individuality and release utopia from its refuge that keeps utopia alive. No utopia for us, but none without us, either. Heaven is impersonal and useless.

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But why drag heaven into it? Why should an observation about commodities end up as a “hyper-distanced” inspection of the one love object categorically immune to the vicissitudes of longing and even to aphanisis, existing beyond every principle of pleasure, heaven? I take the epithet “hyper-distanced” from Raymond Geuss’ *Politics and the Imagination*:

You need some level of analysis *between* that of individuals and that of metaphysics. Criticism of personalities will leave the basic structure untouched, but so will hyper-distanced religious or metaphysical criticism (2010: 147-148)

But to turn this thought on its head: the advantage of hyper-distanced criticism is that it produces hyper-distanced objects, like utopia; ideally, “the basic structure” is intangible. The disadvantage is that the distance is not really hyper, so that what you love for being far away is in truth deceptively near.

Now is he come unto the chamber door,  
That shuts him from the heaven of his thought,  
Which with a yielding latch, and with no more,  
Hath barr’d him from the blessed thing he sought.

*Rape of Lucrece, ll.337-340*

The yielding latch is a commodity produced from iron attached to a commodity produced from wood, the chamber door. The blessed thing he sought is deceptively near, *in* the latch and the door which are its refuge, not beyond them; the heaven of his thought is in the door. But the heaven of his

thought is not the *use* of the door, not even the opening of it to gain access to the blessed thing; what shuts him off from heaven is the heaven of his thought. *Our* heaven is not heaven. Utopia is blocked off by us.

But “hyper-distanced” criticism like Adorno’s in parts of *Minima Moralia* may sometimes be suspected of confecting a standard of objectivity tailored to meet the demand for utopia – Adorno himself concedes, albeit in the form of an undeveloped remark contained in a footnote, that negative dialectics is by comparison with Hegel’s *Logic* “more tolerant toward the nonidentical” (2005: 135). What is it really like, “the fact that the ravishing dress is worn by only one, and not by twenty thousand”? Is it true that “[n]o humane exertions, no formal reasoning, can sever happiness from [this] fact”? Has Adorno not already inserted heaven, by defining his fact as undis severable from happiness? Where else could any fact be like that? Where else is there happiness that can’t be severed? Or if the impotence of humane exertions and formal reasoning to sever happiness from the fact of non-fungibility is just a hyperbole, a figure of speech, and in reality there *are* formal reasons capable of severing happiness from the fact of non-fungibility, don’t we again already have heaven, in the shape of the paradigmatic inefficacy of all formal reasons? The conception of happiness not as attachment but as what is attached and may be severed, is already the graphic premonition of a heaven whose attainment hangs by a thread. Is heaven not already everywhere in refuge in this language, which is a commodity? If meaning can be a use value, must heaven be meaningless?

One answer to those questions is that they would make no sense for God, who may not *not* see the heaven in everything, since he is the only thing that is not free not to be there.<sup>4</sup> David Harvey makes what I think is the classic mistake in explaining the fetishism of commodities: he defines it as the consequence of our not being omniscient.

Not only do you not have to know anything about [. . .] the laborers who congealed value in the lettuce in order to buy it; in highly complicated systems of exchange it is *impossible* to know anything about the labor or the laborers, which is why fetishism is inevitable in the world market (2010: 39-40)

Because we cannot know about people and their experiences we think are far away, fetishism is inevitable. Because we are not God who knows all, but only human, the commodity is burdened with a *Fetischcharakter*. In both cases the people far away are loved, incidentally, or we think they ought to be, either by us or by God, and in both cases they are deceptively near. Marx

however did not hope that humanity would achieve omniscience, nor even think that its love would be better if it should. He hoped that the “person” who blocks the way to communism – a centaur, proletarian-bourgeois, a perfected abstraction, real and bloody, capital in his veins – would be swept out of the way and made impossible, to be replaced not by an omniscient entity, but by communist human beings. Not being omniscient can be classed as a natural human fault, or limit, if we wish to make it into the reason for fetishism or other damage to the world, but it can hardly be classed as a failure of our institutions or as violence inherent in our relations of production. If I am not in on the gossip at the plantation, it is not for that reason inevitable that I will fetishize my bananas (which is the logical bourgeois reply). Slavoj Žižek makes the same mistake as David Harvey. Intent on discovering in Marx an inexplicit reliance on the “utopia” which it suits the purposes of a Lacanian commentary to insert into *Das Kapital*, Žižek asks:

does not Marx’s critique of commodity fetishism rely on the utopian point of transparent social relations? Is this not the point from which he can observe his own society, as if from outside, and thus articulate its ideological blindness? (1997: 99)

The answer to both these questions is no, as follows. In *Das Kapital*, Marx comes nearest to suggesting that social relations might one day be “transparent” in the following remark:

The religious reflex of the real world can, in any case, only then finally vanish, when the practical relations of everyday life offer to man none but perfectly intelligible and reasonable relations with regard to his fellowmen and to nature (1936: 91-92)

This famous remark is not as simple as it may look. First, there is no reason why “perfectly intelligible and reasonable relations” must also be transparent. It is intelligible and reasonable to me that I cannot see to the bottom of a muddy pond, just as it is intelligible and reasonable to me that I may understand nothing, or very little, about the psychic motives for the social behaviour of other members of society. I don’t need to be able to see all the way down, or right through, in order to make enough sense of what you do, or who you are, to enjoy with you a relation that is “perfectly intelligible and reasonable”. The problem under capitalism is not that we are not transparent to each other, or that production is not transparent to consumers, but rather that it is unintelligible and irreconcilable with reason that we accept and daily reproduce relations of production based on slavery,

violence, and the structural injustice of wages. Marx is not, then, making a psychological point about the opacity of relationships (not even a Lacanian one about our own irreducible opacity to ourselves). Marx is a powerfully speculative thinker, not a “scientist” who has done away with speculation, since what he means by “intelligibility” and by “reasonableness” is not something that we can straightforwardly just specify, but on the contrary something that must be passionately argued and thought toward: they are concepts still waiting for their fulfilment, and it is up to us to make what Hegel called the “strenuous effort of the concept” actually to fulfil them in practical reality (Hegel, 1977: 35; 1980: 41). Marx’s critique of commodity fetishism does not, then, rely on the utopian point of transparent social relations, as Žižek suggests; if it did, it would be committed to a very formal definition of “social relations”, one that excludes all experience and all suffering, which is precisely one of the philosophical sterilities of “political economy” that Marx hopes will “finally vanish” along with the reflex of the religious world. In the communist state whose “practical relations of everyday life offer to man none but perfectly intelligible and reasonable relations with regard to his fellowmen and to nature”, we will be *less transparent to each other than ever before*, because more richly filled up with more obstinately visible blocks of love and suffering, and more definitely irreducible to anything so useful as our clarity.<sup>5</sup>

But there is another reason why Marx does not rely on utopia to make his critique of commodity fetishism. Marx’s critique is a satire against bourgeois life, and for Marx, nothing is so perfectly bourgeois as utopia; utopia is not a hidden condition for the critique of commodity fetishism, but manifestly one of the objects that the critique of commodity fetishism is satirising.<sup>6</sup> Marx wrote in the course of his savage, Scriblerian demolition of “Saint Max” Stirner in *The German Ideology*, “Since the middle class demand love for *their* kingdom, their regime, they want, according to Jacques le bonhomme, to ‘establish the kingdom of love on earth’” (Marx & Engels, 1976: 179). When David Harvey explains that “in highly complicated systems of exchange it is *impossible* to know anything about the labor or the laborers [behind the lettuce], which is why fetishism is inevitable in the world market”, this risks seeming an at least ambivalently bourgeois idea. The fact that I can’t possibly be expected to know everything not only explains fetishism, it “reasonably and intelligibly” justifies it. Žižek and Harvey both misinterpret the *Fetischcharakter* as a repercussion of the fact that humans are not omniscient (the pairing is in other respects quite unjust). If I knew everything about the labour of a single producer, or if I could see right to the bottom of my relation with him, and if I could then repeat this insight

for every producer on earth, the *Fetischcharakter* would “finally vanish”. Marx simply had no interest in this sort of fantasy of omniscience, other than as a “construction” to be sarcastically lacerated.

There is in any case no reason to think that if our relations were perfectly transparent, we would be any less cannibalistic. Why not simply better educated consumers?

The passage I just quoted from *The German Ideology* continues like this:

Since the middle class demand love for *their* kingdom, their regime, they want, according to Jacques le bonhomme, to ‘establish the kingdom of love on earth’ [...] Jacques le bonhomme, with his faith that can move mountains, takes as the actual, earthly basis of the bourgeois world the distorted form in which the sanctimonious and hypocritical ideology of the bourgeoisie voices their particular interests as universal interests (Marx & Engels, 1976: 179-180)

“Jacques le bonhomme” is the stupefied individual, a stereotype incarnated, the plaything of Marx’s entertainingly ventriloquistic philosophy. He is one plaything among hundreds of others in Marx, whose writing is more copiously stocked with dunces even than that of his ancestor in satire, Alexander Pope. The passage makes a familiar point, one at the basis of Marx’s historical relativism: that “the bourgeoisie voice their particular interests as universal interests”. In a criticism of the *Critique of Pure Reason* in *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno makes a very similar point about Kant’s concept of sensation:

Its [sensation’s] ‘my’ – accidental to transcendental analysis and tied to ontical conditions – is mistaken for a legal title by experience, which is nearest to itself and the captive of its own reflective hierarchy (2005: 137)

Experience is deceptively near to itself. The bourgeois reflective hierarchy is a captor to experience, most obviously of all in its possessive adoption of “transparency” as the predicate defining the free relation of cognition to its objects. In reality cognition is always non-identical to its object, for Adorno, and this alone guarantees to cognition that it will be redemptively unfit for “allegedly basic philosophizing”, an unfitness which is the freedom of cognition, negatively defined (ibid.: 136). The philosopher is not in reality obliged to be “the functionary of the fundamental”, to borrow a useful, pointedly bathetic image from Derrida.<sup>7</sup> Not only is she free *not* to be the

functionary of the fundamental, but her cognitive freedom consists in *perpetual refusal* of the role. When she mistakes her particular interests for universal interests, in just that moment she leaps into the uniform of the functionary, asserting by means of “allegedly basic philosophizing” not only the view that her own interests are basic, but also, what is its corollary disguised as its condition, the fitness of individual interests in general to be basic.

The *Fetischcharakter* reimagined as the refuge for the utopia of the qualitative is a satire at the expense of the functionary of the fundamental. Because Adorno knows that she is (that he is) looking for the true universal, (s)he will place it where it can neither be possessed nor avoided, in a sealed refuge in the objects that are our preeminent “cogitatively indispensable substrate”, commodities (Adorno, 2005: 135). The difference between Adorno and Marx that makes Adorno’s *Fetischcharakter* an “ontological promotion” (in Bourdieu’s expression) of its original in *Das Kapital* is that for Adorno the refuge for utopia that really matters will not be looked for in just any commodities, but only in those we love most of all: the ravishing dress worn only by one that, by conjuring the phantom of non-fungibility, is already at least the rudiments of an artwork. Adorno puts utopia where we love to wish that we could possess it, in the bosom of the object we love most, since that object is the most formidable test of our capacity to renounce possession and its spurious “legal title”; the fact that utopia is also everywhere else too, in all other objects that are commodities, pales in meaning by comparison with the arduous experience of this irreducibly erotic test. In other words, the fact of universal equivalence (or money) is less important for Adorno than the fact that “amid universal fungibility happiness attaches without exception to the non-fungible”; and if “humane exertions” and “formal reasoning” may be beloved, it will be because we love them for their impotence to “sever happiness” from that fact. Marx’s *Fetischcharakter* is a concentrated radical anatomy of disgust: the commodity is a very mysterious thing because we are cannibals who eat in the form of *Gallerte* the people who produce it. Adorno’s *Fetischcharakter* is a concentrated dialectical anatomy of the *individual*: the commodity is a very mysterious thing because it too, even it, must be contemplated as it would present itself from the standpoint of redemption, even though that standpoint is itself unintelligible except on condition that the commodity be abolished. But what from one angle looks like a dialectical paradox, from another makes the perfect, perfectible sense of a fairy story, a parable or a computer game: if the commodity were abolished, we would have the standpoint of redemption, because there would then be no refuge left for utopia, so that it could no longer be

protected from us. The hyper-distanced, formal, self-completing logic of this story, which, it can be imagined, phenomenologists and sociologists alike will find grossly abstract and empirically void, is the logic of utopia. The banishment of all economism from thinking is a condition for arriving at the problem which is perfect for being insoluble.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The proper noun “Gallerte” (and not the abstract noun “congelation”, which is silently substituted for it in both English translations of *Das Kapital*) is Marx’s name for the substance of “dead labour” comprehended in the commodity. *Gallerte* is itself a commodity, a gelatinous comestible made from miscellaneous animal parts. Marx uses the word to point his satire against consumption. For an extended discussion of *Gallerte* and its significance for reading Marx, see Sutherland (2011).

<sup>2</sup> “In fact,” the poet Kevin Davies adds in *The Golden Age of Paraphernalia*, consummating the innuendo, “you’re not you”.

<sup>3</sup> Cf.: “Intellectuals and artists have a special predilection for the most risky but also most profitable strategies of distinction, those which consist in asserting the power, which is peculiarly theirs, to constitute insignificant objects as works of art or, more subtly, to give aesthetic redefinition to objects already defined as art, but in another mode, by other classes or class fractions (e.g., kitsch). In this case, it is the manner of consuming which creates the object of consumption, and a second-degree delight which transforms the ‘vulgar’ artifacts abandoned to common consumption, Westerns, strip cartoons, family snapshots, graffiti, into distinguished and distinctive works of culture” (Bourdieu, 2006: 282-283).

<sup>4</sup> Perhaps as we are trying to get in, he is trying to get out?

<sup>5</sup> I reject the suggestion by Kristin Ross that the “proletarian, for mature,

scientific Marx, the Marx of the 1850s and 1860s, is the worker who still has only one thing to do, the revolution, and who still has only one identity: that of the lone historical agent who will destroy capital" (2008: 17). I cannot think that Marx could have believed that a singular "identity" like the one described by Ross could be anything but a "speculative construction" of the type he satirised in the work of "Young Hegelian" philosophers. The worker for Marx had more than one thing to do: he had to *live*, too.

<sup>6</sup> My reading of *Das Kapital* as satire is elaborated elsewhere (see Sutherland, 2011: ch. 1).

<sup>7</sup> "What is expected of the philosopher? That he be the functionary of the fundamental" (Derrida, 1991: 42).

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# The Real State of Emergency: Agamben on Benjamin and Schmitt

by Colin McQuillan

## I.

In his essay *On the Concept of History* (1940), Walter Benjamin declares that “the tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the state of emergency in which we live is not the exception but the rule” (Benjamin, 2003a: 392). Benjamin penned this sentence hoping that “a conception of history that accords with this insight” would reveal that “it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency” (ibid.). This real state of emergency would, he claimed, “improve our position in the struggle against fascism”, allowing a revolutionary politics to “brush history against the grain”, “blast open the continuum”, and “leap into the open air” (ibid.: 392; 395; 396).

Giorgio Agamben remains deeply indebted to Benjamin’s essay. Yet, Agamben has also attempted to widen the scope of its analysis, extending Benjamin’s thought beyond a conception of history. Much of Agamben’s recent work can be understood as an effort to rethink the state of emergency as a specifically political problem. While he turns to Michel Foucault for the latter’s critique of the way in which contemporary biopolitics gives form to life, Agamben appeals to Carl Schmitt for his analysis of the logic of the political institutions which makes that regime possible. According to Agamben, Schmitt’s account of the sovereign decision on the exception corresponds precisely to “the state of emergency in which we live” (Agamben, 2007: 57-59) that Benjamin describes in *On the Concept of History*.

Although he thinks Schmitt’s account of sovereign decision serves as a paradigm for contemporary global politics, Agamben also thinks there are a number of ways to undo the logic of sovereignty and the state of emergency it has engendered in our political institutions. Chief among these, for Agamben, is Benjamin’s conception of a real state of emergency. Agamben insists that Benjamin’s real state of emergency is different from the state of emergency theorized by Schmitt. The confrontation Agamben stages between Benjamin and Schmitt in *State of Exception* is an attempt to show

how Benjamin's politics opposes Schmitt's decisionism. It is also a defense of Benjamin's concept of a real state of emergency as a political concept. Agamben will insist that this concept will expose, demystify and unwork the mystical foundations of authority, freeing human beings to be what they are and do what they will (Agamben, 2007: 64).

Agamben could be accused of articulating his own political philosophy through his readings of Benjamin, as if he were a ventriloquist making a dummy speak. Yet, it is important to note that Agamben does not believe that he has staged the confrontation between Benjamin and Schmitt that he describes in *State of Exception*. He bases his account of their confrontation on the following: Benjamin's reference to Schmitt in his *Curriculum Vitae* of 1928; a letter Benjamin wrote to Schmitt in December, 1930, in which Benjamin expresses his admiration for the fascist jurist and acknowledges the influence of Schmitt's theory of sovereign on his own work; Schmitt's comments on Benjamin in *Hamlet or Hecuba* in 1956; and Schmitt's correspondence with Hansjörg Viesel in the 1970s, in which Schmitt claims that his work on Hobbes was written in response to Benjamin. In addition to this "exoteric dossier" – which consists of Benjamin's correspondence with Schmitt and the references Benjamin and Schmitt made to one another in their published work – Agamben also refers to the "esoteric dossier" of a debate between Benjamin and Schmitt on the issues of violence, politics and law. By reconstructing this dossier, Agamben thinks he can show that Benjamin and Schmitt were responding to one another directly from the time of their earliest publications (Agamben, 2007: 52-53).<sup>1</sup>

Even if Agamben's esoteric dossier is not 'authentic' in the philological sense, it remains a useful supposition, which can be used to clarify the philosophical and political differences between Benjamin and Schmitt. In what follows, I will elaborate upon the very brief account of the debate between Benjamin and Schmitt that Agamben presents in *State of Exception*, in order to highlight Benjamin's critique of sovereignty, as well as the outlines of the more general political theory that Agamben draws from Benjamin's work. In the end, I hope to show that Agamben takes up the idea of a politics free from the concept of sovereignty and decision from Benjamin's critique of Schmitt.

## II.

The first document Agamben includes in his esoteric dossier is Schmitt's *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (1922). Agamben

claims that Schmitt wrote this work in response to Benjamin's *Critique of Violence* (1921). While Benjamin tried to "ensure the possibility of a violence that lies absolutely outside and beyond the law and that, as such, could shatter the dialectic between lawmaking violence and law-preserving violence", Schmitt subjected this "pure and anomic violence" to sovereign decision in *Political Theology* (Agamben, 2007: 53-54). When the sovereign "decides on the exception", his decision establishes a rule over what does not belong to the general norm of "ordinary legal prescription", including that exception within the juridical order (Schmitt, 1985: 5-6).

Sovereign decision is not of a kind with ordinary legal prescription for Schmitt, because it includes something which is, by definition, excluded from the normal operation of the law. Although the exception remains outside the law, Schmitt insists that the decision concerning the exception has a definite place within "a systematic legal-logical foundation" (ibid.). Indeed, he says it is at the very foundation of the legal order, because it decides whether or not the law applies. If, as Schmitt says, it is the sovereign who decides "whether there is an extreme emergency", along with "what must be done about it" and "whether the constitution needs to be suspended in its entirety", then it is the sovereign who determines the most basic conditions under which the law is to function (ibid.: 7). The sovereign decides whether or not the law applies, in other words, so that even when the sovereign says the law does not apply, that too is the law.

Agamben sees Schmitt's conception of sovereignty as an attempt to capture Benjamin's pure anomic violence and re-inscribe that violence within a juridical context (Agamben, 2007: 54). By making the sovereign decision between the norm and the exception the political foundation of the legal order, Schmitt guarantees that there is nothing which can truly depose the authority of the sovereign. Whenever and wherever the law is suspended, the one who decides that it does not apply or no longer applies will be sovereign. Consequently, there can be no violence that undermines the law, which does not, at the same time, reassert the most fundamental principle of the political-legal order, the sovereign decision on the exception. The divine violence that Benjamin discusses as the end of his *Critique of Violence* is no less mythical than the juridical order it deposes, according to Schmitt, because the very act of suspending the law is at the foundation of the political-legal order.

Schmitt was more likely concerned with the liberalism and legal positivism of Hans Kelsen's *The Problem of Sovereignty and the Theory of International Law*

(1920) than he was with Benjamin's *Critique of Violence* when he published *Political Theology* (Kennedy, 2004: 74-77). It is unlikely that his concept of sovereignty is a response to Benjamin's conception of a divine violence which remained entirely outside the constitution or maintenance of the law as Agamben suggests. Yet, Agamben is not wrong to bring the two works into dialogue with one another, for his comparison highlights the differences between Benjamin and Schmitt. Agamben shows that Benjamin concerns himself with a kind of violence that undermines the authority of the law, while Schmitt focuses on the decision that founds the law and constitutes the political authority of the sovereign. One could say that Benjamin is concerned with the end of the law, while Schmitt is concerned with its beginning. Understanding the difference between these perspectives, and the consequences of that difference, is essential for understanding the concept of sovereignty that Schmitt articulates in *Political Theology*, as well as the use Benjamin makes of that concept in *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama* (1928).

### III.

That Benjamin's treatment of the sovereign in *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama* was influenced by Schmitt is beyond dispute. Benjamin acknowledged Schmitt's influence on the work in his 1928 *Curriculum Vitae* and in his December, 1930 letter to Schmitt. Jacob Taubes has called these texts "a mine that could blow to pieces our conception of the intellectual history of the Weimar period", especially the political distinction between Schmitt on the right and Benjamin on the left. Yet, Agamben is not the first scholar to have pointed to the important differences between Schmitt's reasons for characterizing the sovereign as the one who decides on the exception and the use Benjamin makes of this concept in his *Trauerspielbuch* (Agamben, 2007: 53).<sup>2</sup> These differences show that there is indeed a clear distinction between the right-wing defense of the concept of sovereignty in Schmitt and the left-wing critique of sovereignty in Benjamin, despite the influence Schmitt exerted on Benjamin's understanding of the concept of sovereignty.

*The Origin of the German Tragic Drama* shows that Benjamin thought Schmitt was correct when he said the concept of sovereignty "emerges from a discussion of the state of emergency" in the works of the natural law theorists of the seventeenth century (Benjamin, 2003b). The natural law theorists "make it the most important function of a prince to avert this", the state of emergency (ibid.: 65). Benjamin nevertheless points out that the

prince, the figure of the sovereign, is unable to prevent the “catastrophic violence” of the state of emergency in the dramatic works of the same period (ibid.: 66). Here, the sovereign is characterized as a “mad autocrat and symbol of a disordered creation” (ibid.: 71). He is a tyrant who, while making an ineffectual “gesture of executive power”, nevertheless reveals “at the first opportunity, that he is almost incapable of making a decision” (ibid.).

While Schmitt adopts Hobbes’ characterization of the sovereign as an awe-inspiring man-made god in *Political Theology*, Benjamin presents the sovereign as a weak, indecisive “creature,” subject to a “constantly shifting emotional storm” within himself as well as the “changing physical impulses” which guide his actions (ibid.: 71-72).<sup>3</sup> Threatened at every turn, unable to decide what to do about the storm within him or the chaos which surrounds him, the sovereign is ultimately dispatched in the most pathetic and inglorious fashion. The audience is fascinated by the downfall of the tyrant in this literature, Benjamin says, because they recognize “the conflict between the impotence and depravity of his person, on the one hand, and, on the other, the extent to which the age was convinced of the sacrosanct power of his role” (ibid.: 72). If “the function of a tyrant is the restoration of order in the state of emergency”, then it is “a dictatorship whose utopian goal will always be to replace the unpredictability of historical accident with the iron constitution of the laws of nature”, one which is doomed to fail (ibid.: 74).

Sixteen years after Benjamin’s death, Schmitt responded to these charges in his book, *Hamlet or Hecuba: The Irruption of Time into Play*. Schmitt argues that Benjamin neglects a distinction that he thought essential for understanding the role of the prince and the difference between the tragic figure of Hamlet and the prince in the German *Trauerspiel*, namely, the distinction between the political and the barbaric (Schmitt, 2006: 54). Schmitt contends that Hamlet, who exemplifies the indecisiveness of the baroque prince for Benjamin, was in fact a figure of barbarism for Shakespeare (ibid.: 54). His limitations as a melancholic and indecisive prince cannot, as such, be utilized for the critique of sovereignty that was such an important feature of Benjamin’s *Trauerspielbuch*. Schmitt claims that they belong, instead, to the “insular” English context of the late sixteenth century.

According to Schmitt, Hamlet represents the condition of an English prince prior to the emergence of the “concrete meaning” of the political in works like Hobbes’ (1651) *Leviathan* (ibid.: 20-27). Hamlet’s indecisiveness and his melancholy are emblematic of the Stuarts’ failure to put “the barbaric middle

ages" behind them and follow the course of modernity. While Benjamin had seen Hamlet as an allegorical figure of the inability of the sovereign to decide, regardless of the historical circumstances, Schmitt presents him as a tragic figure representing the historic failure of a particular regime. Despite his insistence on this point in 1956, Schmitt was also forced to admit that the modern and more properly "political" conception of sovereignty which succeeded the "barbarism" represented by Hamlet was also a failure. This becomes apparent in his study of Hobbes and the fate of his *Leviathan*.

#### IV.

In his 1973 letter to Hansjörg Viesel, Schmitt claimed that his book, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes* (1938), was a response to Benjamin (Viesel, 1988: 14).<sup>4</sup> While the book is usually and probably more correctly taken as a response to *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* (1936) by Leo Strauss, it could also be seen as a reaction to the pathetic treatment sovereignty received in Benjamin's *Trauerspielbuch*. In the course of his discussion of the development of the modern concept of sovereignty out of the barbaric order represented by Hamlet's indecisiveness, Schmitt comes to agree with Benjamin's assessment of inefficacy of the sovereign. Though he is unwilling to admit that the concept of sovereignty is implicated in its failure, Schmitt's analysis of the fate of Hobbes' Leviathan shows that the sovereign ultimately fails to establish the political and legal order it was intended to constitute.

Schmitt concedes that the sovereign of the natural law theorists failed to become the "mortal god who brings to man peace and security" that Hobbes imagined, because the absolute monarchy that Hobbes sought to legitimate failed to appear in England, while continental European approximations of that form of government soon declined. Yet, Schmitt does not think their failure implicates the concept of sovereignty that he developed in *Political Theology*. In *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes*, Schmitt remarks that "the leviathan as *magnus homo*, as the godlike sovereign person of the state, was destroyed from within" during the course of the eighteenth century (Schmitt, 2008: 65).

Schmitt's resentment is palpable when he notes that Hobbes' conception of sovereignty was undone by the liberalism of the constitutional state, which "put a hook in the nose of the leviathan", after it had found a home in "the French and Prussian states that were in many respects distinct expressions of classical perfection" (ibid.: 65; 79). Curiously, Agamben does not discuss

the role this comment might play in his “esoteric dossier” of the debate between Benjamin and Schmitt, but it nevertheless points to an important conceptual difference between Benjamin and Schmitt on the relation between sovereignty and the state of emergency. While Benjamin thinks the concept of sovereignty is fundamentally flawed, pretending to an authority and an efficacy it could never really possess, because it is essentially unable to avert the state of emergency, Schmitt blames its failure on its historical circumstances and the cunning of the liberal critics of sovereignty.

The most prominent of the enemies of sovereignty that Schmitt identifies is “the liberal Jew”, Spinoza, who, according to Schmitt, “noticed the barely visible crack in the theoretical justification of the sovereign state” in Hobbes and “pushed this incipient form to the limit of its development until the opposite was reached and the leviathan’s vitality was sapped from within and life began to drain out of him” (ibid.: 57). For Schmitt, Spinoza’s defense of the freedom of conscience and the separation of church and state was representative of the liberal attempt to establish an apolitical “private sphere” that was not subject to sovereign decision.

Schmitt goes on to explain how the cracks in the political body of the sovereign began to widen and extend themselves throughout the eighteenth century, so the state came to be seen as the guarantor of the freedoms of private individuals rather than the symbolic bearer of public power. Liberal political philosophers began to see the sovereign as the servant of the people and advocated a minimalist view of the state, in which the state’s defense of civil liberties would not interfere with the exercise of those liberties on the part of private citizens. These developments were intolerable for Schmitt, because they made the sovereign dependent on something outside itself, forcing it to appeal to the constitution for its legitimacy and the interests of the people to justify its actions. Sovereign power no longer had free reign, because the sovereign’s capacity to decide was restricted by the legal and political order it founded.

The constitutional limits liberalism imposed on the exercise of sovereign power may seem to be an ideal solution to the problems Benjamin identified in his analysis of the role of the prince in the *Trauerspiel*. They define exactly what kinds of power the sovereign is authorized to wield and the circumstances under which it is authorized to use those powers, eliminating the problem of sovereign indecision and the weakness and frailty of individual rulers. Yet liberal constitutionalism has not eliminated the problem of sovereignty, much less the state of emergency in which we live.



In attempting to limit the exercise of sovereign decision, liberalism has only emphasized its exceptional character, making it even more obvious that there are cases in which the norm does not apply. And it is at this point that Benjamin's more radical solution to the problem of sovereignty becomes essential for an adequate response to the state of emergency in which we live.

## V.

Agamben's analysis of the relationship between the state of exception, sovereignty, and modern democracy in *Homo Sacer* is helpful in understanding why constitutional liberalism did not lead to the "total depoliticization" that Schmitt feared and why the idea of a "state of emergency" has continued to play such an important role in contemporary political debates. Agamben shows that the liberal attempt to restrict the exercise of sovereign power nevertheless acknowledged that, in some cases and under certain circumstances, when it was necessary, exceptional measures were justified and private freedoms could be temporarily suspended (Agamben, 1998: 166-188).<sup>5</sup> Schmitt complained that the terms under which liberals defined these conditions and the liberty they granted to the executive were too narrow. He therefore defended the broadest possible interpretation of Article 48 of the Weimar constitution, which authorized presidential dictatorship in the event of a national emergency.<sup>6</sup> Yet, he must have recognized the existence of such an article as an acknowledgment of the enduring significance of sovereignty for liberal political theory.

The Third Reich is the nightmare scenario for liberalism, because it used temporary, constitutional, emergency measures to authorize a permanent suspension of civil liberties and a universalized exception to the normal order of government. In cases like this, where the exception becomes the rule and the normal function of the legal order is the exception to a state of permanent crisis, liberal restrictions on the exercise of sovereign power offer no protection. For this reason, Agamben says, Benjamin sought a different and more radical solution to the problem of the state of emergency in which we live in *On the Concept of History*. Benjamin does not appeal to the constitutional state to check the excesses of sovereign power or define the conditions under which sovereign power may be exercised, because all such restrictions had been suspended by the Nazi regime. Instead, Benjamin urges us to bring about a real state of emergency which will improve our position in the struggle against fascism (Benjamin, 2003a: 392).

Many readers have suggested that Benjamin's real state of emergency is an appeal to "an authoritarian policy, indissociable from the concept of the state of emergency forged by Carl Schmitt", so that Benjamin's politics turn out to "have no rationale outside certain extreme situations" (Roschlitz, 1996: 234).<sup>7</sup> Yet, Agamben reads Benjamin's politics rather differently. For Agamben, the distinction Benjamin draws between the real state of emergency, which will improve our position in the struggle against fascism, and the state of emergency in which we live, the state of emergency which has become the rule, clearly distinguishes Benjamin's conception of the real state of emergency from Schmitt's state of exception.

According to Agamben, Benjamin's reference to the real state of emergency stands in contrast to the "fictitious" or "political" state of emergency in which we live (Agamben, 2007: 58-59). It is, as such, the reformulation of a traditional, legal distinction, which Benjamin takes up, in order to turn it back against Schmitt (ibid.: 59). The traditional distinction between the "real" and the "fictitious" or "political" state of emergency allows the sovereign to declare a state of emergency when, for example, an enemy force threatens a city but has not yet appeared at the gates. When this threat is not yet "real", the sovereign makes it so by declaring a state of emergency. His declaration is, however, a work of fiction for Agamben: fiction makes real what is essentially unreal. By invoking the real state of emergency against the fiction of the state of emergency in which we live, Benjamin exposes the fiction which underwrites sovereignty itself. It reveals, Agamben argues, that sovereign power is nothing more than an attempt to "annex anomie through the state of exception" (ibid.). It is the fictitious attempt to establish a relation between anomic violence and law when no such relation exists.

Sovereign power is for Benjamin and Agamben fundamentally different from revolutionary violence, which is essentially "anomic". Revolutionary violence is without relation to the constitution, preservation, or suspension of law. It is, as such, nothing less than "a human action which has shed every relation to law" (ibid.). As a kind of action which has "shed every relation to law", revolutionary violence may be called "anomie" or lawlessness. It may also be considered "divine" violence, in Benjamin's sense, insofar as it is deposes every constituted authority. Despite its "divinity", however, it remains a kind of violence. This is not a problem for Agamben, because he considers violence to be no more than "a cipher for human action" (ibid.).

All human action can be considered violent, for Agamben, depending on the context and the different constellation of relations in which it is inscribed. The violence of sovereign power is not problematic because it is violent, but because it remains dependent on its foundation in the juridical order, even when that order has been suspended. Its violence is therefore “mythic”, in the terms of Benjamin’s *Critique of Violence*, because it cannot divest itself of the fiction of its relation to the constitution and preservation of the law. Yet, it is important to note that not all human action, not all violence, has a mythic or “mystical” foundation. Sovereignty is a particular fiction, one with a history, which is by no means the necessary outcome of an unstoppable historical dialectic. It is a fiction which can be exposed and undone by human action, just as it can be constituted by sovereign decision. Benjamin calls the exposure and unworking of the fiction of sovereignty a real state of emergency.

The real state of emergency that arises when the fiction of the legitimacy of sovereign power and the necessity of the political foundation of the law is exposed and undone is the “pure” or “divine” violence that Benjamin describes at the end of his *Critique of Violence*. Here, anomic violence is characterized as a “means without end”, inasmuch as Benjamin approaches violence “in a distinction within the sphere of means themselves, without regard for the ends they serve” (Agamben, 2007: 61). As such, the ends of violence, the fictions which authorize it and attempt to justify it, fall away. When sovereignty is stripped of the legal fictions that found its authority, its violence becomes gratuitous, not in the sense that it is excessive, but in the sense that it is without any particular legitimacy. It becomes nothing more than something some people do, which others may resist, according to their own desires and their own capacities, either individually or collectively. Just as the sovereign exercises his natural right to do whatever is within his power, so too does every subject, every citizen, every human being, and, indeed, every living creature.<sup>8</sup>

The unworking and deactivation of the fiction of sovereignty is for Agamben “the passage that allows us to arrive at that justice that one of Benjamin’s posthumous fragments defines as a state of the world in which the world appears as a good that absolutely cannot be appropriated or made juridical” (Agamben, 2007: 64). The utopian goodness and justice of this world is nothing other than its freedom, that is, the liberation of the potentialities of human existence from the forms which have been imposed upon it and restricted its expression.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that the distinction between the “exoteric” dossier of the relationship between Benjamin and the “esoteric” dossier of their debate is Agamben’s own invention. One could very well doubt the existence of the “esoteric” dossier to which Agamben refers.

<sup>2</sup> See also Weber (1992). While Weber thinks there is only “a slight but decisive” modification of Schmitt’s theory in Benjamin’s work (Weber, 1992: 12), the reading proposed by Agamben, which is also my own position, suggests that there is nothing “slight” about the difference between Benjamin and Schmitt, though both Agamben and myself would agree with Weber that the difference between Benjamin and Schmitt on sovereignty is “decisive” for their politics.

<sup>3</sup> By calling the sovereign a “creature”, Benjamin indicates that the sovereign “remains confined to the world of creation”. There is nothing transcendent about the sovereign, nor does he rule by divine right. This marks a sharp contrast with Schmitt, for whom the sovereign is God’s “acknowledged representative on Earth”. See Benjamin (2003b: 85-86). See also Schmitt (1985: 10).

<sup>4</sup> See also Bredekamp (1999); and Agamben (2007: 52).

<sup>5</sup> See also Agamben (2007: 11-22).

<sup>6</sup> See McCormick (1998: 230-241).

<sup>7</sup> Samuel Weber provides a more sympathetic account of the role “extremes” play in Benjamin’s thought and their relation to Schmitt (see Weber, 1992: 6-8).

<sup>8</sup> This position could be compared to the naturalistic account of political power that Spinoza employs at the beginning of Chapter 16 of his *Theological-*

*Political Treatise*, when he says: “it is by sovereign natural right that fish inhabit the water and the big ones eat the little ones”. It is according to the same “sovereign natural right” that subjects reject unreasonable demands of the sovereign, when they have the power to do so, and when the sovereign does not have the power to compel obedience. See Spinoza (1998: 179).

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# Ideology and Morality

by David Marjoribanks

## Abstract

*In this paper, I argue that important elements of Marx's critique of morality as ideology may be preserved, without undermining Marx's own moral judgments. Morality per se need not be ideology in the negative sense, although the critique of negative moral ideology remains. Insofar as morality is necessarily ideology, ideology is neutral. Insofar as ideology is negative, there is space for non-ideological morality. In short, it is possible to agree with the poststructuralist critique of Ideologiekritik that one can never escape ideology, without thereby losing the critical moment: all thought may be ideology, but some forms of thought may be more 'ideological' than others.*

Marxism is premised upon value-judgments.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, Marx appears to reject morality as ideology. The question is whether Marx is purely in contradiction in the critique of morality as ideology, or whether something important may yet be preserved. Geras, for example, seems content to conclude that Marx is inconsistent: opposing morality as ideology while maintaining that capitalism oppresses and exploits is, in Geras' view, a "genuine contradiction of belief" (1990: 6). It should be recognised, he argues, as a "real and deep-seated inconsistency on Marx's part and one with not very happy effects" (1989: 266). Marx's critique of morality and justice as ideology may then be discarded.

Opposing this 'Marxist moralist' position is the amoralist position, which eschews morality as ideology. The former liberates Marxists to enunciate the ethical critique of capitalism. The latter emphasises the social determination of consciousness and the base-superstructure model of ideology, and presents us with an imprisoning structural determinism whereby ideas reflect and sustain existing modes of production, which denies the efficacy of moral critique. My purpose is to sketch a path to a third alternative.

In this paper, I am interested in whether Marx's opposition to *a certain kind* of morality as ideology ought to be maintained. In rejecting Marxist amoralism, should we take care not to throw the Marxist baby out with the amoralist bathwater and reject everything in the Marxist critique of morality on the basis that the stronger claims of Marxist amoralism cannot be substantiated? If Marx was onto something in his critique of morality, this might place limits on a contemporary ethics informed by Marx. Perhaps even elements of Marxism might be displayed as ideological in a pejorative sense, such that a contemporary ethics seeking to take certain insights from Marx ought to depart from Marx – ought to be *with Marx against Marx*, so to speak.<sup>2</sup>

The third alternative aims to maintain the historicity and sociality of the ethical against Marxist moralism, yet denies the deterministic bars behind which Marxist amoralism incarcerates morality. What is more, this preserved negative concept of ideology does not fall with the poststructuralist critique of ideology critique.

## 1. Ideology in Marx

There is no systematic theoretical exposition of ideology in Marx. Indeed, the term often appears in a more polemical sense than theoretical. Furthermore, there are distinct and apparently contradictory uses of the concept to be found. Thus, I am not concerned here with expounding a novel interpretation of Marx's theory of ideology – it is not clear to me that he has *one*. As a consequence, Larrain notes, "there is no single Marxist conception of ideology or agreement as to which version should be considered the properly Marxist one" (1983: 1).

There are, however, two broad concepts which subsume the varying interpretations – a neutral concept and a negative one.<sup>3</sup> The latter is particularly interesting for Marx's critique of morality. On this account, ideology refers to distorted thought; thought which masks class interests and real contradictions and conceals its complicity in relations of domination. According to the former, ideology refers to the totality of forms of social consciousness, or to the political ideas of social groups or classes. This does not seem to pose problems for morality, for there may then be class moralities (although issues of relativism may then arise). Therefore, I will focus on various interpretations that fall under the critical category. I am interested only in the aspects which may be preserved. I look at religion, idealism and apologia as instances of ideology. Common to all three are the



themes of abstraction, ahistoricity, and the inversion of subject and object.<sup>4</sup>

I argue that while much of the negative concept of ideology cannot be sustained, it may be too hasty to jettison it altogether. Although the difficulties internal to the standard Marxist uses of the negative concept push towards a neutral concept, we should not give up everything in the negative concept too easily. Even if all morality is ideology (in the neutral sense), some moralities may be more 'ideological' than others.

## 2. Ideology as Symptom: The Case of Religion

As Žižek notes, religion is for Marx "ideology *par excellence*" (1994: 9), and although Marx does not yet use the term 'ideology', it is in his early critique of religion that we may find the seeds of his later account(s) of ideology. But in what sense is religion ideology? Marx writes: "The basis of irreligious criticism is: *Man makes religion*, religion does not make man. Religion is the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet found himself or has already lost himself again" (1975: 175). Marx follows Feuerbach in thinking that religion represents a form of alienation. According to Feuerbach, the idea of God is nothing more than human beings' own essence, mistakenly externalized and projected as alien. Human beings misconceive their own powers and qualities as divine powers and qualities, emptying themselves into an imaginary deity, formed of their own natures, which they then kneel down before. Feuerbach writes: "God is the highest subjectivity of man abstracted from himself" (1989: 31); "Religion is the disuniting of man from himself; he sets God before him as the antithesis of himself" (ibid.: 33).

Marx similarly holds that religion is a form of alienation, objectification and projection of what are, in reality, human powers. But Marx emphasizes that this alienation has its basis in the real state of things. A society that is entrapped by religious illusions is not merely mistaken; it is a society that has need of an illusion:

[. . .] *man* is no abstract being encamped outside the world. Man is *the world of man*, the state, society. This state, this society, produces religion, an *inverted world-consciousness*, because they are in an *inverted world*. Religion [. . .] is the *fantastic realisation* of the human essence because the *human essence* has no true reality. The struggle against the religion is therefore indirectly a fight against *the world* of which religion is the spiritual *aroma* (1975: 175)

Marx asserts that “the ‘religious sentiment’ is itself a social product” (2000: 173). Human beings are socially situated, have real needs corresponding to their situation, and that they imagine their own powers to be divine is no accident. Only by comprehending human beings as they really are in the world, understanding the circumstances which give rise to their religiosity, and altering these may the illusion of religion be dispelled. Religious false consciousness provides fantastical resolution to real contradiction. It is a product of the social world. It is a response to a world that is not fit for human beings. Religion is but a *symptom*, the cause of which is a deficient reality itself. Hence:

To abolish religion as the *illusory* happiness of the people is to demand their *real* happiness. The demand to give up illusions about the existing state of affairs is the *demand to give up a state of affairs which needs illusions*. The criticism of religion is therefore *in embryo the criticism of the vale of tears, the halo of which is religion* (Marx, 1975: 176)

If Marx talks of religion as ideology, what does this tell us about ideology, and perhaps by extension, morality? Religious ideology is inverted consciousness that has its basis in alienated conditions of life, and is a reaction to, and provides necessary but illusory solace from, them. We have here three specific points that seem to make religion ideology, and therefore by extension seem to characterize part of what it means for something to be ideological. Firstly, religion is false, illusory, consciousness. Secondly, religion is a response to conditions requiring an illusion. Thirdly, in providing illusory solace in conditions that require illusion, religion therefore diverts attention from the real contradictions.

Let us map these three aspects of religious ideology onto morality. Taking the first two together, if morality is ideology in the same sense as religion, it will be necessarily distorted, as a reflection of real contradictions which require illusions. The space for emancipatory morality then seems to be closed. Religious illusion, Marx claims, cannot be undone by theoretical work alone – as a symptom, religion will only be abolished when the causes are abolished. Likewise with morality: discovery of class antagonisms in reality corrodes the basis of morality – Marx and Engels write that when the contradiction between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat had given rise to communist and socialist views, this “shattered the basis of all morality” (1976: 419).

However, in what sense is morality necessarily illusory (the first aspect)? Religious consciousness is clearly illusory for Marx because God is merely a projection of alienated human powers; it rests on a mistake about the epistemic status of its beliefs – i.e. God does not exist. Is morality similarly supposed to be an epistemic illusion? Acton observes that Marx and Engels' language suggests that "we are as deluded when we make moral, aesthetic [ . . . ] judgments as, on the Marxist view, we are when we make religious and metaphysical judgments, that, for example, the differences between right and wrong, beautiful and ugly [ . . . ] are merely imaginary, and hide from us some real experienced need or desire" (1973: 130). Lukes seems to see this notion as constituting part of Marxism's rejection of morality: there are no objective truths or eternal principles of morality (1987: 3).

Morality as mind-independent moral realism, which posits the existence of moral facts which are somehow part of the fabric of the world, would be illusory in this sense. Morality is a human construct, and any conception of it which thinks otherwise alienates and projects what are human powers in the same way that, for Feuerbach and Marx, human beings make God in their own image. This is the thrust of Freud's critique of morality. Morality has an alien character. It imposes itself on human beings in the form of the 'super-ego', with its directives to which people must conform. But in reality this inner voice of conscience is the individual's own alienated self; it is the internalization of external authority. There is a clear affinity between Feuerbach and Marx's critique of religion and Freud's critique of traditional morality.<sup>5</sup> Ideology then resembles idolatry: in ideology, the subject-object relation is inverted, and the creators bow before their creations.<sup>6</sup>

However, there is no reason why we must think that morality *necessarily* involves anything like this. Hume, for example, sees justice (a moral notion) as literally artificial, yet this does not render it illusory. On the contrary, he writes: "Though the rules of justice be artificial, they are not arbitrary" (Hume, 1955: 33); justice is "absolutely requisite to the well-being of mankind and the existence of society" (Hume, 1988: 31). Moralities might be ideological in this sense, then, but there is no reason to suppose that morality as such is.

The epistemic account of why morality might be illusory then can be sustained, without undermining Marxism's own moral judgments. Not all morality is ideology in this sense, but it is if it contains what Geuss terms an "objectification mistake" (1981: 14) – in other words, a belief that something social is natural, that something historical is ahistorical, or that something

contingent is necessary, and so on. Central to these aspects is the notion that an ideological form of consciousness denies its historicity. Whether it is bourgeois interests masquerading as the universal interests, bourgeois property relations monopolizing the abstract noun 'Property', or capitalist production relations assuming a 'natural' status, at issue in each case is the denial of historicity.

The second aspect of religious ideology (its 'symptomaticity'), suggests that if morality like religion arises as the fantastical resolution to real contradiction, it too will be a form of 'false' consciousness. Here, however, we must distinguish the social determination of an idea from its allegedly illusory content. The fact that something emerges as a reflection of, or even causal response to, something else is clearly not enough to render it illusory. Religion is supposed to be illusory because it springs forth causally as a response to real *contradictions*. But, even if this were also the case for morality, this in itself is not enough to count against its having any amount of truth, or to establish its being illusory. Arising causally from an antagonistic social setting need not necessarily render something illusory. Thus, Geuss asks:

Why should anything we might learn about the origin, motivation, or causal history of a form of consciousness give us (rational) grounds for rejecting it, much less for rejecting it as 'false consciousness' or as a 'delusion'? Of course, if the form of consciousness has an unsavoury causal history this might make us very *suspicious* of it [. . .] but that doesn't in itself give us good grounds to reject the form of consciousness (1981: 20)

What about the third aspect of religious ideology – diverting attention from real antagonisms? If morality is ideology, as is religion, then just as religion is the illusory solace that deflects attention from real contradictions in society, so morality would disguise real social antagonisms and divert attention toward an illusory realm. Marx seems to hold this in the 'Critique of the Gotha Program', when he writes: "what a crime it is to attempt, on the one hand, to force on our Party again, as dogmas, ideas which in a certain period had some meaning but have now become obsolete verbal rubbish, while again perverting, on the other, the realistic outlook, which it cost so much effort to instil into the Party but which has now taken root in it, by means of ideological nonsense about right and other trash" (1978: 531).

But this is not a criticism of morality *per se* either. There is no reason to hold that anything and everything that can merit the appellation 'moral' must

necessarily distract from real contradictions or that it must be opposed to a 'realistic' outlook. As Nielsen reminds us:

To undertake such a [moral] critique does not imply (1) that it is the only relevant critique, (2) that it is the most important sort of critique, (3) that calls for revolution should be made, independently of other practical considerations, simply when these gross injustices obtain, or (4) that such a moral critique can plausibly be made without a good understanding of the mechanisms at work in capitalism and the underlying forces for change in the historical epoch in which the critique is made (1988: 37)

None of the above is necessarily part of a moral critique of capitalist society; morality *per se* need not necessarily supplant social criticism. What is more, Marxism embodies certain moral judgments. Thus, Marxism cannot consistently, simultaneously, hold that all morality is ideology in the above sense.

If morality *per se* was ideology in this sense, morality would cease to exist at all after the contradictory conditions which give rise to it have been resolved. This is just what Marx and Engels seem to suggest. In *The Communist Manifesto*, they write that general ideas such as freedom and justice "cannot completely vanish except with the total disappearance of class antagonisms" (1998: 60). Marx may have thought that morality *per se* is an illusion that would simply dissolve when contradictions are resolved, just as humanism has no need for God, but if so he was inconsistent, for Marxism rests on value-judgments which would then be illusory. It would be absurd to hold that freedom, community, self-realisation, and such, have meaning and importance, while unfreedom, individualism, exploitation, and so on, persist, yet are disclosed as illusory when the antagonism between classes is resolved. Furthermore, it would be hopelessly Utopian to hold that morality would simply evaporate in a society that had transcended the antagonisms of class. Consequently, we may reject the grand claim that all morality is ideology (in *this* sense of illusion) as simply inconsistent.

In conclusion, by mapping Marx's account of religious ideology onto the terrain of morality, we can see that there is no reason to suppose, as Marx seems to, that all morality is illusion in this sense. The space for an emancipatory morality remains open. However, two themes running through the arguments so far survive. Firstly, ideology denies historicity. Morality, then, may be emancipatory and non-illusory, but it must not deny its historicity. Secondly, idolatry – a morality which displayed characteristics

of idolatry, positing human constructions as independent metaphysical entities – would be ideological.

### 3. Idealism as Ideology

In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels continue their assault on ‘false’ consciousness, but the focus switches from religion to the particular philosophy prevalent in Germany at the time – idealism. Marx’s critique of idealism is directed at its false picture of reality, its placing of ideas above the world, its ignorance of the actual production of those ideas in definite social, historical contexts. Idealism as ideology also echoes the genetic and epistemic accounts of ideological illusion encountered previously. The genetic account is echoed, albeit in an inverted way, for while it wrongly denoted the socially determined as ideologically illusory, with idealism the social determination of consciousness reappears, but rather than this being the grounds for something being ideology, it is idealism’s claim of ideas’ independence from, or priority over, the social determination of consciousness which renders it ideology. The denial of historicity, which the epistemic account brought to light, recurs in a straightforward way.

Idealism reifies abstract ideas, regards them as independent entities, detached from the social contexts in which they are produced, and consequently inquires into the ‘true’ nature of concepts such as ‘Justice’ or ‘Man’. Human beings ‘perceive’ and ‘grasp’ these ahistorical entities, and live up to them to varying degrees in different historical epochs, but the ideals themselves have no history. Idealism conceives of the human agent as a transcendental subject freely floating above the material processes of the world, forming her beliefs then applying them by translating her will into action. Marx’s materialism, on the other hand, conceives of human agents as inextricably bound up with social practices, which shape and circumscribe them. Human wills are not formed prior to material practices, with reference to universal, transcendent principles, but are rather always formed within a specific social context.

Idealism is therefore a distorted form of thought, in that it takes the products of human beings in their actual life-processes as the determinants of such processes. Note the parallel with religion. In religion, men bow before their own creations, imbuing imagined entities with their own alienated nature. Idealism puts men’s mental products in an independent realm, above the actual life-processes of human beings that produces the forms of consciousness in the first place. In both religion and philosophical idealism,

the whole picture is upside-down. There is a continuity of theme between religion and idealism: in both, the chief ideological characteristic seems to involve something like idolatry.

Marx and Engels write:

It is to be noted here, as in general with ideologists, that they inevitably put the thing upside-down and regard their ideology both as the creative force and as the aim of all social relations, whereas it is only an expression and symptom of these relations (1976: 420)

The 'true' socialists, they write, "ideologically turn the whole thing upside-down" (ibid.: 460) by starting with 'consciousness' rather than with real human beings in their material life-processes. The concept of ideology as an inverted, 'false' consciousness is readily apparent in these quotes and it seems the cause of this distortion is its idealism – its abstract, ghostly character. An ideological point of view, then, puts the cart before the horse – it takes the effect as the cause. It treats the products of material life-processes as first principles, according to which the world may then be adjusted and made to correspond.

What, then, are the particular consequences for morality? Clearly, taking this account of ideology on its own, morality would then be ideology only insofar as it is idealist. This preserves theoretical space for emancipatory morality: it directs us only against moral idealism. Given that Marx refers to "morality and the rest of ideology", it seems highly unlikely to say the least that Marx would have entertained such fanciful ideas. But why should anyone follow Marx here? Whatever Marx and Engels thought of morality, on the present conception of ideology, the claim that all morality is ideology is false. However, it does give us a reason for opposing certain moralities – moral idealisms.

#### 4. Apologia as Ideology

Marx also uses 'ideological' to mean 'apologetic'. Ideology legitimizes the prevailing order. To take just one example, the original hymn by Cecil Frances Alexander, 'All Things Bright and Beautiful', contains the following verse, usually omitted from hymnals now: "The rich man in his castle / The poor man at his gate / God made them, high or lowly / And ordered their estate". The class position of subjects is presented as ordained by God, just as the right of kings was once thought to be divine. Ideology in this sense

justifies inequalities and presents the status quo as eternally valid, natural, just.

This third negative sense of ideology relates closely to the second. Apologia is often the corollary to idealism. The ideologist investigates abstract, ghostly ideas such as 'justice', 'property' or 'Man'. Due to their intangible, otherworldly nature, and their detachment from the conditions in which they are formed or find expression, such ideas are empty. De-historicizing ideas and bestowing upon them transcendent, supra-historical authority renders them general and abstract. They are merely formal terms devoid of specific content – signifiers *sans* signified. In the absence of any content, therefore, the ideologist supplies the content for these lofty abstract ideas by experience, with reference to the particular meanings the ideas have in present society, which are always historically and socially specific, however much they may appear as natural. The ideologist presents and understands as universal, necessary, asocial and ahistorical the experiences of a particular, contingent, social and historical context.

Hence, Marx takes Bentham to task for universalizing his experience of the English petty bourgeoisie as the general experience of humanity: "With the driest naïveté he assumes that the modern petty bourgeois, especially the English petty bourgeois, is the normal man" (Marx, 1990: 758-759). The ideologist "de-historicizes and universalizes the ideas and forms of thought of his society" (Parekh, 1982: 136). The historical is presented as natural. For these reasons, Marx is "intensely suspicious of any reference to nature in human affairs. In his view it is almost always a cloak for legitimising a social practice by concealing its historicity and alterability" (ibid.: 138). Hence, the centrality of the denial of historicity in characterizing the ideological resurfaces. This theme was read back into Marx's opposition to idealism in the previous section, and also into aspects of the opposition to religious ideology. Common to all three aspects of ideology is the thought that ideology presents the particular as universal, the contingent as necessary, the historical as ahistorical.

What are the consequences for morality in this account? Again, the fundamental question is: is *all* morality ideological? To which the answer must be: clearly not. Marx himself agrees as much, in a passage from the *Grundrisse*:

The recognition [*Erkennung*] of the products of labour as its own, and the judgment that its separation from the conditions of its realization



is improper – forcibly imposed- is an enormous [advance in] awareness [*Bewusstsein*], itself the product of the mode of production resting on capital, and as much the knell to its doom as, with the slave's awareness that he *cannot be the property of another*, with his consciousness of himself as a person, the existence of slavery becomes a merely artificial, vegetative existence, and ceases to be able to prevail as the basis of production (1973: 463)

Clearly here the notion of a slave that cannot be the property of another must refer to the moral notion that slavery is *wrong* – Marx says “improper”. Thus, we have here an instance of morality that works against the existing order. If ideology is inherently apologetic, morality *per se* is not ideological: morality *can* be revolutionary; it *can* help to change the world, and does not merely follow and legitimize the status quo.

I have outlined insights common to all three of the negative concepts of ideology considered above which are not inconsistent with Marx's own moral judgments, yet may set limits to a contemporary approach to morality that draws on Marx. Ideology as idolatry and as denial of historicity can survive the recognition of Marx's moral values, and need not be discarded to remove inconsistency. Morality *per se* need not be ideology in this sense, but the negative concept may be retained and utilized in critique of moralities.

## 5. Morality and Ideology after the Poststructuralist Turn

I now want to show that not only do these themes survive recognition of Marx's own moral values, but they may survive also the poststructuralist turn. The negative concept is often dismissed on the grounds that it requires a concept of its opposite – i.e. for something to be ideological, there must be some non-ideological scientific ‘truth’ to which ideology is contrasted. As Foucault writes:

The notion of ideology appears to me to be difficult to make use of, for three reasons. The first is that, like it or not, it always stands in virtual opposition to something else which is supposed to count as truth. Now I believe that the problem does not consist in drawing the line between that in a discourse which falls under the category of scientificity or truth, and that which comes under some other category, but in seeing historically how effects of truth are produced within discourses which are in themselves neither true nor false. The second drawback is that the concept of ideology refers, I think necessarily, to something of the order of a subject. Thirdly, ideology stands in a

secondary position relative to something which functions as its infrastructure, as its material, economic determinant, etc. (1980: 118)

The first of Foucault's reasons for replacing the negative concept of 'ideology' with the neutral 'discourse' is its problematic reliance on a notion of objective truth. Hence, for Foucault:

The essential political problem for the intellectual is not to criticise the ideological contents supposedly linked to science, or to ensure that his own scientific practice is accompanied by correct ideology, but that of ascertaining the possibility of constituting a new politics of truth (ibid.: 133)

Rorty likewise writes that Marxists' theories are distorted by a "fuzzy distinction between 'ideology' and a form of thought (the Marxists' own) which escapes being 'ideology'" (1999: 59f). In the wake of the poststructuralist turn, which obliterated the notion of objective Truth, and which inaugurated the idea that human beings are created by the use of vocabulary, the concept of ideology for many inevitably fell into disrepute. Ideology was abandoned because it became too strong. Žižek asks: "is it not the ultimate result of discourse analysis that the order of discourse as such is inherently 'ideological'?" (1994: 14). As Laclau writes, the theory of ideology died as a result of its own imperialistic success; the negative concept then turned neutral (1997: 298).

Foucault's third reason has to do with the problematic Marxist base-superstructure metaphor which seems to reduce ideology to a mere mechanical reflex of the base. This deterministic model consigns ideology to secondary, epiphenomenal reflection of the real. Thus, writes Baudrillard: "In sum, ideology appears as a sort of cultural surf frothing on the beachhead of the economy" (1981: 143-144). This is a substantial issue and cannot be dealt with sufficiently here. It must suffice to say that the base-superstructure model with its one-way determinism has proved difficult to sustain.

I suggest we can readily agree with Foucault on the latter point, and contemporary usage of 'ideology' must be careful to avoid the pitfalls of base and superstructure (the themes of idolatry and denial of historicity picked out from Marx above in no way rely on the awkward base-superstructure model). However, accepting also Foucault's first reason, with the consequence that 'everything is ideology' in the neutral sense (i.e. everything is discourse) need not mean abandoning everything in the negative concept.

That is, we can think of some moralities as being more ideological than others, even in the absence of a positivistic conception of non-ideological Truth as an essentialist measuring stick, an epistemologically privileged language to access the real. As Eagleton writes:

The force of the term ideology lies in its capacity to discriminate between those power struggles which are somehow central to a whole form of social life and those which are not [. . .] It is perfectly possible to agree with Nietzsche and Foucault that power is everywhere, while wanting for certain practical purposes to distinguish between more and less central instances of it (1991: 8)

To say that there is no Archimedean point outside discourse or meta-language of the non-ideological is not to say that all descriptions are equal. I suggest that we can yet, in the absence of overarching criteria, judge some moralities to be more distorting than others. To assert that there is no ultimate rational foundation for any system of value-judgments is not to say that all viewpoints, all discourses, are equal. The themes picked out from Marx's negative concept(s) of ideology, then, may be retained. We do not require an objective conception of the non-ideological to be able to identify these ideological characteristics. This is most clearly the case with the denial of historicity. Just as an atheist does not need proof that there is no God to affirm that God (very probably) does not exist and claim greater weight of evidence than the theist, so the critic does not need positivistic access to some reality in order to affirm that moral thought which denies its historicity, particularity and contingency is more ideologically distorting than that which does not. We do not need to get outside of history to demonstrate that everything is historical. It is perfectly possible to decry moralities which claim transcendence as ideological without holding any extra-discursive criteria.

This is also true of idolatry. It may appear that the claim of misrecognition of human constructions as independent entities requires some vantage point outside of discourse: is not the model here similar to the essentialism of 'false consciousness'? However, again, affirming that moral values are human constructions need not require an extra-discursive reality which tells us that it really is the case that moral values are human constructions. Amartya Sen, in his recent book, *The Idea of Justice*, argues that there is no need for transcendent criteria in order to make comparative judgments. "In arguing for a Van Gogh over a Picasso", he writes, "we do not need to get steamed up about identifying the most perfect picture in the world" (2009: 101). Similarly, understanding Mount Everest to be the tallest mountain in the

world is not necessary in comparing the relative heights of Mount Kilimanjaro and Mount McKinley: "There would be something deeply odd in a general belief that a comparison of any two alternatives cannot be sensibly made without a prior identification of a supreme alternative" (ibid.: 102). The relevant point here is that we do not need a privileged 'outside' perspective of perfect, undistorted thought in order to show that some thoughts are more distorted than others. There is no positivistic way of 'discovering', rationally, that moralities are social constructions. But it is nevertheless possible to describe moralities which claim transcendence as more ideologically distorting than those which acknowledge their historicity. Foucault's first point against ideology, then, does not stand. Ideological distortion of the order of the themes extrapolated from Marx above does not require a concept of scientific truth.

Ideology critique (at least in the themes I have picked out from Marx above), then, is not so far removed from Foucault's concept of critique. Foucault writes: "the critical question today has to be turned back into a positive one: in what is given to us as universal, necessary, obligatory, what place is occupied by whatever is singular, contingent, and the product of arbitrary constraints?" (1984: 45). With ideology, we may have our cake and eat it: everything is ideology (discourse), and there is no non-ideological extra-discursive Truth, but some ideologies (here I am only concerned with moralities) may be more ideological (distorting) than others.

## 6. Laclau's Resurrection of Ideology

Ernesto Laclau, in an important article now thirteen years old, has made a case for preserving ideology as distortion. Agreeing with Foucault in dismissing the essentialist notion of ideology as false consciousness, and its opposite (true consciousness), as well as the notion of ideology as a naturalistic infrastructure being reflected in distorted ideas, Laclau yet seeks to preserve the notion of ideological distortion. He writes: "We are however reluctant to entirely abandon the notion of ideology. I think it can be maintained if its meaning is given, however, a particular twist" (2006: 114). "If we entirely do away with the notion of 'distortion' and assert that there are only incommensurable 'discourses'", he writes, "we merely transfer the notion of a full positivity from an extra-discursive ground to the plurality of the discursive field" (1997: 299). The 'full positivity of the social' consists in its being beyond doubt; fully transparent. Whereas the essentialist concept of ideology affirms the full positivity of the social in an extra-discursive meta-language of the non-ideological, replacing this with incommensurable

discourses and doing away with distortion merely transfers this full positivity to the plurality of discourse. Critique then seems to become impossible. Laclau posits an alternative:

If, on the other hand, what we are asserting is that the very notion of an extra-discursive viewpoint is the ideological illusion *par excellence*, the notion of 'distortion' is not abandoned but is instead made the cornerstone of the dismantling of any metalinguistic operation (ibid.: 299)

Not all discourses are equal, it seems: discourses which posit an extra-discursive level involve ideological distortion. Laclau therefore seems to resurrect a negative, yet anti-essentialist, concept of ideology after the pragmatic/poststructuralist turn. He makes a case for retaining the category of ideological distortion while simultaneously denying the accessibility of a privileged, extra-discursive level. Ideology critique thus survives the loss of a detached vantage point outside of social practice.

However, Laclau's merit in preserving ideology after poststructuralism and avoiding the fall into positivism is tempered by his presentation of ideological distortion as both impossible yet necessary. The new twist Laclau gives to the notion of ideological distortion is that distortion becomes constitutive. The constitutive distortion is a projection of the illusion of fullness and transparency onto something which is inherently divided or incomplete. The ideological distortion therefore consists in the projection of fullness onto what will always be incomplete. So far, so good: ideologies which construct the fullness of the community and posit a particular, partial interest as the universal one will be ideologically distorting. This echoes the Marxist themes encountered earlier: negative ideology presents the particular as universal, the contingent as necessary. The impossible closure which ideology projects outwards protects itself from contestation. However, the problem with Laclau's alternative is that this distortion itself becomes universal. He writes: "the operation of closure is impossible but at the same time necessary" (ibid.: 302).

Laclau returns to Althusser's notion of ideology as misrepresentation as *eternal*. Ideology, although it involves distortion, is not negative: *all* ideologies (in the neutral sense) have to attempt the impossible closure. Ideology is conditional upon constituting the community as a *whole*, but the community is not a whole. The fullness of the community is an 'impossible object', but also a necessary one.

There is something essentially catachrestical in any precarious stabilisation of meaning. Any 'closure' is necessarily tropological. This means that those discursive forms that construct a horizon of all possible representation with a certain context, which establish the limits of what is 'sayable' are going to be necessarily figurative [. . .] This closing operation is what I would still call *ideological* which, in my vocabulary, as should be clear, has not the slightest pejorative connotation (Laclau, 2006: 114)

Laclau's reinterpretation of ideological distortion, then, is not a negative concept. Rather, it is firmly situated in the Althusserian vein which treats ideology as eternal imaginary (and distorted) representation.

This is not to say ideologies cannot be more or less distorting. Although constitutive distortion is necessary and unavoidable, ideologies are not all on a par. As Laclau writes, the "illusion of closure is something we can negotiate with, but never eliminate. Ideology is a dimension which belongs to the structure of all possible experience" (1997: 311). The problem with Laclau's alternative is not that there can be no distinction between more or less distorting ideologies. Rather, by presenting ideological closure as necessary yet impossible, distortion seems to become harmless. Hegemonic political action seems unavoidably – and therefore not in the least disturbingly – distorting.

Maeve Cooke highlights the problem with Laclau's presentation of distortion as harmless, and demonstrates that this unfortunate conclusion derives from Laclau's conflation of attainability and desirability. She writes:

Laclau moves too hastily from the thesis of the necessity of the transcendent object to the thesis of the necessity of belief in its attainability. It is not clear that desire for the transcendent object implies belief in its attainability (2006: 12)

Metaphysical closure may be impossible, necessary, yet harmless. Ideological closure, however, is impossible but pernicious, and not necessary. Ideological closure conceals not only its own incompleteness, but also its complicity with the perpetuation of social relations of oppression (ibid.).

Cooke's point brings us back to ideology as apologia. The effect of idealism, abstraction, denial of historicity, and so on, is that the empty signifiers (such

as 'Justice') are given content by present experience, and thereby legitimate the status quo, presenting the historical as ahistorical, the contingent as necessary, particular as universal. Ideology in this sense imposes closure on what is in fact always open and contestable. Likewise with ideology as idolatry. Misrecognition of what are contingent human social constructions as independent, self-determining entities imposes closure; these alterable, contestable constructions then become unalterable, beyond contestation.

If we remove the necessity of impossible ideological closure from Laclau's theory, then, we have the outlines of a theory of ideological distortion which does not indict morality *per se*, and thereby does not undercut Marxism itself, and which survives the poststructuralist turn, but which remains negative. Such a theory can uphold the themes of idolatry and ahistoricity from Marx's negative concept. As Laclau claims, the imposition of closure, which conceals alterability and openness, and masks its complicity in present power relations, is the ideological move *par excellence*. But, although such closure is impossible, it is not necessary. We are not imprisoned in necessary illusions of closure. Morality need not be ideological. For example, a constructivist concept of morality, which sees moral values as discursive constructions competing in hegemonic political practice, would not seem to impose ideological closure. We then have the outlines of a poststructuralist yet negative concept of the ideological: the ideological (in the negative sense) is ideology (in the neutral sense) which projects closure onto what is always open and contestable, and thereby conceals its complicity in power relations of oppression. Marx's critique of moralities as ideological then continues to be a valuable tool of critique and sets important limits to any Marxist moral theory.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> We need not delve into details; there exists a substantial body of work elucidating Marx's moral commitments. For example, see Geras (1989; and 1992) for excellent scholarship on this matter and in-depth bibliographies.

<sup>2</sup> I follow Balibar here who writes that philosophy should be "'Marxist' *against Marx*" (2002: 121).

<sup>3</sup> Alternatively: 'pragmatic' and 'epistemological' (Callinicos, 1983: 128-9), or

'global' and 'non-global' (Peffer: 239).

<sup>4</sup> Notable by its absence is the notion of ideology as serving class interests. This is disregarded here for the following reasons: *either* serving class interests means serving all class interests, in which case ideology is not negative at all (it may serve oppressed classes' interests), *or* it serves only certain (ruling) class interests, in which case it would be negative. However, in the latter case, we again find two variations. If ideology is defined to include serving ruling class interests (the problems inherent in this aside), there is space for non-ideological morality, for there may be morality which does not legitimize the status quo. Furthermore, defining ideology in this way loses the critical insight of Marx's analysis of religion as ideology, which resists reduction to class interests, whether ruling or subservient. On the other hand, ideology as hegemony, the dominance of certain ideas, rather than ideas' inherent function in serving the ruling class, cannot be sustained in its strong forms – there is little reason to think that control over the 'means of mental production' is ever total enough to justify the conclusion that "the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are on the whole subject to it" – but if weakened it then ceases to be a pejorative concept at all.

<sup>5</sup> On the Marx-Freud connection in terms of morality and ideology see Skillen (1974; 1977) and Meynell (1981).

<sup>6</sup> Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams (2008) has identified the link between idolatry and Marx's theory of the lived ideology of modern industrial society in *Capital*: "Marx long ago observed the way in which unbridled capitalism became a kind of mythology, ascribing reality, power and agency to things that had no life in themselves; he was right about that, if about little else. And ascribing independent reality to what you have in fact made yourself is a perfect definition of what the Jewish and Christian Scriptures call idolatry". The same is true with respect to much of Marx's more general thought about ideology, from religion to idealism. In each case, ideology ascribes agency to the inanimate, sets objects as subjects, and inverts the relation between creator and creation.

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# Reviews

## *Habermas: A Guide for the Perplexed*

by Lasse Thomassen

London: Continuum, 2010, pbk £14.99 (ISBN 978-0-8264-8766-7), 192pp.

by Huw Rees

In this latest edition of Continuum's *Guide for the Perplexed* series, Lasse Thomassen attempts to summarize Jürgen Habermas' most important ideas. This will never be an easy task, if only because Habermas has written so much and over such a long period of time. Thomassen's book is an intermediate level introduction. It is aimed neither at complete beginners – as is Gordon Finlayson's (2005) *Habermas: A Very Short Introduction* – nor at those who know much of the material already – such as Andrew Edgar's (2005) *The Philosophy of Habermas*. The author starts with several assumptions. He assumes that biography and history matter, and so presents us with a portrait of Habermas as a philosopher and public intellectual whose life has spanned that of post-war Germany. Thomassen asserts that the public use of reason is the "red thread" running through all of Habermas' work (2010: 11). For Thomassen, communication has been central to Habermas' thought from the start. He underlines this insight with a quotation from Habermas' inaugural speech at Frankfurt in 1965, which can be taken as a summary of his whole philosophical project:

What raises us out of nature is the only thing whose nature we can know: *language*. Through its structure, autonomy and responsibility are posited for us. Our first sentence expresses unequivocally the intention of universal and unconstrained consensus (2010: 9)

In his Introduction, Thomassen gives an unusually full biographical sketch of his subject. Here we can find the familiar details of Habermas' early life, the moral shock of the Nuremberg trials, and the confrontation with Heidegger. But we also learn about the medical conditions with which Habermas was born, which made it difficult for him to speak and required him to have several operations. Habermas himself has suggested that these experiences showed him the importance of communication and intersubjectivity (2008: 13-15). Another point of note in the Introduction is Thomassen's focus on Habermas' interventions in public debates. In this, Thomassen diverges from most other writers of introductory guides.

Habermas has taken part in any number of debates, ranging from the student protests of 1968 to the Iraq war of 2003, but commentators outside the German-speaking world have tended to relegate these interventions to footnotes. Only two texts – Robert C. Holub’s (1991) *Jürgen Habermas: Critic in the Public Sphere* and Martin Matušítk’s (2001) *Jürgen Habermas: A Philosophical-Political Profile* – have explored them in detail. Thomassen does more than discuss Habermas’ interventions. He uses them as examples to illustrate his subject’s philosophical ideas, exploring the concept of post-nation-state politics, for example, using “February 15<sup>th</sup>, or: What Binds Europeans”, Habermas and Derrida’s joint newspaper article protesting the war in Iraq (2010: 147-8). This counterpointing of theory and practice is one of the most original and enjoyable aspects of Thomassen’s book.

In the first chapter, Thomassen describes Critical Theory and Habermas’ place within it. The approach is refreshing, in that he starts with the *third* generation of the Frankfurt School. Only after discussing Axel Honneth does Thomassen quote Horkheimer’s famous definition: “The critical theory of society [. . .] has for its object men [sic] as producers of their own historical way of life in its totality” (2010: 20). He goes on to detail Habermas’ disagreements with Adorno and Horkheimer, and show how his focus on communicative reason should be seen as a response to their pessimistic account of instrumental reason. This forces Thomassen to depart from a strictly chronological approach and to jump between decades as his theme dictates. While this may be unavoidable, it has the potential to confuse a new reader. Having touched on the path Habermas chose not to take with a brief discussion of *Knowledge and Human Interests*, Thomassen describes his subject’s communicative turn and then prepares to deal with his most significant ideas.

Each of Thomassen’s four central chapters focuses on a major theory and the text in which it appears (when a single text can be identified). Anyone who makes this kind of selection tends to draw out that aspect of Habermas which is closest to their own concerns. Political theorists summarize Habermas’ achievement in terms of “public sphere – legitimation – discourse theory of law and democracy”, while philosophers speak in terms of “formal pragmatics – discourse ethics – the postmetaphysical project”. Thomassen attempts to please both camps. To this end, Chapter Two is devoted to the public sphere and *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Chapter Three to formal pragmatics and *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Chapter Four to discourse ethics (which is not confined to any one text), and Chapter Five to the discourse theory of law and democracy, and *Between Facts and*

*Norms*. Thomassen gives lucid and readable accounts of Habermas' ideas. His technique of counterpointing Habermas' philosophy and his public interventions is in evidence throughout. He illuminates the concept of the public sphere using Habermas' comments on the student protest movement in Germany in the 1960s, and does the same for the discourse theory of law and democracy, using comments on civil disobedience in the anti-nuclear protests of the 1980s (2010: 53, 127). Thomassen includes some critiques of Habermas' arguments in each chapter, and, moreover, the tone of his writing can at times prove healthily irreverent. For example, he says in passing that *The Theory of Communicative Action* "clogs up" 1100 pages in the original German, but "a mere 900" in English (2010: 58). This has the effect of making Habermas an interlocutor with whom we may disagree, rather than an authority to be explicated. Habermas, given the nature of his arguments, would surely approve.

The sixth and final chapter deals with Habermas' most recent work. It is inevitably briefer and more open-ended than the others. Thomassen describes the three issues that have preoccupied Habermas in recent years, namely, cosmopolitanism, religion and genetic engineering. The greatest attention is given to the first, while criticism is reserved for Habermas' treatment of the second. As with the rest of the book, Thomassen provides detailed suggestions for further reading. His bibliography expands on this by listing many more texts, introductions and criticism, as well as Habermas' own writings. This aspect of Thomassen's book, combined with his willingness to both explain and criticize Habermas' arguments, makes it ideal for anyone who wants to use Habermas' philosophy to explore other fields. It is also equally suited to those who have a basic familiarity with Habermas' work which they would like to enhance. Lasse Thomassen's book may not be for absolute beginners or seasoned specialists, but it certainly provides an excellent and reliable bridge between the two.

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## *Global Justice: A Cosmopolitan Account*

by Gillian Brock

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, pbk \$45.00 (ISBN: 978-0-1992-3094-5), 366pp.

by Thomas Weitzner

One of the problems facing contemporary approaches to global justice is bridging the gap between abstract ethical theory and concrete proposals for political reforms. In her remarkable book, *Global Justice: A Cosmopolitan Account*, Gillian Brock successfully addresses this difficulty. As a “quasi-institutional” (2009: 316) cosmopolitan, she is convinced that different global governance institutions must be established in order to attain the goals of global justice. The book is subdivided into three parts, beginning with theory in the first, dealing with some practical issues in the second, and returning to theory in the third.

In the first part, Brock provides an excellent overview of the debate that followed the publication of John Rawls’ (1999) *The Law of Peoples*, taking critics as well as proponents of Rawls’ view into account. Although Brock deems some aspects of Rawls’ approach unconvincing, she adopts his ‘original position’ and modifies it to a “global conference” (2009: 48). The delegates of that conference are randomly selected and remain ignorant as to “where they live, the territory’s size, [. . .] what level of economic development is dominant in that territory [or] how well it is endowed with natural resources” (ibid.: 49). However, the delegates are fully aware of some global collective problems such as climate change, terrorism and infectious diseases. On what global moral principles would the delegates thus agree? According to Brock, they would choose a “needs-based minimum floor principle” (ibid.: 73), which ensures every human being the fulfilment of five basic needs. Furthermore, they would want their basic liberties to be protected, demand fair terms of cooperation in collective endeavours, and require the establishment of global institutions that effectively enforce these claims. Brock rejects the idea of a global difference principle or the worldwide application of equality of opportunity advocated by other cosmopolitans (see Moellendorf, 2002; Caney, 2006).

In the second part of her book, Brock applies her theory to five policy issues, namely, taxation and global poverty, basic liberties, humanitarian intervention, immigration, and the global economic order. Here, Brock reveals an extensive knowledge of global politics. Concerning every topic



she makes detailed use of empirical studies from NGOs or international organizations in support of her arguments. Following her own thesis – that global justice can only be achieved through global governance – she proposes several new institutions. Global taxes should finance a so-called “global justice fund” (2009: 136), which in turn could be used to eradicate structural poverty in the developing nations, to protect global common goods, or to finance other international organizations. Further proposals include a “Vital Interest Protection Organization” (ibid.: 177) that is to authorize humanitarian intervention if a nation is unable or unwilling to protect the basic needs and liberties of its citizens, as well as a reformed and extended international criminal court (ibid.: 166). The chapter on immigration is especially noteworthy. Unlike other cosmopolitans, Brock does not advocate a policy of open borders (Singer, 1993: 247). She points out that immigration cannot be a real solution to the problems in the developing world. On the contrary, it is often harmful to poorer countries since they lose their human capital. Brock underpins this thesis with a well informed discussion of the immigration of healthcare professionals, the so-called “brain drain” (2009: 198-201). She offers several proposals to deal with this problem, including an international agency that sets uniform standards and regulates compensation and sanctions.

The third part of the book is a reply to the “nationalist skeptic” and the “feasibility skeptic” (2009: 7), as Brock calls them. She tries to show that the position of liberal nationalism – of the kind advocated by David Miller (1995) and Yael Tamir (1993) – is untenable, and that her own cosmopolitan approach leaves “adequate space for legitimate forms of nationalism” (2009: 274). In the last chapter, Brock replies to several skeptical objections over the feasibility of global justice. Brock demonstrates how we can proceed from theory to practice by designing institutions appropriately, and shows that we are able to measure the progress towards the goals of global justice.

Although the great variety and breadth of subjects Brock addresses in her book is impressive, the sheer scope of the project is, at the same time, one of its weaknesses. Brock cannot do justice to all the issues under discussion, as is most plainly evident in the chapter on humanitarian intervention. While she makes a number of interesting contributions to the topic – e.g. her proposal to redefine sovereignty as responsibility (ibid.: 182) – she leaves open such urgent questions as when exactly the threshold for an intervention has been reached, or whether or not the international organization she proposes in this context should be equipped with its own military forces.

The rejection of human rights-based theories of global justice is another subject with which Brock deals too cursorily. She maintains that talk of human rights is often paternalistic because the concept of individual rights is not established in most non-western cultures (ibid.: 72). Furthermore, since rights are always dependent on needs, we should reject the concept of human rights and focus on fundamental needs instead. However, in view of the comprehensive literature on the justification of human rights and their integration into cosmopolitan accounts, it can be argued that it would take more than two pages to successfully rebut human rights-based theories of global justice (Pogge, 2002; Beitz, 2009; Griffin, 2009). As Amartya Sen argues, the concept of individual rights is also present in Asian cultures (Sen, 1999: 227). Moreover, some theorists like Alan Gewirth – whom Brock quite surprisingly invokes to support her needs-based account (2009: 65) – have presented strong arguments on the question of how human rights can be justified universally (Gewirth, 1978).

Despite these shortcomings, Brock's book will be, and, indeed, already is, the starting point of much productive discussion in the field of global justice. It is a welcome addition to the existing literature and is certainly on a par with Simon Caney's (2006) *Justice without Borders* and Darrel Moellendorf's (2002) *Cosmopolitan Justice*.

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*First Nations, First Thoughts:  
The Impact of Indigenous Thought in Canada*

Edited by Annis May Timpson

Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2009, pbk \$32.95, (ISBN: 978-0-77481-552-9), 336pp.

by Emma Battell Lowman

Canada's reputation as a peace-keeping, non-violent and multicultural nation is a carefully constructed image displayed to advantage on the international stage. This obfuscates historic and ongoing colonization, dispossession and violence directed towards Indigenous peoples, on which the prosperity of the Canadian state rests and through which considerable socioeconomic disparities between Indigenous and Settler peoples in this country have emerged. It also conceals the persistence of Indigenous peoples as distinct political, social and economic actors who challenge this colonial treatment, and work to achieve justice and respect for Indigenous rights, cultures and nations. The rise of Indigenous scholars and scholarship in the academy since the 1960s has significantly, though unevenly, altered the terrain of academic, cultural and political discourse in Canada. However, the question of how Settler discourses have been influenced by Indigenous thought has received far less attention than considerations of how colonization/colonialism has impacted Indigenous peoples and thought. *First Nations, First Thoughts* is a timely intervention that seeks to address this question by bringing together researchers, scholars and practitioners whose respective areas have all been notably affected by challenges from and engagement with Indigenous thought.

In 2000, Tom Flanagan published *First Nations, Second Thoughts*, in which he advocated the assimilation of Indigenous peoples in Canada as both inevitable and advantageous. As Michael Murphy points out in his piece, Flanagan's plan represents both a moral and practical failure (Timpson, 2009: 264). As part of the swift and intense response to this publication, Annis May Timpson, Director of the Centre for Canadian Studies at the University of Edinburgh, organized the 2005 conference, 'First Peoples, First Thoughts'. The aim of the conference was to bring together diverse scholars to "explore the significance of Aboriginal peoples to the development of cultural and intellectual thought in Canada" (Timpson, 2009: 13). *First Nations, First Thoughts* grew out of this successful meeting. Timpson, as editor of this 11-chapter volume, sees it as a contribution to ongoing decolonization in Canada that highlights the contributions of Indigenous thinkers and thought

to public discourse in Canada. In doing so, it invites consideration of how reconciliation between Indigenous and Settler communities may be achieved.

*First Nations, First Thoughts* is divided into five thematic sections. 'Challenging Dominant Discourses' begins with historian Robin Jarvis Brownlie's essay 'First Nations Perspectives and Historical Thinking in Canada', which describes the history and late twentieth-century rise of published historical writing by Indigenous people in Canada, and the ways in which such work challenges non-Indigenous historians to expand their understandings of what events and sources constitute 'history'. In 'Being Indigenous in the Academy: Creating Space for Indigenous Scholars', Plains Cree and Saulteaux scholar of education Margaret Kovach exposes the fundamental causes of the practical difficulties encountered by Indigenous scholars and students in the academy. She calls on non-Indigenous people to take responsibility for the creation of academic environments that are accessible and respectful to Indigenous peoples.

The second section, 'Oral Histories and Narratives', starts with oral history researcher Leslie McCartney's 'Respecting First Nations Oral Histories: Copyright Complexities and Archiving Aboriginal Stories'. McCartney alerts those involved with oral history research to the lack of culturally appropriate protection for Indigenous peoples' intellectual property in Canadian legal mechanisms. In 'Nápi and the City: Siksikaitsitapi Narratives Revisited', social anthropologist Martin Whittles, and Nlaka'pamux nation member and health programming coordinator Tim Patterson, seek to show how Indigenous narratives function in urban settings and in mediating the complexities of being Indigenous in the city.

The third section, 'Cultural Heritage and Representation', opens with a piece by anthropologist Alison K. Brown, and museum curator Laura Peers, entitled 'Colonial Photographs and Postcolonial Relationships: The Kainai-Oxford Photographic Histories Project'. Here, the development of a long-term partnership between the Pitt-Rivers Museum, Oxford, and the Mookaakin Cultural and Heritage Foundation, Alberta, allowed the return of early twentieth-century anthropological photographs to the Kainai people. Built on a protocol agreement (the first signed between an Indigenous nation and a British Museum), this relationship exposes the institutional challenges to, and possibilities of, decolonization. Stephanie Boulton, Métis Nation member and employee of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, adopts a case study approach in examining the impact of the 1992 Task Force on Museums

and First Peoples, in 'Museums Taken to Task: Representing First Peoples at the McCord Museum of Canadian History'.

In the fourth section, 'Aboriginal Thought and Innovation in Subnational Governance', political scholar Fiona MacDonald teases out the elements of social service reform that support and undermine Indigenous self-determination in 'The Manitoba Government's Shift to "Autonomous" First Nations Child Welfare: Empowerment or Privatization?' The book's editor Annis May Timpson, in 'Rethinking the Administration of Government: Inuit Representation, Culture and Language in the Nunavut Public Service', describes the challenges facing existing attempts to develop an Indigenous-focused, representative territorial public service, and its necessary connections to language, education, and cultural vitality. In a piece entitled 'A Fine Balance? Aboriginal Peoples in the Canadian North and the Dilemma of Development', political scientist Gabrielle A. Slowey examines the extent to which Indigenous peoples can exert agency and improve self-sufficiency through engagement with development and resource extraction initiatives.

The final section, 'Thinking Back, Looking Forward: Political and Constitutional Reconciliation', opens with 'Civilization, Self-Determination, and Reconciliation' by scholar of Indigenous politics Michael Murray, in which he demonstrates the failings of Flanagan's assimilationist plan. Murray criticizes the plan's reliance on civilizationism, as well as its exclusion of agency (both Indigenous and Settler), and concludes that true reconciliation must be based on respect, accommodation and consent. In the book's concluding chapter, scholar of Indigenous politics Kiera Ladner examines the potential for reconciling Canadian and Indigenous constitutional orders, and identifies several cases in which the courts have opened the door to Indigenist understandings and principles.

The chapters by Brownlie, Kovach, Peers and Brown, MacDonald, Timpson and Ladner are particularly successful. These authors offer grounded introductions to specific cases and critical engagement with the larger issues surrounding the ways in which Indigenous thought has influenced social and political thought. Despite the wide scope of *First Nations, First Thoughts*, there are, however, two themes which are noticeably absent. Firstly, there is very little direct engagement with the impact of Indigenous science, even though this is a growing area of inquiry in both public policy and academic discourse. Secondly, there is no discussion of the more radical approaches to Indigenous independence and rebalancing Indigenous-Settler relations in Canada, although proponents are occasionally cited in footnotes. The radical

tradition of Indigenous thought has had a major effect on Canadian society and on academic discourses. Harold Cardinal and George Manuel were radicals in their time, as are Taiaiake Alfred and Lee Maracle today. It is suggested in the introduction that this volume will deal with “current realities of integrating Indigenous thought into Canadian institutions” (2009: 14). The kind of fundamental shifts identified as necessary by the radical tradition do not necessarily fit in with an integrationist model, but failure to consider them considerably narrows the scope of possible solutions and fruitful debate.

*First Nations, First Thoughts* draws strength from the wide range of subjects examined by its diverse contributors, but functions as a cohesive collection due to the stellar editorial work of Timpson. Her influence is acknowledged by most of the contributors, and in the introduction and presentation of the goals of the volume, she deliberately opens and defends space for meaningful dialogue and exchange on what is still a contentious area. Those sceptical or new to this area will find *First Nations, First Thoughts* a compelling statement of the importance of Indigenous thought to Canadian discourse. However, the implications of *First Nations, First Thoughts* stretch beyond Canada. Brown and Peers demonstrate the need for British institutions to engage with Indigenous groups in Canada, while development issues in Canada have an impact upon international corporations and markets. Moreover, the ethical imperative to develop postcolonial societies is an international responsibility requiring the engagement and support of scholars, researchers and policy makers worldwide to make necessary changes to dominating paradigms of knowledge, practice and justice. *First Nations, First Thoughts* affirms the priority of Indigenous thought in understanding and developing public discourses in Canada, and constitutes another step forward in ensuring that Indigenous and Settler people continue to work towards a truly postcolonial future.

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## *Engaging Heidegger*

by Richard Capobianco

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010, hbk \$55.00 (ISBN: 978-1-44264-159-4), 182pp.

by Andrew Ryder

Richard Capobianco's *Engaging Heidegger* advances a comprehensive reading of Martin Heidegger's writings. The author's thesis is that a consideration of Being is central to the entirety of Heidegger's project. While this might not seem controversial to a casual reader of Heidegger, Capobianco discusses a variety of interpreters who suggest that Heidegger moved on from this theme in his later development as a thinker. Capobianco persuasively and responsibly treats various continuities and revisions in Heidegger's long career, submitting that while Heidegger abandoned the problematic of ontological difference distinctive of his early work, this was in the service of a fuller responsiveness to Being as such. In addition, Capobianco is concerned with a vacillation in Heidegger's thought between the possibility of existing 'at home' with Being versus a fundamental estrangement. In this concern Capobianco eventually locates the real shift in Heidegger's thinking.

Much of the book is concerned with terminological disputes between Heideggerian specialists. The author begins with a convincing and thorough approach to Heidegger's attention to Being. In chapter one, Capobianco (2010: 6) provides an extensive account of Heidegger's statements regarding the centrality of Being, as well as arguments by scholars who claim that Heidegger ultimately disregarded this term as a fundamental concern. Capobianco (ibid.: 35) proceeds from this into a discussion of *Ereignis* (translated as 'event' or 'enowning', among other possibilities), which might appear to be a more crucial notion for the later Heidegger. Capobianco's thesis is that this is simply another permutation of Heidegger's primary attention to Being. On Capobianco's account (ibid.: 37), a manuscript from the 1930s, entitled *Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis)*, has received too much emphasis in recent years, which has led to the mistaken belief that *Ereignis* is a concept more fundamental than Being.

These disputes regarding nomenclature later give way to a much more controversial and thought-provoking matter. In his third chapter, Capobianco (2010: 52) explores Heidegger's consideration of whether Dasein (an individual's existence) is 'at home' in Being, or fundamentally alienated. This is most crucially apparent in Heidegger's reading of Sophocles'



*Antigone*, and in particular the famous first stasimon, the 'Ode to Man' (Capobianco, 2010: 55-56). Here, Capobianco argues that Heidegger revises his reading of *Antigone*. While in the *Introduction to Metaphysics* (1935) Heidegger initially argues that man is essentially unsettled, he reverses this in 'Hölderlin's Hymn *Der Ister*' (1942) in which he claims that Dasein finds a primordial home in Being (Capobianco, 2010: 57).

This concern is continued in the following chapter, which treats the theme of *Angst*. Capobianco (2010: 73) aims to distinguish *Angst* from an ordinary experience of anxiousness, while noting a superficial connection between an everyday affect and an ontological phenomenon. The fifth and sixth chapters both deal with Heidegger's consideration of *Lichtung*, originally conceived of in terms of 'lighting' before a turn away from visual metaphors and later translated as 'clearing' (ibid.: 94-95). The author argues that commentators have overemphasized continuity in Heidegger's attention to *Lichtung*, overlooking a fundamental alteration in the transition between 'lighting' and 'clearing' (ibid.: 92). This turn away from a focus on 'light' leads Heidegger to assert that both light and darkness can be found in the clearing, allowing him to provide for a fuller experience of Being that does not require the same kind of anxiety (ibid.: 100-101).

The seventh chapter discusses the reception of Heidegger in architectural theory. Here, Capobianco sees a restaging of the basic alternatives of the possibility to "find our place or regain our lost place in the world", on the one hand, or a fundamental unsettledness, on the other (ibid.: 123-124). He associates this latter reading with Jacques Derrida and deconstruction. This basic opposition between a Heidegger that would find a home in the world, as against one that valorizes transgression, is most emphatically staged in the final chapter, which returns to *Antigone's* 'Ode to Man' in order to discuss commonalities in the readings of Heidegger and the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (Capobianco, 2010: 131). Capobianco's afterword emphasizes maturation in Heidegger's thought, from anxiety and homelessness to awe and humility (ibid.: 141).

In Slavoj Žižek's view, it is actually a failing of Heidegger to claim that man can be at home (2008: 143). This defense of Lacan is in keeping with a variety of commentators who locate Heidegger's error not in an awareness of transgression and death, but rather in a complicitous outlook that is not anxious enough. Such positions can be found, for instance, in Georges Bataille's article 'From Existentialism to the Primacy of Economy' (1999 [1947]: 161), and, more famously, in Heidegger's student Emmanuel Levinas

(2001 [1947]). Levinas argues that Heidegger conceived of Dasein as too much at home in the world, and indicates that the latter's involvement with National Socialism resulted from a failure to attend to the positive existence of evil (ibid.: 4, 34).<sup>1</sup> In defense of this perspective, we might note Heidegger's valorization of the Nietzschean eagle and his associating it with "the fully developed resolution of one who maintains himself at the level of his own essential rank, a rank to which his task appoints him" (1991 [1954]: 46). Even in the work of the 1930s, Heidegger emphasizes not a transgressive repudiation, but recognition of hierarchy, something that is absent from Lacan.

With *Engaging Heidegger*, Richard Capobianco provides a much needed clarification of the development of Heidegger's thought. The book will be especially valuable for those striving to appreciate the later Heidegger. It is a valuable contribution to scholarship concerned with Heidegger's differing approaches to the question of Being as well as to the development of his concept of *Lichtung*. It also draws out the stakes of two very different elements of Heidegger's work – one that emphasizes the impossibility of being at home, and another that sees the world as fundamentally a dwelling.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> While this has long been a concern, it has been forcefully placed on the agenda by a number of contemporary works. An entire 'Affair' occurred in France regarding the depth of Heidegger's involvement in Nazism after the publication of Victor Farías' (1991) *Heidegger and Nazism*, which recurred more recently with the release of Emmanuel Faye's (2009) *Heidegger: The Introduction of Nazism into Philosophy in Light of the Unpublished Seminars of 1933-1935*.

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## *Derrida: Profanations*

by Patrick O'Connor

London: Continuum, 2010, hbk £65.00 (ISBN: 978-1-44118-170-1), 224pp.

by Arthur Willemse

In his monograph, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life*, Martin Hägglund argues that otherness is at the heart of every entity, in an absolute sense: "Every finite other is absolutely other, not because it is absolutely in itself but on the contrary because it can never be in itself. Thus, it is always becoming other than itself and cannot have any integrity as such" (2008: 94). With this view, he extrapolates from, among other things, Derrida's early critique of Husserlian phenomenology:

[P]henomenology seems to us tormented, if not contested from within, by its own descriptions of the movement of temporalization and of the constitution of intersubjectivity. At the heart of what ties these two decisive moments of descriptions we recognize an irreducible nonpresence as having a constitutive value, and with a nonlife, a nonpresence or nonself-belonging of the living present, an ineradicable nonprimordially (Derrida, 1973: 6-7)

Derrida locates death within life, as he will keep doing throughout, and even in retrospect on, his career: "To listen to oneself, can that be pleasant? Can one find that pleasant without the nasty taste of a poison, or the foretaste of an illness? I doubt that more and more" (Derrida, 2003: xiii). Or, if we turn to Derrida's works on friendship, for instance, we find that all amity is based on a future anterior mourning over the friend that dies first. One friend 'will have mourned' the loss of the other – thus would Derrida perhaps phrase the anticipation of death that marks every friendship from its beginning.

Note that there are two sides to this 'torment from within', this *auto-immunity*. Firstly, it is a puzzle with regards to some philosophical works (Husserl, for instance). Secondly, and more profoundly perhaps, it is "the condition for the being of all things" (Hägglund, 2008: 1, 9; O'Connor, 2010: 13-14). The logic of this auto-immunity in Hägglund's book becomes the key to all of Derrida's work: there is one sole realm of *différance* that does not allow for perfect presence and in which every entity is already marked by death as the condition of its very existence.

So this is an important notion in recent Derrida scholarship and it is the interpretation of Derrida's work in this light that Patrick O'Connor's book

means to secure:

If all identities are never as such derived from a prior identity that precedes all others, they must then be equivocal to a form of mortalism; since they are subject to demise. | This insight is further radicalized in the only other work that offers a stringently profane reading of Derrida's work: Martin Hägglund's excellent *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* [ . . . ] I will thus consolidate the shift that Hägglund has attempted to institute in his theorization of radical atheism (O'Connor, 2010: 4-5)

O'Connor attributes to Hägglund, and also to Rodolphe Gasché, great profundity. He commences the second chapter as follows: "This reading will be based on the interpretations of both Rudolph Gasché and Martin Hägglund, interpretations that ought to be the ground zero for *any* discussion of Derrida on these *or other matters*" (O'Connor, 2010: 38, my emphasis). Indeed, O'Connor stays particularly close to Hägglund. O'Connor for instance writes:

Derrida does not restrict this analysis merely to that which happens in consciousness. That which is lived *is* only because it relates to an alterity, which is to say, its absence or death, because all identities are shot through with temporality, both infinitely and infinitesimally (2010: 17-18)

Hägglund's analysis on Derrida's relationship to Kant sounds familiar:

What I want to emphasize here is that Derrida describes the trace and *différance* as conditions of life in general. They should not be understood as 'transcendental' conditions of possibility in Kant's or Husserl's sense, because such conditions only apply to the experience of a finite consciousness (2008: 18-19)

This shared project of Hägglund and O'Connor is controversial. From Derrida's critique of phenomenology, how it revolts at heart against itself, they account for the "conditions of reality itself" (O'Connor, 2010: 14). So from where Derrida finds that phenomenology, as a theory, lacks consistency, it is argued that reality in itself lacks consistency, and, as a result, it no longer makes sense to warn against this flaw. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida analyses the structure of time with a view to a line from Hamlet: "The time is out of joint. O cursèd spite, | That ever I was born to set it right!" (Derrida, 1994: 1, 18, 20, etc.; Shakespeare, 1998, Act 1, Scene 5, 196-197). Paradoxically, the

essential corruptibility of all things becomes the condition for anything desirable. So far, Derrida would still be on board. In 'Force of Law', he makes the same argument for the love of ruins (Derrida, 2002: 278). Yet, this does not 'unambiguously' make Derrida a thinker who is "essentially egalitarian, atheistic and profane" (O'Connor, 2010: 1). The *fact* that Derrida finds and appreciates these philosophical paradoxes in philosophy, and in life itself, does not equate with an appreciation of these paradoxes as literally straightforward. Where in Häggglund's and O'Connor's books 'spacing' or *différance* are thought of as the ultimate principles of reality, I think they may be understood better as mechanisms or reflexes that ceaselessly defy positivist philosophical decrees. This understanding could be better because it fits the various ways in which Derrida phrased these non-concepts: not as laws or sufficient conditions for being, but as quasi-transcendental conditions – conditional to being and ending.

Often Derrida explains the *problematic* of the auto-immune situation.<sup>1</sup> The problematic is interesting only with a view to the possibility of its solution. To understand the problematic in a rigid way à la Häggglund or O'Connor could empty Derrida's work of its promise and hope. This is why I fear that O'Connor's concentration on the ontological implications of Derrida's work eclipses the imperative to thought within it. To get a glimpse of how the problematic could be confronted otherwise, we might follow O'Connor's suggestion and turn to Giorgio Agamben's work (O'Connor, 2010: 81): "The world – in so far as it is absolutely, irreparably profane – is God" (Agamben, 1993: 89-90). Agamben's examination of the 'ban of/from the law' in *Homo Sacer* as "*Being in force without significance*" actually takes its cue partly from Derrida's 'Before the Law' (Agamben, 1998: 51). Importantly, however, it does not resign itself to Derrida's analysis but instead prepares us for what comes next: the next step in thought, which can very well be understood as part of a reception of Derrida's work, since this work has no absolute existence either. Profanation, then, is in the critical reception that revitalizes the work. Following the logic of auto-immunity, I would recommend Derrida as the subject, rather than the master, of profanity.

To conclude, I turn to more logistical matters, namely, with a word on the book's style of presentation. Within this volume, errors in spelling and grammar, as well as significant editorial mishaps, are so abundant that to read it can be hard work. From the first fifty pages alone: "The term environment is [a] more useful way of reading 'world' here" (O'Connor, 2010: 13); "The *noema* is not the object itself [. . .] then the *nomea* [sic] implies the unity [. . .]" (ibid.: 17); "What it [sic] is critical to realize here is [. . .]" (ibid.: 21); "If phenomenology is conceived of [as] an infinite task [. . .]" (ibid.: 23).

Moreover, there are misquotations, like this one from *Writing and Difference*, which introduces another typographical error as well: “The trace can *only* be a trace *only* if its presence is [. . .]” (ibid.: 47, my emphasis), instead of: “This latter is a trace only if presence is [. . .]” (Derrida, 2001: 336). The reason I emphasize this problem is that philosophy texts are difficult enough as it is, and, as such, publishers should make an effort to present them in a clear and comprehensible form, especially as they expect people to pay £65.00 for them.

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Think of, for example, ‘Violence and Metaphysics’: “That philosophy died yesterday, since Hegel or Marx, Nietzsche, or Heidegger – and philosophy should still wander towards the meaning of its death – or that it has always lived knowing itself to be dying” (Derrida, 2001: 97); ‘Before the Law’: “My only ambition, therefore, without offering an answer, will be to focus, at the risk of deforming, the double question [. . .] and to summon before the law the utterance itself of this double question” (Derrida, 1992: 188); or the aforementioned analysis of Husserlian phenomenology, which insists on the contradiction as a problem.

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*The Cultural Politics of Analytic Philosophy:  
Britishness and the Spectre of Europe*

by Thomas L. Akehurst

London: Continuum, 2010, hbk £65.00 (ISBN: 978-1-84706-450-9), 224pp.

by Lorna Finlayson

Akehurst's *Cultural Politics* offers a skilfully constructed, illuminating and much needed historical study of the attitudes of British analytic philosophers towards the styles of thought associated with their 'continental' counterparts – a term dating from the aftermath of World War II.

Much of the book is taken up with Akehurst's effort to establish and depict the character of those attitudes. For analytic philosophers in the period from around 1930 to around 1960, what they regarded as the German tradition of thought was philosophically bankrupt: obscure, pretentious, wild, an emotional 'revolt against reason'. This in itself does not come as much of a shock, and nor does the analysts' contrasting portrayal of themselves as upholding intellectual standards. But the extremeness and, frequently, the sheer crudeness of these attitudes have the power to surprise. Some of the statements documented are not nearly as well known as their quotability, vehemence, and, in many cases, comic value might lead us to expect. Akehurst's own take on the neglect of this area of cultural history is that it stems from the general ahistorical approach of the analytic tradition. No doubt this is an important part of the story: the analysts do not attach much importance to history, even their own, and Akehurst points out that, to the extent that they *are* concerned with it, they tend to tell a delusional story of steady cumulative progress-with-the-occasional-setback occurring in a rarefied academic realm that is somehow 'hermetically sealed off' from the world at large. But it is equally well worth noting that some not 'strictly' philosophical facts about analytic philosophers *are* quite well canvassed. These are the anecdotes that lend themselves to a more affectionate portrayal of the analysts, emphasising endearing quirks or heroic endeavours: Russell is known for the pipe, the activism and imprisonment, not the residual racism. As Akehurst argues later on, history *is* important to the analysts, for their construction of an identity for themselves. In the present case, history appears to be subordinated to public relations and self-flattery.

If there is a criticism to be made here, it is that Akehurst devotes proportionally too much space to this admittedly worthwhile project of establishing the analysts' attitudes during the period in question, at the cost

of further developing some of the lines of criticism of which his exposition is suggestive. Perhaps as a result of a slightly excessive concern to speak to as many readers as possible, the book goes out of its way to emphasise the modesty of its commitments, and continually revisits many examples and quotations, explaining and paraphrasing in some cases where the original already seems quite straightforward. The cost of this slight over-defensiveness is that it leaves Akehurst too little room to develop the critical force of what are in my view his two most interesting findings. The first of these, I suggest, is the intermingling of philosophical, personal, cultural and political judgements exhibited by what Akehurst dubs the analysts' 'critique of the anti-canon'. This critique, he argues, flits between (i) the condemnation of the intellectual values and practices of 'continental' philosophers; (ii) the attribution to those philosophers of deplorable traits of personal character; (iii) the affirmation of negative stereotypes of foreigners, and of Germans in particular; (iv) the attribution to continental philosophers of totalitarian or proto-totalitarian *political* attitudes; and (v) the identification of a link – often a causal one – between continental philosophy and the actual rise of totalitarian regimes. The second point is that in addition to the mingling of these elements *within* the critique, that critique as a whole turns out to be importantly caught up in the wider historical and political context in which it was made – in particular, the two world wars. Akehurst describes, for example, the dramatic turnaround in prevailing attitudes towards German scholarship (and towards the British idealist tradition that was associated with it) after the beginning of the First World War, and the cementing of the new, hostile attitude after World War II.

These points are particularly interesting in connection with Akehurst's own nascent critique of the critique he attributes to the analysts. Throughout the book, Akehurst implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) takes the line that there is something not merely noteworthy but *disreputable* about the analysts' attitudes. The exact nature of his dissatisfaction though is less clear. One strand of it seems to consist in an internal critique along the following lines: the analysts' critique fails to live up to their own tradition's philosophical standards (e.g. in that it makes wild, lightly supported claims, and fails to separate either itself from the political, or the political from other elements within its critique of the anti-canon; these sit badly with its own emphasis on what it takes to be good 'mental hygiene' and cautious rigour of argument. Furthermore, it often seems as though this critique is not *merely* internal and that Akehurst himself endorses the standards that the analysts boast and betray.

Thus far, Akehurst's criticism appears as a simple injunction to the analysts to clean up their act. This is quite compatible with the view that their critique is insightful and fundamentally 'onto something', even though it may need whipping into shape: once the analytic legwork is done, the evidence carefully marshalled and presented, the result might be a respectable and persuasive attack on 'continental' philosophy. But another strand is detectable in Akehurst's 'critique of the critique', one that emphasises the inadequacy of the analysts' ahistorical approach. Crudely, the idea would be that the at times laughable inadequacy of the analysts' critique of the anti-canon is an indictment of their characteristic ahistoricism. Central to this line is a point that Akehurst emphasises towards the end of the book, namely, that whilst it may be acceptable (or unavoidable) for philosophy to be shaped by its social context, it is unacceptable to be oblivious to this state of affairs – not only because this is a failure of (self-) knowledge, but also because it has a tendency to lead to bad criticism, and bad philosophy in general.

All I wish to point out here is that these two strands of criticism are (a) relatively undeveloped in the book, and (b) at least independent of, and arguably in tension with, one another. To take this second point, the demand for (a particular construal of) 'caution' and 'rigour' in evidence and argument is associated with the *analytic* tradition, whilst the emphasis on the embeddedness of philosophy in a historical context is more readily associated with 'continental' philosophy. This is not to say that there could be no attempt to reconcile the two thoughts, for example, by arguing that what the analytic tradition correctly regards as lapses of standards are sometimes attributable to a blindness to history. But it is not obvious how this would work, since what the analytic tradition in this case defines as 'lapses of standards' will cease to be regarded as such on at least some kinds of 'historicist' approach (e.g. the ideals of separating the 'strictly' philosophical from the political, or of philosophising in a way that is 'hermetically sealed off' from context, might cease to seem coherent let alone desirable). From this point of view, a different defect of the analysts' critique that Akehurst identifies is more to the point: its unselfconscious conformity to the contemporary political and cultural climate.

For those particularly interested in investigating the value of the second, more historicist line of criticism mentioned, it is tempting to say that Akehurst's identification of a "political heart" to the "apparently apolitical movement" (2010: 15) of British analytic philosophy should have been allotted a more central position. If this is a criticism at all, then it is directed toward the book's chosen aims and not to the author's success in achieving these chosen aims. But it might be equally understood as a statement of its

applicability and spur to further thought. Either way, Akehurst's account is valuable both in itself and for the material and stimulus it provides.

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## 'Forms of Domination and Emancipation'

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