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# Modern European Philosophy

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## Abstract

This chapter reviews three of the most consequential works in Modern European Philosophy published in 2017: Étienne Balibar's *Citizen Subject*, Nick Nesbitt's edited volume *The Concept in Crisis*, and William Clare Roberts' *Marx's Inferno*. These works reflect the fact that 2017 witnessed an upsurge of philosophical publications on Marx and Marxism. On one level, this is because 2017 was simultaneously the 150-year anniversary of the publication of the first volume of Marx's *Capital* and the 100-year anniversary of the Russian Revolution. Yet on another, more substantial level, these works point to the enduring question of the meaning of 'Marxist philosophy' in its dual, and disputed relationship to transformative political practice on the one hand, and to the history of philosophy, on the other. There are different threads that tie these works together, but two concepts, coming out of Louis Althusser's work, stand out: those of 'conjuncture' and 'symptomatic reading'. In short, this chapter suggests that the importance of Modern European Philosophy is in large part attributable to the theoretical and political problems that Marxism constitutes for it, problems which, at the same time, Marxism cannot articulate without this philosophy. The chapter is divided into five sections: 1. Introduction; 2. Writing and Conjuncture: *Citizen Subject*; 3. A Symptomatic Reading: *The Concept in Crisis*; 4. A Symptomatic Reading?: *Marx's Inferno*; 5. Conclusion.

## Introduction

2017 represented a series of significant anniversaries within Marxism, most notably the 150-year anniversary of the publication of the first volume of Marx's *Capital*, and the 100-year anniversary of the Russian Revolution. This predictably yielded the publication of a number of articles, special journal issues and books reflecting on the political and theoretical legacies of Marx and Marxism more generally. It also brought to centre stage the intractable question of Marx's contribution to modern European philosophy, revisiting – with renewed vigour – the question of what constitutes the meaning of 'Marxist philosophy' at a time when Marxism is still regarded as lacking the political relevance it once possessed. In this manner, 2017 highlights the fact that the confrontation between Marxism and modern European philosophy remains tethered, perhaps indefinitely, to the dilemmas of legacy and memory.

This chapter takes these anniversaries as an opportunity to pause and reflect on the intersections between philosophy, politics, and memory. Beyond the usual outflow of publications which anniversaries mechanically trigger, the question of the specific, conjunctural actuality of Marxism resonated with particular force last year within the larger constellation of modern European philosophy. A crucial question

that emerges from this is what, in and for philosophy, constitutes a 'legitimate' inheritance, one that does not fall into the trap of commemorative memorialisation? In a recent article on Walter Benjamin as a historian-archivist of the failures of the nineteenth-century revolutions, Rebecca Comay evocatively suggests we invert the famous maxim by René Char ('Our heritage was left to us without a testament'): the problem would no longer be one of deficit, a lack of knowledge and the means to transmit the revolutionary resources of the past. (Comay, 'Testament of the Revolution', p.5) On the contrary, the question today is perhaps marked by a distinct surplus of testament, an excess of material which overwhelms the historical present. From a different angle, Enzo Traverso has recently reflected on 'left-wing melancholia' as the self-perpetuating culture of defeat which colours the emotional response to – and the collective guilt over – the 'failures' of twentieth-century social movements (Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia*, p. 22) Beyond the 'landscape of sorrow' (p. 19) described by Traverso, is there a dialectical possibility of renewal hidden in this history, one which animates new forms of philosophical production and, more speculatively, political action?

This echoes, more than half a century later, some of the questions that the small group of students formed around Althusser raised in their renowned 1965 *Reading Capital*. At its core, *Reading Capital* was an attempt to revitalise what was perceived to be an ossified Marxism, a Marxism whose rich philosophical implications were stifled by the political culture of the French Communist Party (PCF), particularly its relation to Stalin. Their philosophical work to reactualise *Capital* took, from today's perspective, a long but crucial detour. Indeed, it is by inflecting the reading of Marx with the then prominent epistemological concerns stemming from debates around 'structure', 'history' and 'humanism', that Althusser and his students brought out the concept of 'conjuncture', which names the present within the framework of structural causality. To think a conjuncture is to think the complex 'time of times', the specific inadequacy, the non-contemporaneity of the present with itself. (Pippa, 'The necessity of contingency', p. 21) Beyond the questioning of structural causality from which it emerged, the concept of 'conjuncture' continues to hold crucial importance for Marxist philosophy as a whole, as it represents the possibility of thinking the objective articulation of theory and practice. Indeed, insofar as the present can be grasped as an objective totality (of relations of forces), can it become the locus of potential intervention. The paradox of Althusser, Balibar, Establet, Macherey and Rancière's reactualisation of *Capital* is that it is by *thinking* Marx's endeavour in terms of its autochthonous production of an epistemology adequate to its 'object', that the problem of actuality was reassigned to Marxism as a whole. Such a theoretical detour through the structural objectivity of the conjuncture remains pertinent to philosophical readings of Marx which seek to reactualise his thought, whilst avoiding the pitfalls of memorialisation or scholasticism. However, the relationship between politics and philosophy seems to have shifted: whilst Althusser was retrieving a philosophical Marx against the rigidity

of institutional Marxism, it seems that today the task is to reanimate a political Marx over and against the philosophical Marx of the philosophical pantheon.

### **Writing and Conjuncture: *Citizen Subject***

Initially published in French in 2011, Étienne Balibar's recently translated *Citizen Subject. Foundations for Philosophical Anthropology* upholds the principle of a philosophy rooted in the conjuncture, developing this Althusserian legacy into the precept of Balibar's own philosophical practice. As he writes in his Introduction, the concept of conjuncture helps us think the immanence of philosophy to history in a way which does not rely on either 'context', *Zeitgeist* or *épistémè*, but which instead articulates *from within*, textual 'points of heresy', with a given conjuncture:

Philosophy constantly endeavors to untie and retie from the inside the knot between conjuncture and writing [...] I hold, then, that philosophy is never independent of specific conjunctures. It should be clear that I use the word in a qualitative rather than a quantitative sense, stressing by it the very brief or prolonged event of a crisis, a transition, a suspense, a bifurcation, which manifests itself by irreversibility, i.e., in the impossibility of acting and thinking as before... (p. 10)

Balibar pursues an immanent conception of the philosophical text. For him, nothing stands above the dialogic relationship between a text and its reader; 'there is no metalanguage in philosophy' (p. 11). If philosophy only exists in singular texts, it is also bound to specific idioms and tied up with specific conditions of utterance. As such, philosophy cannot disengage itself from a 'procedure of infinite translation' (p. 12) in which it is always already entangled. Disjunctive syntheses and active 'incompletions' (*inachèvements*) bestow a paradoxical unity to the ensemble of texts that compose this volume.

Balibar presents *Citizen Subject* as a field of hypotheses which 'might help to understand the upheavals that modernity has produced in the field of philosophical anthropology' (p. 1). Spanning essays on Descartes, Marx, Hegel, Locke, Rousseau, Freud, Derrida, Blanchot and Tolstoy, the anthology brings together studies written over twenty years. The book is presented as the outcome of a double project: first, to disentangle 'the anthropological question in philosophy' from the question of humanism, to which it has been bound since the aftermath of the 1960s' controversy, starting with Althusser's 'anti-humanist' injunction (p. 16); second, to rethink the relationship between bourgeois universalism and the anthropological question 'at much deeper and more general level than the humanism debate would suggest' (p. 16). This means rethinking the articulation between metaphysical categories and political concepts. As we discover in the course of the book, this also involves a reflection on (social, intersubjective) relationality as articulated by Marx, Feuerbach and Hegel, with an account of the 'irreducible differences implicated within the

construction or institutionalization of any social relation' (p. 16). Therefore, the English subtitle, 'Foundations for Philosophical Anthropology' (the French being *Citoyen-Sujet et autres essais d'anthropologie philosophique*), might betray Balibar's intention, which is not so much that of *founding* philosophical anthropology as a constituted field or 'regulative idea', as it is addressing 'a critical question apropos of the necessary but ambivalent relation that exists between philosophical or sociological concepts and modern politics' (p. 16). This project brings the Marxian articulation of political universality into dialogue with the critical examination of subjectivity in philosophy, but it also seeks to reframe the philosophical genealogy of the 'subject' from the standpoint of the dynamic conflictuality generated by claims to universality. The book thus rethinks two major twentieth-century philosophical controversies in the light of one another: the 1960s' controversy over humanism, on the one hand, and what Balibar calls the new 'querelle of universals' (Balibar, 'A New Querelle'), on the other: the debate around universalism, politics and globalisation that emerged in the 1980s and that has remained pivotal to philosophy and the humanities since.

As Balibar reminds his readers, the opening chapter, 'Citizen Subject' was conceived as a response to Jean-Luc Nancy's question 'Who comes after the subject?', and is an opportunity to glance back at the vexed problematic of the subject *after* and, as it were, at a distance from, the 1960s' and 1970s' 'controversy' of humanism. Rather than calling for the 'death' or 'return' of the subject, Balibar rethinks the subject as the site of a number of antinomies that encapsulate the modern constitution of what he calls 'civic-bourgeois universality'. This means defending a critical genealogy of the subject and its secularization, one that sidesteps the emphasis on predication and substantiality (*subjectus as hypokeimenon*) privileged by Heidegger, to focus mainly on the juridical and political history of sovereignty and its overturns (*subjectus as subditus*). As with his *Equaliberty: Political Essays*, published in 2014, the starting point of Balibar's demonstration is the 1789 'Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen', which crystallizes the impossibility of thinking the newly created category of the 'citizen' without positing a new concept of 'man', in order to justify its peculiar sovereignty. This is what Balibar calls a 'hyperbolic proposition':

What is new is the sovereignty of the citizen, which entails a completely different conception of freedom. But this sovereignty must be founded retroactively on a certain concept of man, or, better, in a *new* concept of man that contradicts what the term previously connoted. (p. 30)

This concept of 'man', supposedly grounding the equality of all subjects, is in turn unintelligible without reference to the idea of the 'citizen', which in this discourse stands for universality itself. Thus, for Balibar, the 1789 Declaration compels us to imagine a paradox, that of 'sovereign equality' (p. 30), a sovereignty inscribed, not in hierarchy, but in equality. Rousseau's social contract can be viewed as resolving this

paradox by creating a further ‘antinomy’, that of a purely *immanent law*: ‘in his capacity as “citizen”, the citizen is (indivisibly) *above* any law [...] In his capacity as “subject” he is necessarily *under* the law [...]’ (p. 33). But this equation of the law remains purely formal, and proves untenable as soon as it appears that ‘governing’ and ‘law-making’ are not, in fact, the same. For Balibar, who here echoes Foucault’s *The Order of Things*, the invention of the ‘citizen’ appears intrinsically related to the unending conflict around the anthropological definitions of man, that is, with what Foucault identified as the structural impossibility of a purely transcendental ‘subject’ or ‘empirico-transcendental doubling’. Indeed, in retrospect, the insight of Foucault was to point to Kant’s *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* as the flipside of the *Critiques*, as one of the most important quandaries of political modernity (Balibar, *Citizen Subject*, p. 300).

The Hegelian articulation between individual and collective subjects occupies the attention of three different essays in this volume. Balibar describes the famous formula of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, ‘Ich, das Wir, une Wir, das Ich ist’ or ‘(this) I that We are, (this) We that I am’ (IWWI) as a ‘centre of gravitation’ (p. 6) of the book. In Chapter 5, he retraces the roots of this Hegelian formula in two ‘models of intersubjectivity’: a theological model of mutual inherence in the Gospel of John (pp. 134-5), and one of immanent association or ‘single-multiple person’ coming from Rousseau’s famous lines on the ‘social pact’ (pp. 136-7). In Chapter 7, ‘*Zur Sache Selbst: The Common and the Universal in Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit*’, Balibar associates IWWI with another of Hegel’s famous formulas, ‘Tun aller und jeder’ (‘the action [or the operation] of all and each’ (p. 7)), which crystallizes the problem of collective praxis in Hegel’s *Phenomenology*. How does Hegel register the specific activity, operation, concrete effectivity, of the collective subject? How shall we grasp the ‘concrete universality’ of what Balibar calls ‘Being in common’ in Hegel, the effectivity of the ‘transindividual’ (pp. 156-7)? Balibar points us towards a middle path between two important post-Hegelian trajectories: a typically Sartrean conception of Hegelian *praxis* and a deconstructive interpretation in the terms of an ‘inoperative community’ (Nancy, Bataille, Blanchot), one that stresses the rift between ‘community’ and ‘work’ (p. 155). Drawing on Jean Hyppolite, Balibar interprets the ‘thing’ (*Sache*) of Hegel’s *Phenomenology* aporetically:

In reality, it seems to me that what Hegel wants to say is that the categories of ‘real’ universality (value, exchange) as well as those of ‘symbolic’ universality (law, equality) *both institute communities* in which the difference between the part and the whole, the individual and the collective is mediated or relativized, and yet always fails to make this community into a living ‘individuality of individualities’ in which consciousness would no longer see anything in its own actions except the inner expression of a being in common conceived as a unique and absolute essence. (p. 167)

In Chapter 4, 'From Sense Certainty to the Law of Genre: Hegel, Benveniste, Derrida', Balibar explores the 'subject' of Hegel's *Phenomenology* from yet another perspective: that of its performative constitution through enunciation. Following Jean-Claude Milner's hypothesis that Émile Benveniste's theory of personal pronouns was directly influenced by his reading of the chapter of the *Phenomenology* on sense certainty, Balibar highlights 'a remarkable element of continuity between a segment of the dialectical tradition – albeit atypical – and structuralism' (p. 113). In this famous chapter, enunciation is the locus of a contradictory experience, 'the fact that each term paradoxically appears to be both absolutely singular and irremediably universal' (p. 109). As Balibar writes, Hegel 'transforms sense certainty into a quasi-subject – or better still, into a subjectless voice traversing all subjects that itself enunciates the paradoxes of uttering the "I", the "Here", and the "Now"' (p. 110). Balibar unravels the theory of the subject contained in Benveniste's theory of the conversion of language (*langue*) into individual discourse. Importantly, Balibar argues that Benveniste's subject is not the individual interlocutor, but the twin, symmetric intercourse of 'I and You'; in other words, Benveniste's subject is already always a *transindividual* subject (p. 114). But whereas Hegel develops enunciation as a model of expropriation of the universal through language, for Benveniste first-person enunciation is structurally underpinned by the appropriation of the totality of language (*langue*). In *Monolingualism of the Other*, Balibar comments, 'Derrida proceeds to reflect upon the demonstrative value of his personal testimony, which exhibits in no uncertain terms the element of dispossession buried within his relation to a mother tongue that is both alienated and alienating' (p. 107). Derrida's reflections on the subject's simultaneous appropriation *and* ex-appropriation of language thus provides a third term between Benveniste and Hegel. In addition to thinking the interface between the philosophy of enunciation and social ontology, Balibar's triangulation sheds new light on Derrida's intervention in linguistic structuralism, especially regarding the link between subject and structure (p. 113).

It is also by relying on a theory of enunciation that Balibar reframes the problematic of universality in modernity. The enunciation of the universal, he explains, can both reveal a contradiction or conflict and manifest a difference; it brings to the fore the intrinsic dynamic of universality itself. This is the theme of the final chapter, 'Bourgeois Universality and Anthropological Differences', in which Balibar throws a retrospective glance at the essays comprising this volume, by providing a re-articulation of the Marxian critique of human rights and the post-Kantian problematic of anthropological difference, a notion that he had already introduced in his *Equaliberty*. By 'anthropological difference', Balibar refers to the antithetical movement, in political modernity, between the invention of the notion of 'citizen' (which repressed differences in the sphere of particularities), and the generalization of human classification in function of their difference. To address this chasm, Marx's own critique of the bourgeois abstraction of human essence, and his transindividual 'ontology of relations', remain profoundly insufficient:

[...] while Marx keeps a decisive critical distance from bourgeois universalism and naturalism, whose essentialist individualism ('possessive' as well as 'reflexive') he denounces, he does not depart from its abstract representation of the human, making 'relation' (*Verhältnis*) into a generic activity that is fundamentally reciprocal and, in this sense, *undifferentiated, even when it is presented as intrinsically conflictual*. (p. 300, emphasis added)

In order to supplement the limitations of Marx's own philosophical anthropology, this concluding chapter goes on to stage the adventures of political universalism as a dialogical and conflictual encounter with its 'missing voices', the voices of the forgotten 'subjects' of political modernity:

In their very singularity (because each voice is, precisely, that of a 'subject' or a *subjectivation* under determinate conditions), these voices demonstrate that the contradiction manifested in exclusions (and voiced by the excluded themselves) is exactly what allows universality to be 'verified' as such, because it prevents it from compromising on its principle and devolving into a more or less accommodating hegemony. Most of all, these voices show that the great 'anthropological differences' (whether it be sex, intelligence, 'race', or – as we will see – abnormality) are never simply a matter of particularity (nor of its defence of celebration in the form of 'particularism', to say nothing of 'communitarianism'). They derive, on the contrary, from a conflict of universalities. (pp. 281-2)

Under the heading of the 'ill-being of the Subject' (*Malêtre du sujet*), Balibar articulates a series of readings which attempt to flesh out the relationship between 'anthropology' and 'difference' dialectically. His deconstructive dialectic nonetheless maintains that the relationship of difference to universality is not one of complementarity, but rather one of conflict and contradiction. Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) and Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin White Masks* (1952) are not speaking 'about difference, but they speak *in* difference (or *out of* difference) of the contradiction that it induces' (p. 286). But apart from these exemplary cases, Balibar also conceptualises anthropological difference on the model of Foucault's works on normality, abnormality and deviancy, as well as Freud's and Butler's works on sexual difference. These anthropological differences, he concludes, are not simply 'constitutive of the human'; rather, 'in their unstable multiplicity [they are] the only site where subjects can exist who raise the question, without preset answer, what it means to regard – or not regard – other subjects (who are also others as subjects) as human, and thus practically to confer on them an equal right to have rights' (p. 301). In this philosophical anthropology moulded within the conjuncture, difference is not opposed to contradiction: on the contrary, it singularises, concretises and thereby bestows upon contradiction its full power (p. 302).

## **A Symptomatic Reading: *The Concept in Crisis***

*The Concept in Crisis: Reading Capital Today* came out of a 2015 conference commemorating the 50-year anniversary of *Reading Capital*. The volume is in large part guided by what Althusser calls a 'symptomatic reading', which, as Robert J.C. Young reminds us in his contribution, is a particularly difficult notion: not only does this term oscillate between epistemological, Freudian and Lacanian connotations, but is also the object of a singular *mise-en-abîme* in the text of *Reading Capital*, where Marx's reading practices and the reading of Marx feed into one another. For it is by attributing the fatherhood of this approach to Marx that Althusser devises his own begotten son. Indeed, when making explicit the implicit problematics produced within the discourse of 'political economy' (particularly those of Adam Smith), Marx 'managed to read the illegible in Smith, by measuring the problematic initially visible in [Smith's] writings against the invisible problematic contained in the paradox of *an answer which does not correspond to any question posed*' (Althusser et al., *Reading Capital*, p. 27). Thus the pivotal importance of Marx's method of symptomatic reading is that it 'establishes the indispensable minimum for the consistent existence of Marxist philosophy' (Althusser et al., *Reading Capital*, p. 33). Whereas the 'Marxist philosophy' of *Reading Capital* was built upon a doubled symptomatic reading (Marx's reading of Smith, Althusser's reading of Marx), the gamble of Nick Nesbitt's *The Concept in Crisis* is that a 'tripled symptomatic reading' opens up new avenues of theoretical production. As Knox Peden states,

we can forgive it its infelicities, or its philological dubiousness. Above all we can concern ourselves less with the possibility that Althusser might be wrong about Marx. [...] But it is worth considering to what extent Althusser, in challenging the place of alienation in Marxist thought, and thereby quite possibly getting something about Marx wrong, may have gotten something else right. (p. 86)

Above all, the book is addressed to an anglophone readership, for whom the reception of Althusser has long been relatively detached from the (still understudied) field of French epistemology. Thus one of the book's aims is to register an ongoing change in the reception of *Reading Capital*, in the light of recent English-language publications around the history of the French epistemological tradition, Spinozism and French rationalism (such as the recent works by Warren Montag, Knox Peden, Peter Hallward, Tom Eyers and others). From 'ideology critique', *Reading Capital* 'is increasingly read', Nesbitt writes, 'as a culminating moment in the twentieth-century French tradition of epistemology that extends from Bachelard, Cavailles, and Albert Lautman to Canguilhem, and Foucault and Althusser' (p. 4).

The first part of the volume focuses on Althusser's conception of method – not so much to thematise his use of a definitive 'symptomatic' or 'structural' method, but rather to expand on his manifold concept of 'reading'. In his contribution, Robert

J.C. Young examines the notion of repression at issue in Althusser's notion of symptomatic reading: what *type* of unconsciousness (*Bewusstlosigkeit*) was Althusser after, exactly? Young argues that Althusser's reading is in fact closer to the workings of processual and productive translation than to a Freudian symptomatology: 'The symptomatic reading [...] is not at all Freudian reading in which symptoms are traced back to their explanatory cause, but a translation of the text forward in terms of the new concepts toward which it was working' (p. 47) Following a similar line, Emily Apter even suggests that we grasp *Reading Capital* as an 'event in the history of translation' (p. 54), drawing on Althusser's analyses of the relationships and gaps between various natural, formal, and diagrammatic languages as many 'translative events'.

In his contribution, "The Althusserian Definition of "Theory"", Alain Badiou travels into the past, reflecting on an unrealised collective project that Althusser, himself and others once envisaged (p. 34). They had planned to write a synthetic, pedagogic book about theory, 'a sort of synthesis of [their] epistemological convictions' (p. 25) around the idea of epistemological rupture and other key ideas. In this hypothetical opus, Badiou would have made a case for clarifying the distinctions between 'concept', 'notion' and 'category', in order to systematize the relationships between science, ideology and philosophy as different genres of discourse. The incomplete materialist epistemology of Althusser would have been at the centre of this project. For Badiou, the critical question posed by Althusserianism is that posed by theory: 'By what mechanism does the process of knowledge, which takes place entirely in thought, produce the cognitive appropriation of the real object, which exists outside thought in the real world' (p. 28)? This question, he claims, must be analysed in light of the effects of Althusser's uncoupling of the dialectical opposition of theory and practice. Indeed, the reduction of theory to 'theoretical practices', its 'adjectivization', means that 'theory' ends up vanishing in its own circulation: 'when you destroy the dialectical relationship, you produce the liberation of a word that is, finally, everywhere' (p. 31). Badiou considers that 'Althusser's project to substitute a unified materialist vision of knowledge is paid for by a sort of adjectivization without limit' (p. 31). Althusser's rejection of the dialectical bind between theory and practice, Badiou concludes, led him to endorse a rather mysterious position between Kant's transcendental schematism and Spinoza's immanent materialism.

Étienne Balibar rereads *Reading Capital* with and against another major Marxist theorist of the early 1960s historical and theoretical conjuncture: Mario Tronti, the leading figure of 'workerism' (*operaismo*) in Italy, a tradition that, against the 'relative autonomy' granted to theory by Althusser, instead stressed the autonomy of politics – specifically the autonomy of working-class struggle – as the true locus of *Capital's* theoretical discovery. Tronti's Marx is thus more straightforwardly 'political' than Althusser's, insofar as 'Tronti's *operaismo* can be considered a rebirth of the "class against class" tactics' (p. 98), situating the traditional arena of class struggle – the factory – as not only the site of the general social antagonism between

labour and capital, but as the contemporary (early 1960s) meaning of 'society' itself. For Balibar, Tronti's 'factory' is 'the ultimate place where [...] political actors and strategies [confront] each other, [...] the place where the *State* qua "monopoly of power" is constituted, where the *Leviathan* is created' (p. 107). In short, the factory is the metonym of capitalism itself; its destruction points to the potential destruction of capitalism itself. The differences between Althusser and Tronti are palpable, and Balibar demonstrates this through their divergent relationships to Lukács and Gramsci. Yet it is ultimately the shared 'points of heresy' between Althusser and Tronti that interests Balibar, because they enable us to identify the 1960s as a distinct political and intellectual conjuncture, one whose theoretical productivity has by no means been exhausted. It is worth recalling, as Balibar states, that 'Althusser's and Tronti's theoretical productions in the early 1960s express the last moment in which communist discourse, combining "theory" and "politics", was produced as such in a creative manner by party intellectuals, provided they gained or imposed some distance with respect to the official elaborations, while remaining attached to the organization' (p. 97). In this way, whether it is their shared strategic decision to feature Marx's analysis of the wage-form, or their commitment to revealing the locations and dislocations of capitalist ideology, the 'affinities' between Althusser and Tronti – which Balibar summarises as 'antihistoricism, antihumanism, antieconomism' (p. 108) – mark the early 1960s as singular conjuncture that attempted to '[bring] together politics and theory and the level of "grand" thinking' (p. 109). Antihistoricism looms largest in Balibar's account, because the rejection of historicism (the rejection of 'vulgar' linear, progressive time as the 'motor of history') is what secures the fact that the 'conjuncture' is, as we stated in the introduction, a complex 'time of times', a historical present that is non-contemporaneous with itself. Echoing Benjamin, this rejection, to which Althusser and Tronti were both committed, not only reveals that the true "objects" for theory are [...] *conjunctures themselves*' (p. 105), but in so doing invigorates the theoretical and political potential of memory itself, releasing it from the suffocating straightjacket of commemoration.

Bruno Bosteels' illuminating chapter, 'Reading *Capital* from the Margins', deserves considerable attention. It proceeds from Althusser's position that the Marxian law of uneven development has no 'exceptions' (it does not 'derive' from any other law) and Balibar's supplemental declaration that this law is thus primordial or 'primitive' (p. 113). Bosteels takes these assertions to raise the question of what happens to the universality of this law when it is resituated in 'other places, other styles, and other practices' (p. 114) than those through which Althusser and Balibar articulate it. The purpose of posing this question, Bosteels asserts, is neither to 'provincialize Althusser', along the lines of Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe*, nor to introduce an 'Althusser at the margins' (p. 115), such that the 'true Althusser' comes to light within the periphery. Rather, the question cuts to the heart of Althusser's thought itself. Bosteels formulates it as follows:

To what extent does the logic of uneven development enable or disable the concrete analysis of other styles and other practices in those other places? Put differently, if we are in fact dealing with a tension, [...] a contradiction, it concerns not an external contrast between the wealth of empirical data in the periphery and the scarcity of conceptual frameworks coming from the centre, but a tension within the conceptual frameworks themselves – regardless of their geopolitical origin or particular site of enunciation. (p. 122)

In other words, there is within Althusser's figuration of uneven development a tension internal to the concept itself, between, on the one hand, its status as a 'universal' or 'primitive' law, without exception, and, on the other hand, its dependence on specific social and historical conditions and thus on what is indeed 'exceptional'. Yet already by *For Marx*, Bosteels shows, 'uneven development' becomes transhistorical and transcendental – replaced by the 'structural invariant' of discrepancy/dislocation (*décalage*) – and therefore shorn of its particular historical and historicising bearings (pp. 123-4, 133). Thus for Althusser, 'primitive internal unevenness' comes to define the 'Marxist' or 'materialist' dialectic as such, insofar as it grounds the relationship between the overdetermined part and complex whole. The effect of this is that Althusser cannot account for the determinate conditions under which the complex structural whole produces what is 'exceptional', which is to say that – ironically – he cannot account for the very exceptions that *enable* this dependency of the exceptional on the invariant in the first place. The importance of the science of historical materialism is therefore thwarted by an insurmountable, a- and de-historicising obstacle (p. 131): the philosophy of the materialist dialectic, or 'dialectical materialism'. In short, Althusser falls on the wrong side of the very divide he created, between philosophy and science, in order to secure Marx's theoretical revolution.

In *Reading Capital*, the primary register of this is the pride of place bestowed to the aforementioned concept of 'discrepancy' or 'dislocation' (*décalage*). After introducing Althusser's understanding of the methodological, structural and historical dimensions of *décalage*, Bosteels contends that *décalage* does not illuminate the complex temporalities that infuse historical change:

For all the insistence on discrepant temporalities as opposed to both the empty homogeneous time of bourgeois historiographies and the linear, teleological or developmentalist time of [...] ideological forms of Marxism, the affirmation of a radical principle of lag, dislocation, or discrepancy [...] does not seem to be any better equipped to address the complex time of history than Althusser's hierarchical subordination of Marx's science of history to a philosophical theory of structural causality. (p. 140)

In sum, the principle of *décalage* simply does not clear up '*the confusion that surrounds the concept of history*', as Althusser famously put it in his essay 'The

Errors of Classical Economics' (Althusser et al., *Reading Capital*, p. 239), which, incidentally, Balibar states is 'perhaps the most enduring philosophical achievement in *Reading Capital* (p. 104). For Bosteels, *décalage* does not adequately address, and in fact it exacerbates, the theoretical problems posed by 'under-' and 'uneven development', even if these categories of historical analysis do not offer the radical alternative that *décalage* does. Nonetheless, the dismissal of these problems leads us a point where 'it [...] seems as though the time of history – like the hour of the finally determining instance of the economy – will never come' (p. 141).

Yet Bosteels looks to Althusser's work itself as a means of addressing the theoretical problems raised by unevenness, which is to say that 'history develops unevenly, according to the different rhythms, times and turnovers of politics, ideology, science, art, philosophy, and so on' (p. 144) What, Bosteels effectively asks, happens if we transpose Marx's 'symptomatic reading', the fact that it 'divulges the undivulged event in the text it reads' (p. 142), to the terrain of history itself? In other words, does the concept of 'symptomatic reading' provide us with a logical model of grasping the 'historical event' as such, insofar as this concept registers an 'irruption of the new within an existing structure' (p. 142) that can be theoretically extended to all the places, styles and practices that are marked by unevenness, by history itself?

Bosteels joins this potential of symptomatic reading, which leads to a concept of the historical event itself, with an analysis of Althusser's contribution to the theory of the subject. Whilst still acknowledging Althusser's commitment to theoretical antihumanism, Bosteels declares that 'the dislocation or discrepancy at the heart of any structure not only depends on the rare event of a structural mutation; such symptomatic appearances of the impasse within a given structure also do not become visible unless there is already a subject at work in doing the impossible, which is to pass through the impasse' (p. 147). The need for a 'minimal *theory of the subject*' (p. 147) – and hence of 'subjection' (*assujettissement*) and 'subjectivization' (*subjectivation*) – cannot be denied, because the *décalage* simply cannot 'appear unless there is an intervening subject at work on [...] the site of an event where the historicity of the situation is symptomatically concentrated' (pp. 148-9). The presence of a subject is hence the condition of attending to the historical problems raised by unevenness while at the same time preserving the rich grasp of historical time that Althusser's reading of Marx provides.

We return now to the other 'places, styles, and practices' with which Bosteels' chapter begins. Responding to recent theories of the subject which seem to issue a 'primitive law' in their own right, 'applicable to any structure whatsoever' (these theories stress the 'constitutive excess' of subjectivity, which is to say they revolve around the notion that 'the subject always exceeds its own determination by the power structures that nonetheless bring it into existence in the first place' [p. 149]), Bosteels implores us to instead undertake a 'twofold historicization' – first of different 'modes of politics', and second of multiple 'theories of the subject' (p. 151) – so as to open our eyes to historical unevenness and the possibilities of rupture it entails. He zeroes in on the tradition of the commune in Latin America and its

confrontation with capitalism, because it raises anew 'the question of the historical emergence of capitalism out of the fortuitous encounter of factors that are themselves not capitalist but that subsequently come to be transcoded and reinscribed [...] as though they had been the result of capital itself' (pp. 152-3). Suggestively, Bosteels transposes and reinscribes this question into the domain of political subjectivity itself, and detects a resemblance between this feature of capitalism and our understanding of modern subjectivity. As he articulates it: 'the notion according to which a subject, though *determined* by circumstances that are not of its own making, can simultaneously *transform* both itself and its own circumstances, offers an uncanny replica of the loop whereby capital seems to posit the effective presuppositions of its own becoming, as though they were the products of its own doing' (p. 153). In short, does the concept of the subject – particularly the 'transformative' or 'revolutionary' modern subject – reproduce the very ahistorical and transcendental ruse of capitalism itself? If this is the case, how can we possibly think a 'subject' capable of overcoming capitalism, one that does not simply reproduce the conditions of its own becoming and intelligibility? The speculative answer, according to Bosteels, is sustained attention to the 'breaks' between modern and premodern, and therefore capitalist and precapitalist, economic and social formations. The theory of the subject 'cannot afford to obliterate the historical markers that might separate, for instance, a Christian from a pre-Christian understanding of the self, or a capitalist from a pre-capitalist understanding of human speech and thought' (p. 154). To put this another way: the revolutionary potential of the commune as a political subject is not realised by its modern forms (e.g., Paris, Chiapas) alone. Our memory of these forms must be doubled with the memory of their premodern antecedents. After José Carlos Mariátegui, this appeal to recollect an 'archaic' communal order is in no way a romantic desire for the recovery of a premodern utopia. Rather, it is an attempt to affect an intellectual, if not actual, conjuncture whose discordant temporalities cannot be re-presented by capitalism as products of its own doing.

Each in their own way, Warren Montag, Adrian Johnston, Nick Nesbitt and Fernanda Navarro provide us with a symptomatic reading of *Reading Capital* itself: Montag with his reading of Lacan as the primary interlocutor who guided the place of 'absence' in Althusser's 'structural causality', Johnston with his revisitation of Althusser's famous and controversial notion of Marx's 'epistemological break' (the purported 'rupture' in Marx's work in 1845, represented by *The German Ideology*), Nesbitt with his analysis of the 'symptomatic status' of Marx's concept of 'value' in *Reading Capital*, and Navarro with her reflection on the political reverberations of Althusser's work (namely in the Zapatista movement in Chiapas). Finally, Nina Power's short chapter on the relationship between the theory of reading (symptomatic reading) offered by *Reading Capital* and the social reproduction of capitalism is particularly noteworthy: it raises new and thought-provoking questions for 'social reproduction theory', the interpretive framework of some of the most innovative scholarship in both Marxism and feminism today.

## **A Symptomatic Reading?: *Marx's Inferno***

We finish with William Clare Roberts' *Marx's Inferno: The Political Theory of Capital*, one of the most consequential works on Marx that appeared in 2017. It not only won the Deutscher Memorial Prize (the single significant English-language book prize for works in the Marxist tradition), but triggered a series of thoughtful exchanges, in the magazine *Jacobin*, between Roberts, on the one hand, and prominent Marx scholars David Harvey and Peter Hallward, on the other. It must be stated upfront that, unlike *The Concept in Crisis*, *Marx's Inferno* is not presented as a 'symptomatic reading' of *Capital*. Indeed, it situates itself (p. 13) against the symptomatic reading offered by *Reading Capital*, not because it rejects this concept of reading as such, but because it endeavours to displace classical political economy (Smith and Ricardo) and philosophy (Hegel) as the exclusive objects of this reading. It does this because, for Roberts, *Capital* is first and foremost a work of *political theory*: the key interlocutors that catalysed Marx's 'theoretical revolution' are not Smith, Ricardo or Hegel, but the patriarchs of nineteenth-century socialist discourse, figures whose writings animated and were animated by the contemporary workers' movements in France and Britain: Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Charles Fourier, Henri de Saint-Simon, and Robert Owen. 'I am convinced that Marx's *Capital* is one of the great works of political theory,' Roberts declares, because it 'identifies and analyses an interrelated set of political problems that are either invisible to or wished away by virtually every other book in the canon of great works' (p. 6). In this regard, if, as we stated in the introduction, one task of the contemporary conjuncture is to reanimate a political, not a philosophical, Marx, Roberts doubles down on this: *Marx's Inferno* not only insists that *Capital* is fundamentally a 'political document' (p. 51), but that its status as a 'great work', and thus its relevance to the historical present, is only secured by this politicality.

Provocatively, Roberts maintains that the structural inspiration (p. 20) for Marx's *Capital* is another 'great work', here of literature: Dante's *Inferno* (the first part of his epic poem *Divine Comedy*). This does more than lend *Marx's Inferno* its catchy title. It constitutes one of the two overriding arguments of the book: *Capital* was Marx's self-conscious attempt to rewrite Dante's *Inferno* 'as a descent into the modern "social Hell" of the capitalist mode of production', whereby Marx 'cast himself as a Virgil for the proletariat, guiding his readers through the lower recesses of the capitalist economic order in order that they might learn not only how this "infernal machine" works, but also what traps to avoid in their efforts to construct a new world' (pp. 1-2). Consistently exercising a degree of caution and conjecture, Roberts states that 'Marx could have modelled *Capital* on the *Inferno*' (p. 24), that 'Marx might [...] have borrowed the plot of Dante's *Inferno* in order to supply himself with an order for his exposition in *Capital*' (p. 32), and that *Capital* is a 'recapitulation of Dante's *Inferno*' (p. 136) and an 'appropriation of Dante's schema' (p. 228). In Chapter 2, Roberts proceeds to argue and even diagram that the order

and content of the chapters in *Capital* can be directly mapped onto the circles of hell (and thus cantos) in the *Inferno*, such that the famous opening three chapters in *Capital*, on commodity exchange and money, correspond to Upper Hell (the sins of incontinence) in the *Inferno*, those on capital in general and consequently exploitation correspond to Dis (the sins of violence), those on transformations within the production-process and accumulation to Malebolge (the sins of fraud), and finally the chapters on the 'primitive accumulation' of capital functioning as the self-reflexive rewriting of Cocytus (the sins of treachery).

Despite this interpretive creativity, Roberts does not adequately substantiate his case for this structural homology (the limits of this reading have been raised in the multiple reviews, to date, of *Marx's Inferno*): the evidence is clearly circumstantial, and comes at the expense of downplaying, if not omitting, other essential aspects of *Capital*. Yet even as this detracts from the overall persuasiveness of the book, it does not prevent us from highlighting its other substantial argument, namely that *Capital* is foremost a sustained critical confrontation with the theoretical stances and political aspirations of actually existing socialisms in the nineteenth century, that '*Capital* is best read as a critical reconstruction of and rejoinder to the other versions of socialism and popular radicalism that predominated in France and England in the 1860s and 1870s, when Marx was composing his magnum opus' (p. 2). Much more than the parallel reading of Marx and Dante, this is the real contribution of *Marx's Inferno*.

In Chapter 3, Roberts appropriates the place of *Akrasia* (incontinence, lack of self-control and self-mastery, etc.) in Dante and transposes this to the 'anarchic' experience of everyday capitalist societies: the first three chapters of *Capital* are Marx's attempt to reframe, qualify, and extend the idea that market-based societies cause people 'to behave in an *akratic* manner' (p. 57). Marx's innovation in these chapters is his critical relocation of the source of *Akrasia* from individuals (the moralising discourses yoked to *Akrasia* by Dante and early socialist writers alike) to the impersonal domination of the market itself, of which individuals are merely the bearers or personifications. This is the basis for Marx's rendition of money and value as generalised social domination against the Owenites and Proudhon, who hold out hope that exchange relations can be freed from money, and thus that commerce can be 'reformed' (p. 80). It is the basis of Marx's concept of commodity fetishism, which Roberts demonstrates to be a locus of social domination, and thus a structural cause of *Akrasia*.

Chapters 4 and 5 restage Dante's sins of violence (Dis) and fraud (Malebolge) within the terms of Marx's analysis of the production-process of capital and transformations that this process entails. Roberts' overriding concern is to illustrate, first, how Marx's analysis of capitalist exploitation sets him off from the socialists Saint-Simon (who linked the exploitation of human beings to a transhistorical 'failure of the strong to protect the weak, and with a consequent rule of force' [p. 110]) and Proudhon (who understood exploitation as a remnant of feudalism, grounded in landed property). Against this, Marx's theorisation of exploitation is historically

specific to capitalism: like the market, it is impersonal, it harnesses the productive powers of the human bodies in an unprecedented manner, and it is fuelled by an endless need for surplus labour. All of this presents a new mechanism of fraud, one that takes Proudhon's positive portrayal of cooperation and association and redirects it towards a 'threefold fraud inherent in the historical development' (p. 164) of capitalism, a fraud that destroys workers' lives as much as it develops their productive powers, and that is simultaneously expressed and hidden by the wage-form. The destruction wrought by this fraud is palpable, but it is also 'the development of the material conditions of communism, for the simple reason that capitalism gives to the laboring classes a powerful motive to cooperate in the construction of a new society' (p. 171). In this sense, 'the most important material condition of communism is the subjectively felt need for a new form of cooperative production' (p. 184), which resonates, but ultimately departs from, Proudhon's vision of emancipated society founded on reciprocity and mutuality.

Roberts brings his reading of *Capital* to a close with the declaration that the chapters on 'primitive accumulation' are 'Marx's attempt to conclude his argument against Proudhonism and similar forms of moralism within socialism' (p. 189). Amongst other things, Roberts maintains that these chapters are driven by Marx's desire to counter the 'working-class separatism of the cooperative and mutualist movements' (p. 190) widely espoused by Owenites such as William Thompson and social radicals like Bronterre O'Brien (p. 191). In short, Roberts says, 'their fantasy of independence is wholly internal to the Hell they seek to escape' (p. 192). The point is not to enable labour to create capital of its own, but to exit from capital and the political forms (i.e., states) that faithfully serve it (this is analogous to the passage through and out of the treachery of Cocytus).

Underlying this chapter on primitive accumulation, indeed *Marx's Inferno* as a whole, is what Roberts calls Marx's 'obstetric conception of politics' (p. 230), a concept of politics that is grounded by Marx's well-known conviction that 'new higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions of their existence have matured in the womb of the old society itself' (p. 230). The question at hand is, of course, communism, not the Leninist one of how to get there, but the 'prescriptive account of what communism ought to look like' (p. 230). At this point Roberts paints his overarching picture of Marx's political theory:

The terms in which [Marx] criticizes capitalism reveal the principles according to which communist institutions would have to be [...] constructed and judged. Although Marx is widely read as a proponent of self-determination or autonomy, his diagnoses of capitalism's evils consistently point out forms of domination, not heteronomy. Hence, I read Marx as radicalizing the republican tradition for which freedom as non-domination is the highest virtue of institutions. Since Marx identifies novel forms of domination, his republic of labor looks unlike the republics advocated by others. However, it is supposed by Marx to be consistent with the federation

of communist republics advocated by Robert Owen's later works. I argue, therefore, that Marx should be appreciated both as a radical republican and an (admittedly heterodox) Owenite communist. (pp. 230-1)

There is a great deal to unpack, even question, here, but the most essential task is to expand on Roberts' view that Marx's political theory is at heart a *republican* political theory, albeit one that significantly radicalises this tradition. The origin of this reading is Roberts' use of what in political science is today known as 'neo-republicanism' (or more specifically 'neo-Roman republicanism'). Roberts is particularly guided by the theoretical works of Quentin Skinner and Philip Pettit, whose 'explication of republican freedom as non-domination tracks much more closely the range and types of Marx's concerns than does the more traditional attribution to Marx of a positive conception of freedom as collective self-realisation or collective self-mastery' (p. 7). Neo-republicanism is *not* the republicanism that is usually associated with the French revolutionary tradition (Jacobinism, Blanquism, etc.), and that is generally linked to Marx. Roberts' neo-republicanism significantly downplays both individual and collective self-actualisation: freedom as defined by self-conscious, rational acts, and hence social relations as products of individual and collective wills. This is the conception of 'freedom' from which Roberts explicitly dissociates Marx (p. 248), because for Roberts it leads, amongst other things, to so-called 'cook shops of the future' (p. 238), prescriptive accounts that dictate 'what is to be done' in post-capitalist societies. Marx, Roberts contends, is wary of these, and thus restricts his conception of freedom to non-domination: the solutions that any given emancipated association of laborers offers to their particular problems is up to them, not us, to decide; these solutions 'will have to emerge out of the context of the problems themselves, and the institutions of freely associated people are their own affair, *provided that no one is dominated*' (p. 238). Thus this is not the republicanism with which we are generally familiar – it is not a discourse on the virtues of citizenship (p. 242) – but rather one whose conditions capitalism only, albeit already, carries in its womb: 'the institution of a global republic, or global federation of republics [...] [that] [...] would expand freedom to cover the whole breadth of depth of social life' (p. 242). For these reasons, Roberts argues that Marx's political theory is guided by a critical appropriation of Robert Owen's political writings, and that this is the heart of Marx's 'self-conceived relation to the utopian socialist tradition' (p. 244). Above all else, Owen's vision of large-scale cooperative production as the condition of human emancipation inspires Marx's 'republic of labor', a republic that is not free of 'debate, deliberation, and disagreement' (p. 253) – there *will* be politics – but that is nonetheless grounded by an association of free producers. This, in sum, is Marx's 'republicanism in the realm of production' (p. 251). It is the political-theoretical basis of *Capital*.

## **Conclusion**

By way of a conclusion, it is worth raising the point that, like *Reading Capital, Marx's Inferno* constitutes a 'symptomatic reading of Marx': its explicit rendition of *Capital* as a singular work of political theory, modelled, moreover, on Dante's *Inferno*, provides in its own way 'an answer which does not correspond to any question posed'. At another but related level, the publication of this book in 2017, 150 years after the first publication of *Capital*, is no coincidence. Roberts never references the anniversary, but the fact is that it amplifies, if not underlies, his claim that 'in order to be properly appreciated, Marx's *Capital* must be recovered as a work of political theory, written in a specific political context, but seeking also to say something of lasting importance about the challenges to – and possibilities for – freedom in the modern world' (p. 1). In this sense, anniversaries function as seemingly inexhaustible wells of political desire for recovery. Yet if 2017 taught us anything, it is that the relationship between Marxism and modern European philosophy is constantly and necessarily open. Beyond the anniversary, the eternal return of 'Marxist philosophy' points to a persistent challenge for modern European philosophy: that of, for each generation, devising new paths to reactivate the critical kernel of Marx's work.

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