

# Blanqui's bifurcations

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Auguste Blanqui's *Eternity by the Stars* (1872) is perhaps the only text, across the scattered fragments of his oeuvre, that poses a genuine problem of interpretation.<sup>1</sup> How could this ultra-voluntarist revolutionary come to embrace a vision of the cosmos based on endless repetition and the eternal recycling of monotonous variation? Blanqui committed his life to the idea that deliberate political intervention by a small group of activists can change the course of history; how, then, should we understand his defence, towards the end of his life, of an 'astronomical hypothesis' that appears to empty historical sequence of all meaning and direction? Is Walter Benjamin, still Blanqui's most influential interlocutor, right to suggest that this late text is best read as an expression of despair and submission, the final surrender of a heroic but exhausted figure?

If we put *Eternity* to one side for a moment, one of the most striking things about the broad trajectory of Blanqui's political thought, from his first involvement in student protests in the 1820s to his final polemics against religious mystification and bureaucratic militarization in the late 1870s, must surely be its internal consistency. From his experience in and after the street battles that overthrew the Restoration monarchy in July 1830, Blanqui drew three lessons that were to guide the rest of his long political career, across all of its many interruptions.

First and foremost, Blanqui learned that when concentrated in a large city like Paris people already have all the power they need, if they choose to exercise it, to challenge an unjust government and overcome its forces of repression. This power endures even when it might seem, to detached or hostile observers, in the absence of its exercise, that the people have become indifferent or resigned. Here the unexpected triumph of July 1830 anticipates the equally unexpected insurrections of February 1848 and March 1871. However it comes to pass, forceful popular mobilization can immediately herald the 'advent of socialism'. 'In the presence of armed proletarians, all obstacles, resistances and impossibilities will disappear',<sup>2</sup> for revolutionary change stages an abrupt and dramatic redistribution of 'fear and hope'.<sup>3</sup>

Second, the unjust societies in which we live are organized at all levels in such a way as to ensure that the exercise of popular power remains exceptional at best and forgotten at worst. So long as people are discouraged from choosing the path of freedom and insurrection, they will need encouragement from a committed and reliable vanguard. Blanqui thought that if you can solve the problems posed by organizing and preserving such a vanguard, then you can trust its capacity to lead a popular insurrection to the threshold of political power, the power that can subsequently transform society as a whole.

Blanqui's third lesson follows from the temporality at work in such social transformation. Social change takes time, and as things stand people have been socialized in ways that nurture deep-seated deference and credulity. However unjust or irrational, what is established solicits respect, simply because it is successfully established. In the relatively short but decisive time that it takes to establish an alternative, revolutionary leaders must both guard against counter-revolutionary betrayal (as occurred following the insurrections of 1830, 1848 and 1870–71) and protect the people from further miseducation at the hands of those who deceive and exploit them (as must occur in every pre-communist society).

Reference to these three basic principles may be enough to explain the salient features of Blanqui's political life: his rejection of all established forms of power; his dogged persistence, after repeated failures, death sentences and prison terms, in conspiratorial politics; his contempt for the post-revolutionary traitors who abused the people's trust; his emphasis on popular education as the essential basis for a future communist society; his hatred of the Church and of all religious ideology as the quintessential form of miseducation; his valorization of Paris as the leading edge of the nation as a whole; his admiration for the Hébertiste faction of the first French Revolution; his privileging of political and moral principles over economic structures, and so on.

However it might be interpreted – and however routine its dismissal or condemnation – Blanqui's conception of politics appears broadly coherent, and

seems to fit smoothly with his broader philosophical assumptions about freedom, volition and necessity. Blanqui tends to embrace a form of dualism, distinguishing between a law-bound sphere of nature on the one hand and human capacities of thought and freedom on the other. At the anthropological level, rather than ‘manual dexterity it is ideas alone that make people what they are. The instrument that frees us is not our arm but our brain, and the brain lives only through education’ and the cultivated *activity* of thought.<sup>4</sup> ‘Mankind is thought, and without thought man is nothing; what remains is only misery and confusion.’<sup>5</sup> Blanqui insists on this point: ‘Thought is our unique strength’, and ‘we must devote our lives to developing and broadening it.’<sup>6</sup> By extension, and as if to invert the priorities of Marxian historical materialism, Blanqui believes that ‘philosophy rules the world’<sup>7</sup> and that ‘the life of a people is not in works of its hands but in what it thinks; material life is only the reflection of its thought, and as soon as it takes the lead and the servant becomes the master, it marks the beginning of the end.’<sup>8</sup> The material laws of nature, as elucidated by science, do not then apply directly to the sphere of human action and social relation, and any attempt to treat the latter in terms of ‘neutral’ scientific norms violates its object. ‘Justice is the sole criterion in the application of human things.’<sup>9</sup>

Blanqui’s dualism, however, is far from absolute, and it involves no appeal to something like Kant’s noumenal or extra-natural dimension. Like Rousseau before him, Blanqui rejects any spiritualist or religious appeal to an abstract, metaphysical notion of a disembodied *libre arbitre* or ‘free whim’ – a ‘fantasy’ that serves only to assign misplaced moral blame to the victims of social disadvantage. Blanqui’s notebooks of the late 1860s dwell at length on the ‘reciprocal action of the brain on thought and of thought on the brain.’<sup>10</sup> The exercise of actual thinking, Blanqui speculates, is both a material, cerebral process and a socialized capacity that can be more or less educated or trained, and thus more or less stifled by repression and ideological manipulation.<sup>11</sup> In keeping with his Enlightenment-inspired materialism, Blanqui seeks ‘to prove that a man is nobody’s puppet’, and that while his character and actions may ‘depend on the configuration of his brain’, he also retains ‘the power to act on and affect the organ [the brain], to improve it continually – and this perfectibility is indeed the peculiar character of the species.’<sup>12</sup>

If *la volonté du peuple* is not to be confused with the complacent fantasy of an indeterminate *libre*

*arbitre*, still less is it to be conflated with any sort of natural necessity, cultural destiny or historical ‘fate’. There is no contradiction between Blanqui’s early recognition that ‘you must never blame anyone other than yourself, there is neither chance nor fatality in life’,<sup>13</sup> and his later emphasis on mutual association and solidarity. As soon as Blanqui became involved in politics, he began to see that ‘once people begin to assist each other, they will find in their union a weapon against the fatalities that rule the world’, and he quickly came to recognize that the only consistent way of establishing communist forms of association must be through a social process that allows each individual to choose them, of their own ‘full and free will’.<sup>14</sup> Early and late, Blanqui assumes as a matter of course that government must be ‘of the people and by the people’, that laws should be ‘nothing other than the expression of the general will’,<sup>15</sup> and that the only legitimate form of political organization is one that ‘expresses the enlightened will of the nation’s vast majority’.<sup>16</sup> By the same token, when it comes to suppressing the ‘depredations of capital’ and enhancing the well-being and education of this majority, as Blanqui will note with disarming sincerity in an 1870 note on ‘the course we should take’, we should remember first and foremost that the task may be ‘easier than we think. All we need is good will – for it is ill will that we have encountered thus far, be it out in the open or in hiding’.<sup>17</sup> Our essential political questions are thus decided, as Blanqui puts it in a widely circulated letter to his friend Maillard in 1852, through deliberate affiliation and voluntary commitment, and what one wills and does trumps what one is or has been: your background may have pushed you in the direction of one class rather than another but your actual political affiliation remains a matter of choice and will, and ‘thank god there are many bourgeois who have joined the proletarian camp’, where they actively ‘seek real equality between citizens’ and the revolutionary ‘destruction of the existing order, founded on inequality and exploitation’.<sup>18</sup>

Blanqui’s ‘classical’ or anti-romantic voluntarism has been widely and rightly acknowledged,<sup>19</sup> and it is what underlies another of his abiding obsessions in the years immediately preceding the drafting of *Eternity by the Stars* – his polemic against Comte and Comtean positivism. Blanqui is everywhere opposed to any determinist account that might justify, on either religious or pseudo-scientific grounds, ‘the doctrine of the fatality of social suffering’,<sup>20</sup> and he singles out positivism as the most pernicious contemporary form of fatalism. There can be no defence for

those who try to argue that people who happen to be poor were on natural or historical grounds somehow destined for a life of deprivation and submission. If Comte and his followers came to serve as the quasi-official philosophers of restoration and empire, it's because they invented a suitably 'modern' way of celebrating what is established on account of its mere establishment. They embrace what has come to be simply because it prevailed over all that might have been.

From the positivist perspective, 'everything that takes place is good for the mere reason that it takes place', and 'since things have taken place this way, it seems that they could not have happened any other way. The *fait accompli* has an irresistible power. It is destiny itself. The mind is overwhelmed by it, and dares not revolt against it.'<sup>21</sup> Blanqui rages against these 'fatalists of history', these 'neo-religious thinkers, these worshippers of success, who accept and acclaim as progress every event, simply because it is an event, simply because it represents a step taken by humanity under way.' He goes on to mock their position in terms we should bear in mind when reading his tract on eternity:

They think humanity progresses, simply because the world turns, because generations of people succeed one another, because the day before is not the day after, and the day after is more recent than the day before.<sup>22</sup>

By this logic, in keeping with previous forms of theodicy, the positivists find a way to justify 'each atrocity of the victors' of history, coldly converting their every act of violence and oppression into a seamless, 'rule-bound and ineluctable evolution, modelled on the evolution of nature'. As with other natural processes, they acknowledge this evolution without reference to any moral or political 'criterion that might distinguish the good from bad'.<sup>23</sup> The upshot is abject surrender to the status quo, and an 'immoral' and 'criminal' glorification of the historical process that led up to it.<sup>24</sup>

As Blanqui's stubborn commitment to planned insurrection suggests, there is no conception of history that he opposes more strenuously than one which affirms the immanent necessity of a continuous process, advancing with the inexorable force of law-bound motion. 'The activities of a professional conspirator like Blanqui', as Benjamin observed, 'certainly do not presuppose any belief in progress – they merely presuppose a determination to do away with present injustice'.<sup>25</sup> Confronted with an

accomplished fact, Blanqui concedes with heavy irony that it's always possible to argue that 'everything is fated or fatal [*fatal*], if you will. It's enough for a fact to be accomplished for it to be declared fatal. On this score, everything that happens was fatal and should have happened, since it did happen.'<sup>26</sup> Blanqui's whole effort, however, is to insist that what thus happened, and what in its wake may for the time being still tend to happen, provides neither guide nor criteria for what should and what actually *will* happen.

So far so clear. Then along comes French surrender to Prussia in the autumn of 1870, followed by the Paris Commune, a further term of seaside imprisonment for Blanqui, and the publication of the strange little book that is *Eternity by the Stars*. As Benjamin observed when he first stumbled across *Eternity* in late 1937, its opening pages are 'banal', and the text, written 'completely without irony', does little to conceal the limitations of its self-taught author.<sup>27</sup> Compared to his journalism, political tracts and clandestine texts on urban warfare, Blanqui's *Eternity* certainly marks a startling shift in perspective, one that its readers have often tried to explain with reference to the circumstances of its composition. Written over the course of 1871 with minimal access to library materials, in conditions of absolute isolation, cut off from any knowledge of or influence over the tumultuous events taking place in Paris, *Eternity* posits a vision of the cosmos that might seem to reduce the domain of human freedom and political will to trivial irrelevance. The universe is now as it 'already was, and so it will always be, without an atom or second of variation. There's nothing new under the sun. All that's done is done, and will be done. ... Men of the nineteenth century, the hour of our appearances is forever fixed, and it will always bring us back the same' as before (EA, 378/55, 381/57). Most damning of all, it appears to mark a retreat, or at least some uncertainty, with respect to fate and fatalism: 'One can take things by chance or choice, it doesn't really matter, but no one slips away from fatality' (364/43).

### **The astronomical hypothesis**

The astronomical hypothesis proposed in *Eternity by the Stars* is easily summarized. Blanqui's point of departure is to affirm the universe as 'infinite in time and space: eternal, boundless, and indivisible'.<sup>28</sup> The whole of what follows depends on the vertiginous implications that Blanqui draws from this first assertion, and his quintessentially pre-Cantorian presumption that infinity is non-denumerable, 'indefinable' and 'incomprehensible' (EA, 319/4). Every finite

existence, every limited duration or extension, be it that of an entire galaxy or a single human life, can figure as nothing more than a vanishing quantity and an evanescent episode, when considered from the sublime perspective of the infinite.

Blanqui's second move draws on the results of the spectral analysis of his day, which confirmed that all material entities are composed from a small number of basic elements. From sand to stars, everything is made of the same elemental stuff. 'The forms are innumerable, the elements are the same', and so are the laws of motion and combination that affect them, to the exclusion of all 'chaos'. So far we have distinguished sixty-odd basic chemical elements on earth, and Blanqui speculates that there may be around forty more in the universe as a whole.

Along with an end to any existential basis for 'chimera' like spirits or deities, Blanqui further assumes that the finite number of material elements justifies his inference that the number of their possible combinations, however large, must be finite as well. He recognizes the immense diversity of species and individuals but guesses that, from one galaxy to another, the basic 'causes of diversity remain fairly weak', since everywhere we find 'the same matter, classified and organized by the same method, according to the same order. Its foundations and its government are identical' (358/37tm). By definition, no finite amount of variety can ever begin to approach the limit marked by actual infinity. Although the number of possible combinations of elements is indeed astronomical and 'incalculable', Blanqui assumes that it must nevertheless be finite (360/40).

Since time and space are infinite, the crux of Blanqui's argument appears to follow as a matter of course: the limited set of possible combinations must repeat, over infinite time and infinite space, in infinitely many copies or reiterations. Since time has always already been under way and is without origin or end, so there can never be or have been any properly 'new' types or combinations. Stars are born, expand and die, along with the planets, organisms and histories these may support, generating an endless supply of further stars and planets along the way, but every 'new' star can only ever repeat one or another of the originary types. However, as some of Blanqui's first readers immediately pointed out, his effectively 'atomic' or building-block approach to material entities as combinations of a limited set of basic elements leads him to neglect the possibility of progressively evolving combinations of combinations, composed over the course of unfolding time, which

might then be understood as generating a series of entities no less unending than time itself.<sup>29</sup>

The rest of *Eternity* revels in the dizzying implications of its inaugural thesis. The number of actual living and human beings must be finite, and thus trivially small in relation to the 'infinite quantity of identical planets' on which they live, have lived or will live.

It follows that each earth, containing one of these particular human collectives as the result of incessant alterations, has to be repeated billions of times to meet the infinite's demands. From there, billions of earths are absolute copies or twins in matter and personnel, without a hair's difference in time or place – not by a millionth of a second nor a spider's thread. (EA, 373/51)

Every actual human being is likewise one of a multitude of identical copies or twins.

What I write at this moment in the dungeons of Fort du Taureau I will have written for eternity, on a table, with a pen, in my clothes, in circumstances that are completely alike. And so it is, for everyone. (EA, 380/57)

This eternity applies, moreover – since the infinite is infinitely inexhaustible – not only to every currently existing human being and the course of every actually accomplished life, but to every possible variation of every human being and their every possible alternative life. Everything you have done you will do again infinitely many other times, and are currently doing in infinitely many other places – and the same applies for what you (and every variation on you) *might* have done, or may yet do, in every different iteration of our world.

In this way, every one of us has lived, lives, and will live endlessly according to a billion forms of an alter ego. As one is at each second of life, so one is stereotyped [*stéréotypé*] in eternity in billions of copies. (EA, 377/55)

Who could deny, Blanqui readily admits, the monotonous quality of a universe purged of any novelty or chaotic modification?

Always and everywhere, on this earthly camp it's the same drama, the same setting, on the same, narrow stage ... The same monotony and the same *immobilisme* ... The universe is repeated without end, it paws the ground in the same place. Eternity imperturbably plays the same representations over and over, ad infinitum. (EA, 382/58–9)

Past barbarisms will return, along with their genesis and suspension. 'On billions of earths, the

future will again see all the acts of ignorance, the foolishness, and the cruelty of our previous ages!' (382/58). And who, then, could deny the 'melancholic' quality of such an eternity, the 'sadness' of our separation from our every extra-galactic twin? For any individual struggling to decide on a course of action,

it's true that his twins don't sound the alarm for him. That's the terrible thing! One cannot be warned ... So many identical populations that pass without one having suspected their mutual existence! (EA, 367/46, 380-81/58)

### Benjamin's Blanqui

Understandably, perhaps, Blanqui's politically minded readers have generally paid little attention to his one-off exercise in amateur cosmology. Maurice Dommanget's magisterial survey of his social and political thought hardly mentions *Eternity*, and Samuel Bernstein's book on Blanqui (which remains the most detailed English-language study) considers it for one brief paragraph, before concluding that it offers little more than 'proof of diligent effort to banish himself as far as possible from earth and politics'.<sup>30</sup> The only major exception was also the only major Marxian thinker who tried to take Blanqui seriously, at a time when revolutionary politics were themselves plunging into full-blown crisis: Walter Benjamin.

To Benjamin's enduring credit, and very much against the prevailing tendencies of his day, he remembered that 'in the nineteenth century no one else had a revolutionary authority comparable to Blanqui's'.<sup>31</sup> He recognized that it is now 'hardly possible to overestimate the revolutionary prestige which Blanqui ... preserved up to his death. Before Lenin, there was no one else who had a clearer profile among the proletariat'.<sup>32</sup> It had taken Europe's social democrats only 'three decades to erase the name of Blanqui almost entirely', he observed in 1940, a name 'whose resounding call [*Erzklang*] had made the preceding century tremble'.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, no one else had so clearly anticipated what Benjamin himself would formulate as 'the experience of our generation: that capitalism will not die a natural death'.<sup>34</sup> Arguably, no other thinker did more to connect the 'three moments' that Benjamin was to identify, in a late note, as fundamental to 'the materialist conception of history: the discontinuity of historical time; the destructive power of the working class; the tradition of the oppressed'.<sup>35</sup> Writing in his Paris exile in the late 1930s, at the height of

both fascist and Stalinist reaction, Benjamin was well placed to appreciate how Blanqui's approach might allow 'politics to attain primacy over history', and how political defiance might endure in a period of profound historical discouragement.<sup>36</sup> By retaining a link with Blanqui, Benjamin helped to correct Marx's one-sided dismissal of the conspiratorial 'alchemists of revolution',<sup>37</sup> to say nothing of Engels's late, firmly anti-Blanquist reformulation of the Marxian project along proto-reformist lines.<sup>38</sup>

However, Benjamin's idiosyncratic patronage of Blanqui was and remains very much a mixed blessing. For one thing, it has helped to cement the reputation of Blanqui's minor astronomical provocation as an apparent 'key' to his oeuvre as a whole. More importantly, whereas Blanqui actually staked his revolutionary hopes on principled consistency, careful organization and the cumulative promise of mass education, Benjamin emphasizes the messianic potential of moments of 'catastrophe'. What fascinates him about Blanqui are less his insights into the oppressive machinery of his society or the steps that he took in order to change it, and more his quasi-mythical status as a figure of damned isolation and untimely interruption, the 'pariah' of his epoch.<sup>39</sup> More precisely, he appears as a pariah whose political life ends with an abrupt admission of defeat. Benjamin's first reference to *Eternity* already reads it as a gesture of both protest and submission to its author's 'infernal' social world, as a 'complement of the society to which Blanqui, in his old age, was forced to concede victory ... It is an unconditional surrender', even if it is 'simultaneously the most terrible indictment of [his] society'.<sup>40</sup>

Benjamin reiterates the point in his most detailed discussion of the text, in the '1939 Exposé' of his *Arcades Project*. Blanqui's *Eternity* is 'a vision of hell', and the irony of its formulation - 'an irony which doubtless escaped the author himself - is that the terrible indictment he pronounces against society takes the form of an unqualified submission to its results'.<sup>41</sup> No doubt it has a 'tragic grandeur', but Blanqui's 'betrayal' leaves him apparently trapped within the dominant 'phantasmagoria' of his day, within the logic of indifferent repetition and mass production.<sup>42</sup> In *Eternity*:

humanity figures as damned. Everything new it could hope for turns out to be a reality that has always been present; and this newness will be as little capable of furnishing it with a liberating solution as a new fashion is capable of rejuvenating society.<sup>43</sup>

Glossing Blanqui's evocation of eternal repetition and his rejection of progress, Benjamin concludes:

this resignation without hope is the last word of the great revolutionary. The [nineteenth] century was incapable of responding to the new technological possibilities with a new social order. ... In the end, Blanqui views novelty as an attribute of all that is under sentence of damnation.<sup>44</sup>

Would it not be more fruitful to read Blanqui on repetition in the light of what Trotsky or Gramsci had to say about Calvinist doctrines of predestination, considered as a strategy for defending political volition 'when in a weak position',<sup>45</sup>

Benjamin's appreciation of Blanqui's cosmomythology has had another unfortunate side effect, anticipated in his 1938 letters to Horkheimer and developed in considerable detail by subsequent readers – an insistence on its apparent proximity to Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal return.<sup>46</sup> It's true that Nietzsche, like Blanqui, reviled that 'admiration for the "power of history" which in practice transforms every moment into a naked admiration for success and leads to an idolatry of the factual'.<sup>47</sup> It's also true that when he comes to articulate his own visions of 'the eternal return of the same' and the 'infinitely reiterated circulation of all things',<sup>48</sup> around ten years after Blanqui, Nietzsche also revels in the vertigo effect induced by the principle of infinity or endlessness. Both authors stage scenarios in which eternal repetition applies to every lived experience, down to that 'spider's thread' (Blanqui) or 'this spider and this moonlight between the trees' (Nietzsche). Blanqui's most recent editor concludes:

both Blanqui and Nietzsche are committed to some sort of determinism, that is to say, at least to some idea that the possible and the necessary are equivalent (Nietzsche calls this unity 'fate').<sup>49</sup>

Such comparisons are profoundly misleading. The lack of evidence for any direct influence of Blanqui on Nietzsche is neither here nor there. But leaving aside the fact that Nietzsche's reactionary political principles oppose those affirmed by Blanqui on every point, his conception of repetition also differs in two fundamental respects. First, whereas Blanqui's infinity absorbs both what is actual and what might be possible in a single array of endless variations, Nietzsche's repetition is expressly limited to what is made actual, and serves in effect to consecrate or immortalize it.

This life as you now live it and have lived it you will have to live once again and innumerable times

again; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unspeakably small or great in your life must return to you, all in the same succession and sequence.<sup>50</sup>

Any future variation on what you might do or might have done is excluded in advance. Second, Blanqui's vision is 'seen' from an altogether inhuman or cosmic perspective, one that embraces the endless succession of stars and galaxies on their own terms, such that what happens to the innumerable 'copies [sossies]' of yourself that may be scattered through these galaxies can be of no existential consequence to the finite *you* as such, living your life at this time and on this world. You can know nothing of your other 'selves', except that, by implication, they will incarnate and will have already incarnated every possible variation on your own course of action (to the point of exploding any imaginable coherence of 'one' underlying self). For Nietzsche, by contrast, return figures as the greatest psychological 'test' that a person can confront, and consolidates the deep integrity of one's self still more than the old classical theme of self-revelation at the hour of one's death. Blanqui's vision applies without exception to all that exists or could exist, and is of no significance for what you will or should do here and now; Nietzsche's myth, on the other hand, is designed to separate the many who might be crushed by 'the heaviest weight' from those few who might embrace and carry it, sustained by their unconditional affirmation of the way they live.<sup>51</sup>

Nietzsche's whole effort, in short, is to align one's own decisions and actions, one's deepest purpose, with the essential nature of the cosmos itself, in a single unified field, a single 'will to power', so as to be able to affirm: 'thus my eternal fate wills it!'<sup>52</sup> Nietzsche claims to *live* his philosophy 'experimentally', and what this philosophy wants or wills is precisely *amor fati*, an unconditional 'affirmation of the world as it is, without subtraction, exception, or selection – it wants the eternal circulation: the same things, the same logic and illogic of entanglements.'<sup>53</sup> Nietzsche lives the unity of cosmos and self; Blanqui divides these two dimensions without remainder.

### Blanqui's voluntarism

This is the point that Benjamin's pessimistic interpretation of *Eternity* fails to grasp, and that needs to be remembered if we are to make proper sense of its place in Blanqui's broader project. For Blanqui, unlike Nietzsche (to say nothing of a neo-Nietzschean

naturalist like Deleuze), there is simply no common measure between cosmic or natural necessity on the one hand and the constrained domain of human freedoms on the other. As Blanqui pointed out in a note written in 1868, and then used almost word for word in the manuscript of *Eternity*, ‘the word law only makes sense in nature. Whoever says Law means an invariable, immanent and fatal rule – a principle that is immediately incompatible with intelligence and will’, and also with the ‘capricious and arbitrary’ passions that condition their exercise. ‘What we call law, where people are concerned, is nothing other than the expression of the will of the strongest [*la volonté du plus fort*].’<sup>54</sup>

Benjamin condemns *Eternity* for failing to counter the socio-historical tendencies that consolidate repetition and trivial variation as dimensions of our increasingly commodified and administered life – but he does so only because he opts to read the text from the cosmic rather than the human or political point of view. As soon as it is considered from this latter perspective, it becomes clear that the whole point of Blanqui’s *Eternity* is to show that ‘nature doesn’t bother with us’ (EA, 376/53tm) – and since nature largely leaves us alone to get on with our lives as we choose, so then we are free to make and remake the course of our *own* history, which is the only history that matters. All natural laws are indeed ‘inflexible and immutable’, and so long as natural laws are left to ‘govern alone then everything follows a course that is fixed and fated. But variations do begin to take place with animate beings that have will, or in other words, caprice. Above all, as soon as people intervene, fantasy intervenes with them.’ Human *fantasie* can make little impact on nature itself, no doubt, but ‘while the turbulence they create never seriously upsets the natural course of physical phenomena, it does upset humanity. So it’s necessary then to foresee this subversive influence’ that can ‘change the course of individual destinies’ as much as it can ‘tear nations apart and topple empires’ (370/49). This is where Blanqui’s essential dualism reasserts itself, and disrupts any proto-Nietzschean alignment between volition and fate.

It is among people themselves that victims are made and people are driven to immense changes. It’s when they are carried away by passion and other competing interests that their species gets stirred up with a violence that’s greater than an ocean beneath the toil and strain of a tempest. What a difference in the course of humanities! It is a difference that nevertheless began its career

with the same *personnel*, due to an identity in the material conditions of the planets. (EA, 371/49)

The immutable cosmic order of things, in short, is simply irrelevant to both the individual choices we make and the collective arrangements in which we participate. What is most important in one’s own life or history certainly counts for nothing from the perspective of infinite variation and return – but the indifference is symmetrical, and leaves the domain of our political priorities and possibilities thoroughly untouched. As Jacques Rancière notes, in the conclusion of his own reflections on *Eternity*, ‘what other revolutionary, of thought or action, has ever proposed such a radical gap between the “objective conditions” of action and the courage of his enterprise?’<sup>55</sup>

There is no contradiction, then, between the ‘melancholic’ cosmology explored in the 1872 booklet, and Blanqui’s insistence three years before, that the sequence ‘driving human things is not inevitable [*fatal*] like that of the universe, it can be changed at any moment.’<sup>56</sup> Blanqui emphasizes the point within the text of *Eternity* itself, in lines that Benjamin never appears to consider. Every time a life-bearing planet takes shape, and every time humanity evolves on such a planet,

every minute and every second, thousands of different directions are set before this human race. It chooses one of them, forever abandoning the others. Such sidetracks and divergences – the right and the left alter individuals, alter history!

These irreversible and irreducible choices condition the whole of human existence, regardless of scale. However perfectly the world we have shaped thus far may have been (and will be) copied in other worlds in other spaces and at other times, still the path or ‘chapter of bifurcations’ opens again with every new decision. If we could observe an exact copy of our world as it has existed thus far, Blanqui insists, still it would tell us nothing about what is about to happen here and now:

Here is a complete copy – the things and people. No stone, tree, or brook; no animal, human, or incident that has not found its place and moment in this duplicate. It’s a genuine copy or twin-earth [*terre-sosie*] – at least until today. For tomorrow, the events and the people will follow their course. Henceforth, for us, it’s the unknown. Our Earth’s future, like its past, will change its course millions of times. (EA, 362/43)

No doubt the world we are about to choose and shape will in turn be repeated, in infinitely many

iterations, like every other possible world – but that’s *not* to say that our actual decisions in this world are predetermined by any sort of causal power, be it natural or historical. Decisions are decided by those who have acquired, in practice, the practical capacity to take and to implement them, and not by some higher or more fundamental logic or necessity (and still less, in the absence of the latter, by the play of mere chance or *hasard*). What we decide remains a matter of freedom and volition, as much at the level of the individual as at the level of social development or political transformation. If natural events unfold with law-like regularity,

it isn’t the events alone that create human variants. Is there a person who hasn’t now and then found himself confronted with two careers? And the one he turns away from would indeed make his life different, while still leaving him the same individuality. One leads to misery, shame, bondage, and servitude. The other leads to glory and liberty. (364/43)

This is the sort of alternative that preoccupies Blanqui. If, then, regardless of what or how one might choose, one ‘cannot escape fatality’, what Blanqui means in this particular context is simply that once a choice is taken, there is indeed no escaping the consequences it entails for the one who takes it. To choose ‘revolution or death’ is certainly to renounce other alternatives: that these alternatives may be or may have already been chosen by other variations of oneself, in other worlds and at other times, can never affect any actual instance of choice. In other copies of our world, ‘perhaps the English lost the battle of Waterloo many times’, in any number of ways (365/44) – but our world is the only one that can matter to *us*, and our future can no more be anticipated in advance than our past can be undone.

Blanqui’s hypothesis may indeed suggest that only the path of ‘bifurcations is still open to hope or expectation [*espérance*]’ (EA, 381/57), but that is the only basis for action that free actors require. If there is anything that might ‘suffer’ the fate of cosmic necessity, then so far as Blanqui’s vision is concerned, strictly speaking it can be understood as a ‘tragedy’ only ‘for the stars’ themselves, obliged to submit to the endless cycle of their reincarnation without progress or sense. ‘Only the stars would be entitled to complain’, Blanqui acknowledges – ‘but they don’t’ (377/54).

Blanqui’s critique of fatalism shouldn’t be inflated, then, to imply a critique of progress *tout court*. Blanqui grants that there can be no progress over

the course of infinite time, by definition, but the finite lifetime of a planet can certainly be punctuated by sequences of political progress or regress. For Blanqui, the return of classical and proto-atheist references with the Renaissance certainly marked a great step forward with respect to the reactionary Middle Ages, as did the Enlightenment over the Counter-Reformation; the Revolution and Terror of 1789–93 likewise marked an unprecedented advance over the powers of tyranny and superstition, and their agents persist as models of revolutionary vigour and lucidity.<sup>57</sup> The argument of *Eternity* does nothing to refute this, since if ‘there is no progress’ at the level of the universe as a whole this is simply because ‘what we call “progress” is shut away in each particular world’ (EA, 382/58tm) – which is where it belongs. Even the ‘melancholic’ implications Blanqui infers from the cosmic distances that separate one planet from another need not apply within the confines of a particular planet, where the effort to build ever more inclusive forms of association, and ever more adequate ways of sharing knowledge, is precisely the task that identifies ‘communism as the future of society’ – that is, as the future of *our* planet.<sup>58</sup>

Blanqui’s perspective, in *Eternity* as elsewhere, should be understood as neither defeatist nor simply defiant. Blanqui’s emancipatory project had many limitations, but the general approach he defends is a consistent and thoroughgoing voluntarism, and it is all the better for it.

## Notes

1. Louis-Auguste Blanqui, *L’Éternité par les astres: Une hypothèse astronomique* (1872), in Blanqui, *Maintenant il faut des armes*, ed. Dominique Le Nuz, La Fabrique, Paris, 2007, pp. 317–82; translated by Matthew H. Anderson as *Eternity According to the Stars in New Centennial Review*, vol. 9, no. 3, Winter 2009, pp. 3–60. Page references are to the French and then the English editions, separated by a solidus. Along with EA for *Eternity*, I use the abbreviation MF to refer to the *Maintenant il faut des armes* anthology, ‘tm’ to indicate ‘translation modified’, and MSS for Blanqui’s manuscripts, collected as part of the series of *Nouvelles Acquisitions Françaises* held by the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, vols 9578 to 9598.
2. Blanqui, ‘Avis au peuple: Toast du 25 février 1851’, MF, p. 167.
3. Blanqui, ‘Le Communisme, avenir de la société’ [1869–70], in Blanqui, *Critique sociale*, vol. 1, Félix Alcan, Paris, 1885, p. 203.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 215.
5. Blanqui MSS 9590(1), f. 274–5 [August 1868].
6. Blanqui MSS 9590(1), f. 155–6 [6 March 1869].
7. Blanqui MSS 9591(1), f. 388 [no date].
8. Blanqui MSS 9591(1), f. 297 [1861].
9. Blanqui, *Critique sociale*, vol. 2, Félix Alcan, Paris, 1885, p. 58.
10. Blanqui MSS 9592(3), f. 137 [27 June 1868].
11. See in particular Blanqui, ‘Fatal, fatalisme, fatalité’, MSS 9592(3), f. 186–7 [22 June 1868].
12. Blanqui MSS 9592(3), f. 177.
13. Blanqui, letter to Adélaïde de Montgolfier, 20 May 1831,

- in Blanqui, *Œuvres*, vol. 1, ed. Dominique Le Nuz, Presses Universitaires de Nancy, Nancy, 1993, p. 162.
14. Blanqui, *Ni Dieu ni maître: critique matérialiste*, ed. Maurice Dommanget, L'Idée Libre, Conflans-Honorine, 1925, p. 13; Blanqui, *Critique sociale*, vol. 1, p. 210.
  15. Blanqui, 'Formulaire de réception à la Société des Saisons', 1837, *Œuvres*, vol. 1, pp. 381–3; cf. MF, p. 71.
  16. Cour des Pairs, 'Rapport fait à la cour par M. Ménilhou' (1839), vol. 2, pp. 25–7, cited in Samuel Bernstein, *Blanqui and the Art of Insurrection*, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1971, p. 82.
  17. Blanqui, 'La Marche à suivre', *Critique sociale*, vol. 2, p. 117.
  18. Blanqui, 'Lettre à Maillard', 6 June 1852, MF, pp. 177, 179.
  19. See, for example, Maurice Dommanget, *Idées politiques et sociales de Blanqui*, Marcel Rivière, Paris, 1957, p. 118; Alan Spitzer, *The Revolutionary Theories of Louis Auguste Blanqui*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1957, pp. 45, 76, 125; Bernstein, *Blanqui and the Art of Insurrection*, pp. 273, 311; Miguel Abensour, 'Benjamin entre mélancholie et révolution: passages Blanqui', *Walter Benjamin et Paris*, ed. Heinz Wismann, Éditions du Cerf, Paris, 1986, p. 232; Abensour and Valentin Pelosse, 'Libérer l'enfermé', postface to Blanqui, *Instructions pour une prise d'armes, L'Éternité par les astres, et autres textes* [1972], ed. Miguel Abensour and Valentin Pelosse, Sens et Tonka, Paris, 2000, p. 385.
  20. Blanqui, *Critique sociale*, vol. 1, p. 136.
  21. Blanqui, 'Contre le positivisme' [1869], in *Instructions pour une prise d'armes*, p. 205.
  22. Blanqui MSS 9591(2), f. 348 [16 November 1864].
  23. Blanqui, 'Contre le positivisme', p. 216; cf. Abensour, 'Benjamin entre mélancholie et révolution', p. 241.
  24. Blanqui MSS 9590(1), f. 61 [1 April 1869].
  25. 'Walter Benjamin, 'Central Park', §40, in *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Baudelaire*, ed. Michael Jennings, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 2006, p. 166.
  26. Blanqui, 'Fatal, fatalisme, fatalité', MSS 9592(3), f. 174 [22 June 1868].
  27. Walter Benjamin, letter to Max Horkheimer, 6 January 1938, in Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1999, p. 112.
  28. EA, 318/3. As Dominique Le Nuz notes, Blanqui's investment in the category of infinity pre-dates the composition of *Eternity* by at least twenty years. 'The finite doesn't exist', he noted on 11 April 1851. 'Only the infinite exists. Everything is infinite. The individual: human being, plant, pebble, all are infinite' (cited in MF, p. 317).
  29. See in particular Camille Flammarion, review of *L'Éternité par les astres*, in *L'Opinion Nationale*, 25 March 1872, in 'Dossier de presse de *L'Éternité par les astres*', in *Instructions pour une prise d'armes*, ed. Abensour and Pelosse, p. 364.
  30. Bernstein, *Blanqui*, p. 342.
  31. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 21.
  32. Walter Benjamin, 'The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire', in *The Writer of Modern Life*, p. 50.
  33. Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History', *Selected Works*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 2006, vol. 4, p. 394tm; cf. Abensour and Pelosse, 'Libérer l'enfermé', postface to Blanqui, *Instructions pour une prise d'armes*, pp. 384–5; Michael Löwy, *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History'*, Verso, London, 2006, p. 82.
  34. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 667.
  35. Walter Benjamin, preparatory notes for 'On the Concept of History', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1, p. 1246, cited in Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1982, p. 261.
  36. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 389.
  37. Karl Marx, review of 'Les Conspirateurs', par A. Chenu' [1850], in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 10, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1978, pp. 311–25.
  38. 'The time of surprise attacks, of revolutions carried through by small conscious minorities at the head of unconscious masses, is past.' Friedrich Engels, 'Introduction' [1895] to Marx, *Class Struggles in France*, in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 27, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1987, p. 520; cf. Engels, 'The Program of the Blanquist Fugitives from the Paris Commune' [1874], in *ibid.*, vol. 24, pp. 12–18.
  39. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 385; cf. Benjamin, 'The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire', in *The Writer of Modern Life*, p. 129.
  40. 'Benjamin, letter to Max Horkheimer, 6 January 1938, in Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 112.
  41. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
  42. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 375.
  43. *Ibid.*, p. 15; cf. Abensour, 'Benjamin entre mélancholie et révolution', pp. 243, 246.
  44. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 26.
  45. See Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1971, pp. 336–7), Leon Trotsky, 'One or Two Peculiarities of English Labour Leaders' [1926], in *Trotsky's Writings on Britain*, ch. 3, online at <http://marxists.anu.edu.au/archive/trotsky/works/britain/ch03.htm>.
  46. See Benjamin, 'Central Park' §22, in *The Writer of Modern Life*, p. 150. On Blanqui and Nietzsche, see in particular Frank Chouraqui, 'At the Crossroads of History: Blanqui at the Castle of the Bull', in Blanqui, *Eternity by the Stars*, Contra Mundum, New York, 2013, pp. 23–47.
  47. Friedrich Nietzsche, 'On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life', in *Untimely Meditations*, ed. Daniel Breazeale, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997, p. 105.
  48. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols*, trans. Judith Norman, ed. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005, p. 110.
  49. Chouraqui, 'At the Crossroads of History', p. 34.
  50. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff, ed. Bernard Williams, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001, §341.
  51. Nietzsche: 'how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life to long for nothing more fervently than for this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal?' (*The Gay Science*, §341).
  52. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Adrian Del Caro, ed. Adrian Del Caro and Robert Pippin, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006, p. 178. 'Joy wants the eternity of all things, wants deep, wants deep eternity!' (p. 263).
  53. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann, Vintage, New York, 1968, §1041; cf. §617, 1032, 1065.
  54. 'It is possible', Blanqui continues, 'that this will [volonté] might on occasion conform with justice and right [droit]. So much the better' – but there is nothing external to the process of willing per se that can prevent it from 'becoming the formula [formule] of iniquity and violence' (Blanqui MSS 9590(1), f. 278 [February 1868]).
  55. Jacques Rancière, 'Préface', Blanqui, *L'Éternité par les étoiles*, Les Impressions Nouvelles, Paris, 2002, p. 25; and above, p. 25. If anything, Rancière still does not go far enough in acknowledging the full extent of the gap between this enterprise and its 'objective conditions': no more than (objective) necessity, it's not only (objective) 'chance' that can lead different iterations of a person 'down different paths'.
  56. Blanqui, 'Contre le positivisme', in *Instructions pour une prise d'armes*, ed. Abensour and Pelosse, p. 206.
  57. Cf. Blanqui MSS 9591(2), f. 348 [16 November 1864].
  58. Blanqui, *Critique sociale*, vol. 1, pp. 173–220.