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ENTER THE ACTOR[1]

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The concept of the subject is fundamentally equivocal, and its political connotations remain ambiguous. I propose to foreground instead the general category of the actor, in both its theatrical and action-oriented senses. The theatrical register helps remind us of the difference between being and doing, or between a performer and a role; it also serves to foreground the deliberate, trained, prepared, and situated quality of any performance. More importantly, the actor understood as capable of action helps to foreground aspects of agency that the philosophers of Jean-Luc Nancy's generation tended to downplay or condemn, notably those of intention, purpose and will. If we are actually to confront the enormous problems facing the world we need an adequate account of collective action and thus of collective purpose. Rousseau and Marx help to frame some of the elements of such an account, while Luxemburg, Sartre, and Fanon, among many others, help to clarify some of its contemporary dimensions.

Le concept du sujet est fondamentalement équivoque, et ses connotations politiques restent ambiguës. Je propose de mettre plutôt en avant la catégorie de l'acteur, en jouant sur les deux sens principaux du mot – l'action au théâtre, et l'action en générale. Le registre théâtral nous aide à rappeler la différence entre être et faire, ou entre un comédien et un rôle; il sert également à mettre en avant la qualité délibérée, entraînée, préparée et située de toute performance. Plus important encore, l'acteur compris comme capable d'agir aide à souligner des aspects de l'action que les philosophes de la génération de Jean-Luc Nancy avaient tendance à minimiser ou à condamner, notamment ceux de l'intention, de la motivation, et de la volonté. Si nous voulons réellement affronter les problèmes énormes auxquels le monde est confronté, nous avons besoin d'une théorie adéquate de l'action collective et donc de l'objectif ou du but collectif. Rousseau et Marx aident à encadrer certains des éléments d'une telle théorie, tandis que Luxemburg, Sartre et Fanon, parmi beaucoup d'autres, aident à clarifier certaines de ses dimensions contemporaines.

[1] An initial version of this text was presented as a talk delivered to the conference "Who Comes After the Subject?," hosted by Radboud University Nijmegen on 9–10 February 2023. I'm very grateful to the conference organisers, Lucas Gronouwe, Lisa Kampen, and Luca Tripaldelli, for their invitation to the conference and their responses to my talk.

Who comes after the subject? The same figure that long preceded it: the actor.

In the beginning, when there is a beginning, on the stage as in politics, there is some kind of entrance, the crossing of a threshold and the exercise of a capacity. To take up the theme of the actor is first of all to accept that we begin here with a genuine beginning. An actor enters. Actors enter into a place of action, a place of intentions and consequences, of ends and means, and in doing so they move on from those "subjected" dimensions of the always-already, the under-lying, the forever presupposed. When an actor enters, the subject does not collapse, or vanish, or end, but wherever there is an actor there is something more than subjection. There is an entrance, the entrance of someone, someones, that is or are no longer merely subject.

No one is always-already an actor: we become one, or join one, or join many, as we learn to play the roles we encounter or invent. In each case there is a stepping out, at some point, onto the stage or into the place of action—a movement from the wings and the shadows to the clarity of engagement and its consequences.

Having begun, I have already acted on my own guiding presumption here, that it's helpful and suggestive to think of this term *actor* in both of its two primary meanings at once. "Actor" can mean both a doer or performer of action in general, and a player or theatrical performer more specifically. In English these two senses of the word came into usage around the same time, over the sixteenth century, and along with an originary definition of "one who drives or moves something," the two meanings appear equally fundamental in the Latin root: *actor, actoris*.[2] In what follows, I will consider some of the several ways in which these two registers overlap, in the hope that this might contribute something to the most pressing practical task of our time: the re-organisation and re-assertion of our capacity for collective action, and so to the mobilisation of the kind of collective actors that might be capable of performing the kinds of action we need to take, as soon as we can, if we are to address any of the existential problems now confronting us.

(Before moving any further I should stress that my few brief references to theatre and actor training in this article are not intended to be anything other than suggestive, and to avoid a possible misunderstanding I should add a preliminary remark. By considering these two domains together I certainly do not mean to suggest that political action is merely theatrical, a matter of staging and role play and so on, as if politics might be just another dimension of that society of the spectacle that still threatens to absorb everything we think and do. Elsewhere I've tried to draw attention to the dangers of thinking about political action and organisation in overly "theatrocratic" terms.[3] Since the more obvious differences between political and theatrical action should speak for themselves, I propose here to explore some of their similarities precisely in order to draw attention to what might be specific about *political* action per se, as distinct from *e.g.*, instinctual drives, customary behaviour, economic tendencies, sociological regularities, historical developments, and so on.)

I frame this task in the light of a general fidelity to Rousseau on the one hand and to Marx on the other. Following Rousseau, I prioritise the work of collective association and self-determination, the organising of a group of people held together only by a common project or a common will—a group whose nature, extent, and capacities depend first and foremost on their ability to *generalise* and act on this shared will.[4] From Marx, I adopt his insistence that history by itself "does *nothing*" and "wages no battles," and that people make their own history, however discouraging the circumstances that confront them. People are

[2] "Actor," in *A Latin Dictionary*, (ed.) C. Lewis and C. Short (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1879), 35; see also "Actor," in *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, (ed.) J. Wyllie et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 30.
[3] Peter Hallward, "Staging Equality: Rancière's Theatrocracy," *New Left Review*, vol. 37 (February 2006), 109–129.
[4] For more details see Hallward, "'The Most Absolute Authority': Rousseau and the Tensions of Popular Sovereignty," in *Rousseau Today: Interdisciplinary Essays*, (ed.) N. Harris et al. (London: Palgrave, 2023), 43–82.

"the authors and the actors of their own drama."[5] It is the oppressed alone who can enact their own emancipation, in keeping with the premise that "the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves."[6]

Some more recent and vitally important political figures are best read, I think, as contributing to the integration of these distinct Rousseauist-Marxist trajectories, including Luxemburg and Lenin, Zetkin and Gramsci, Sartre and Fanon, Che and Cabral, Walter Rodney and Angela Davis, and a good many others.[7] Though much recent work on Marx tends to foreground his analysis of value, of commodification, and of capital's "impersonal logic of domination," to read Marx with Rousseau on the one hand and Lenin or Gramsci on the other is to foreground instead the role of class and state *actors*, along with their intentions and priorities, their deliberate choice of ends and of the means required to achieve them. One of the many virtues of Heide Gerstenberger's recently translated study of the "historical functioning" of actually-existing capitalism, for instance, is that her emphasis on force and violence foregrounds specific class, state, and colonial actors in ways that ordinary usage presumes—"violence (like the French term *violence* or the German term *Gewalt*) necessarily involves intent, and consequently actors who harbour this intent."[8] No merely "structural" or economic tendency can account for the slow and uneven introduction of "free labour" and of voluntary labour contracts in some privileged parts of the capitalist world order, any more than it can account for the widespread and perfectly deliberate retention, in its more exposed, vulnerable, or "unbounded" parts, of forms of forced labour ranging from the *ersatz* slavery of indentured servitude to the horrific labour camps of the Third Reich. Even quasi-automated financial transactions, Gerstenberger reminds us, are still "based on the decisions of concrete institutions and thus also real human individuals."[9]

The perspective most opposed to this approach is of course the one that is most reluctant to acknowledge the role or even the existence of collective actors, namely the neoliberal logic that privileges those forms of "spontaneous order" that seem to arise from apparently dispersed and impersonal market forces. Properly managed and insulated from political interference, such forces can be trusted to overwhelm any political actor that might seek to reshape society along in accordance with consciously chosen values or a deliberately adopted plan. Once thoroughly established, these forces may indeed *appear* to operate all by themselves, and at that point, as Adorno understood early on, "the ruling class disappears

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[5] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Holy Family* [1845], Chapter 6, in *Marx & Engels Collected Works, Vol. 4* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 93; Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* [1847], Chapter 2, in *Marx & Engels Collected Works, Vol. 6* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 170.

[6] Karl Marx, "General Rules and Administrative Regulations of The International Workingmen's Association," [October 1864], in *Marx & Engels Collected Works, Vol. 23* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 3.

[7] I develop this wider argument in Hallward, *The Will of the People and the Struggle for Mass Sovereignty*, forthcoming from Verso, 2025.

[8] Heide Gerstenberger, *Market and Violence* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2023), 2. As Gerstenberger shows in compelling detail, the relative and tenuous freedoms occasionally accorded to labour, in the capital-labour relation, reflect the relative *political* balance of class forces. "Everywhere, political struggles had to be fought out and political decisions had to be taken to create the form of labour relations that now we have come to consider as being adequate for capitalist production" (110). Such struggles, however, were more forceful and thus more successful in some places than others. In particular, "while organised labour and struggles to extend the right to vote eventually induced governments in the metropolitan capitalist countries to criminalise the use of direct violence against labourers, this did not only fail to transpire in the colonies, but such aims have often not even been pursued at all or only during the final phases of colonial rule" (311). See also Robert Steinfeld, *Coercion, Contract and Free Labor in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 1–5, 9–10. Likewise, if more and more of us now live, and are destined to live, in what Mike Davis calls a "planet of slums," this is not the "natural" or inevitable consequence of sub-voluntary economic tendencies, but rather the thoroughly predictable result of specific policies imposed by specific actors. See Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso, 2006), 69, 82, 151–58.

[9] Gerstenberger, *Market and Violence*, 421.

behind the concentration of capital."[10] Not the least of neoliberalism's inconsistencies, however, is the fact, amply demonstrated by recent historians, that this outcome was itself a thoroughly deliberate and consciously organised one, the achievement of a carefully coordinated effort pioneered by elite business interests hostile to the New Deal and its European analogues in the 1930s, developed via the efforts of people like Ludwig von Mises and Lemuel Boulware, and indefatigably pursued by a solid phalanx of class actors through to the triumphant rise of Pinochet, Thatcher and Reagan over the 1970s.[11]

Though it may have lost some of its lustre over the past fifteen years or so, this neoliberal logic clearly remains hegemonic to this day, not least because it draws on much older variations of a similar logic, one whose oldest ancestors, in a European context, reach back through the individualisms of *laissez-faire* liberalism and of the Reformation to the early Christians and Stoics. Despite obvious differences in context and circumstance, what is characteristic of such neo-Stoic conceptions of human agency is the way they combine a degree of private or inward freedom with reasoned acceptance of public submission or resignation.[12] Exemplified by policies of privatisation, marketisation, and deregulation, this is the kind of combination that can seem especially compelling in times, like our own, of prolonged political discouragement and defeat. From the mid 1970s to this day, variations on this combination have been imposed so thoroughly, across so much of the world, that it remains largely a matter of consensus to insist—even as the literally suicidal consequences of such insistence become harder and harder to hide—that "there is no alternative."

Leaving aside the dominance and legacy of figures like Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman, this politico-intellectual transition was especially marked in post-war France, as we move from a concern with the organisation and assertion of collective actors like classes or insurgent groups or national liberation movements (for instance in the work of Sartre, Fanon and Althusser) to an agenda dominated by liberal and neoliberal priorities, in the projects and institutions led by figures like Claude Lefort and François Furet. The recurring target of much of this work is above all that mass democratic actor which might dare to assert its powers of self-determination in the full or properly "sovereign" sense of the term—a pretension exemplified by the Jacobin actors of the French Revolution, followed by the Soviet insurgents of 1917 and the world-making anti-colonial projects of the 1950s and 60s. If this agenda is most clearly exemplified by the trajectories of leading members of what was once dubbed *la galaxie Furet*, for instance Pierre Rosanvallon and Marcel Gauchet, a turn away from

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[10] "This latter," Adorno continues, "has reached a magnitude and acquired a weight of its own that enables capital to present itself…as the expression of society as a whole. By virtue of its omnipotence, the particular is able to usurp the totality." Theodor Adorno, "Reflections on Class Theory" [1942], in Adorno, *Can One Live After Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*, (ed.) R. Tiedemann (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 99.

[11] See for instance Mike Davis, *Prisoners of the American Dream* (London: Verso, 1986), 102–180; David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Businessmen's Crusade Against the New Deal* (New York: Norton, 2010); Jessica Whyte, *The Morals of the Market: Human Rights and the Rise of Neoliberalism* (London: Verso, 2019); Katharina Pistor, *The Code of Capital: How the Law Creates Wealth and Inequality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020); Jonathan Katz, *Gangsters of Capitalism: Smedley Butler, The Marines, and the Making and Breaking of America's Empire* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2022); Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020); Slobodian, *Crack-Up Capitalism: Market Radicals and the Dream of a World Without Democracy* (London: Allen Lane, 2023). As Ellen Wood observes, the basic structure of Marx's analysis of capital, starting with the forced expropriation of its workforce, "suggests that, for Marx, the ultimate secret of capitalist production is a *political* one. What distinguishes his analysis so radically from classical political economy is that it creates no sharp discontinuities between economic and political spheres, and he is able to trace the continuities because he treats the economy itself not as a network of disembodied forces but, like the political sphere, as a set of social relations" and as the result of political priorities and interventions. See Ellen Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1996), 20–21.

[12] See also Peter Hallward, "Stoics and Jacobins," lecture delivered for CRMEP, Kingston University (30 March 2023), [https://soundcloud.com/user-455945207/stoics-and-jacobins-peter-hallward]. See also Jessica Whyte, "Neoliberal Freedom as Stoic Resignation," lecture delivered for the LSE (10 February 2022), [https://www.lse.ac.uk/lse-player?id=d11455bf-1204-4963-9f1b-9b101fe52580].

collective actors and organised capacities (let alone pretensions to "sovereignty") also characterises the work of thinkers with quite different political perspectives, *e.g.,* Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, or Giorgio Agamben.[13]

A brief glance at Foucault's political trajectory over the 1970s may help to characterise this wider trend. In the early 1970s Foucault still defended a conception of power rooted in the logic of class struggle and "civil war," in which rebellious groups organised themselves in opposition to their political enemies, as so many efforts "to undermine and take power" away from the actors and institutions that "maintain capitalist exploitation."[14] In early 1973, Foucault saw "civil war [a]s the matrix of all struggles of power, of all strategies of power," on the understanding that "the actors in civil war are always groups qua groups," "collective elements" that (like the *sans-culottes* of the French Revolution, the insurgent French peasants of the seventeenth century, or the proletariat of the twentieth century) are not only "staged" but "formed" and trained by their engagement in struggle.[15] By the end of 1973, however, Foucault had already distanced himself from his "civil war matrix" of power, and from the idea that power is something that collective actors might seize and then use or exercise. "Power," Foucault has instead come to realise, "is never something that someone possesses, any more than it is something that emanates from someone. Power does not belong to anyone or even to a group; there is only power because there is dispersion, relays, networks, reciprocal supports, differences of potential, discrepancies, etcetera."[16] By the time he publishes his most influential accounts of power, in the mid 1970s, Foucault is firmly committed to an understanding that "power is not something that is acquired, seized, or shared, something that one holds on to or allows to slip away." On the contrary, "power is exercised from innumerable points," dispersed across a complex array of social positions and institutions.[17] From here it is not much of a leap to Foucault's subsequent fascination with the emergence of those complex and dispersed market forces which, first with the Physiocrats and *laissez-faire* liberals of the eighteenth century and then the neo- and ordoliberals of the twentieth century, confront any would-be sovereign actor and tell them: "you cannot." You cannot rule these forces because you are "powerless" to know or direct them. Well before the French revolutionaries confronted this apparent reality for themselves, liberal political economy had already established the principle that Gauchet and Rosanvallon would go on to explore in such detail, and that remains our governing principle to this day: "there is no sovereign in economics."[18] It's perhaps no coincidence, furthermore, that Foucault arrived at his conclusion that power is essentially dispersed at a time when, in reality, over the 1970s, it was arguably becoming more coordinated and concentrated than ever before, precisely in the hands of a ruling class that had done everything necessary to ensure that capital is indeed an

[13] As I've tried to show elsewhere, recent French thinkers who foreground "*actants*" and "*agencements*," like Bruno Latour or Gilles Deleuze, cannot be read as advocates of (deliberate, voluntary, purposeful…) action in the sense affirmed here.

[14] Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, "Intellectuals and Power" [1972], in Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, (ed.) D. Bouchard (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1980), 216; see also Michel Foucault, "On Popular Justice: A Discussion with Maoists" [1972], in Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, (ed.) Colin Gordon (New York: Random House, 1980), 5–6.

[15] Michel Foucault, *The Punitive Society: Lectures at the Collège de France 1972–73* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 13.

[16] Michel Foucault, *Psychiatric Power: Lectures at the Collège de France 1973–74* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 4 [session of 7 November 1973].

[17] Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: The Will to Knowledge* (London: Penguin, 1998), 94–95.

[18] Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*: *Lectures at the Collège de France 1978–1979* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 283; see also Jessica Whyte, "The Invisible Hand of Friedrich Hayek: Submission and Spontaneous Order," *Political Theory*, vol. 47, no. 2 (2019), 156–84, here 157–58; Mitchell Dean and Daniel Zamora, *The Last Man Takes LSD: Foucault and the End of Revolution* (London: Verso, 2023).

economic sovereign in a perfectly classical sense of the word—a role distilled most concisely in Marx's definition of capital as "the command over unpaid labour."[19]

One of the many things that has become clear, in the intervening years, is that the only political force that might challenge the sovereignty of capital and of the states that serve and enable it is one that might organise and impose itself as an alternative sovereign. Whether this should be understood primarily as a response to the questions of political organisation posed since the eclipse of communist parties in the 1970s, or by the failures of the "mass protest decade" that began in 2010, or in the classical terms of a transitional "dual power," or of "dictatorship of the proletariat," or as the invention of a communal "lever for uprooting the economical foundation upon which rests the existence of classes, and therefore of class rule"[20]—in each case the essential question remains that of the political actor. The essential political questions remain precisely those that Foucault came to downplay. *Who* might organise itself to take power or command? *Why* might they strive to take power, to what ends and by what means? Or in Lenin's incomparably compressed formulation: *who, whom*?

In what follows, I will survey some of the general contours for addressing this question, in a series of nine points.

1. To begin with, to adopt the figure of the actor as an answer to the question "who comes after the subject?" is to foreground the *after* in the question, *i.e.* the temporality of a succession or break, the crossing of a threshold, the making of an entrance. Before they can do anything else, actors must first move into the space they will animate or transform. They do not evolve, or defer, or fragment, or scatter along a line of flight; they begin by making a start, by taking a first step. This is especially obvious in the case of revolutionary actors, insofar as the novelty, scope, and consequences of a revolution can never simply be inferred from its historical causes or conditions of possibility.[21]

It is in this sense that we can say that in France 1789, mass revolutionary actors enter the political stage with a suddenness and force that was widely experienced as the dawning of a new era, as much in a newly mobilised Paris as across a countryside convulsed with the "great fear" of July.[22] In the revolution's first months, the experience was perhaps most explicit and self-conscious in that "becoming revolutionary," to use Timothy Tackett's phrase, whereby in May and June 1789 members of the third estate gathered in Versailles to constitute themselves as a properly national assembly and to lay explicit claim to sovereign power.[23]

It's also in this sense that we can say that in August 1791, in the French colony of Saint-Domingue, the mass of insurgent slaves entered the political stage with a force that would arguably do more to turn the world upside down than any other event in modern history. Similar points could be made about the emergence of a proletarian class actor in the Paris insurrections of July 1830 and June 1848, of the Paris commune of 1871, of Russia's Soviets in 1905 and again in 1917, of the anti-colonial projects that later take shape in Cuba and Algeria, and so on. An adequate analysis of these actors and of their actions cannot be

[19] Karl Marx, *Capital: Critique of Political Economy*, *Vol. 1* [1867] (London: Penguin and New Left Review, 1990), 672.
[20] Karl Marx, "The Civil War in France" [1871], in *Marx & Engels Collected Works, Vol. 22* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 334.
[21] See for instance Haim Burstin, *Révolutionnaires: Pour une anthropologie politique* (Paris: Vendémiaire, 2022), 8–9.
[22] See for instance Micah Alpaugh, *Non-Violence and the French Revolution: Political Demonstrations in Paris, 1787–1795* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); David Garrioch, *The Making of Revolutionary Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Sophie Wahnich, *La longue patience du peuple. 1792. Naissance de la République* (Paris: Payot, 2008).
[23] Timothy Tackett, *Becoming a Revolutionary: The Deputies of the French National Assembly and the Emergence of a Revolutionary Culture* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996); cf. Jean-Paul Sartre, "Mai-juin 1789: Manuscrit sur la naissance de l'Assemblée nationale," *Études sartriennes*, vol. 12 (2008), 19–154.

undertaken on the basis of assumptions about the primacy of continuity and the slow evolutions of a *longue durée*. On this point I think Alain Badiou's work remains fundamental, along with the legacies of Sartre, Fanon, and de Beauvoir—and perhaps it is no accident that Sartre and Badiou, as well as Fanon, have a particular interest in theatre, and see their writings for the stage as an essential part of their philosophical work.[24]

A similar point can also be made, of course, about the emergence of newly conservative or reactionary actors—actors who, in their determination to confront and overpower the rise of new insurgent challenges, are in no way reducible to the guardians of established or time-honoured institutions of class power.[25] For instance, as soon as the unsettling egalitarian implications of the French revolutionaries' Universal Declaration of the Rights of Man began to reverberate, over the summer of 1789, a well-organised and well-connected colonial lobby set out, from an initial base in the *grand blanc* assemblies of Saint-Domingue and the Club Massiac in Paris, to do everything possible to contain and deflect them—a project that eventually succeeded in Napoleon's France, after failing in Toussaint's Saint-Domingue.[26] From the Black Hundreds and *Freikorps* of incipient fascism through the counter-insurgency projects of the postwar period to more recent investments in fundamentalist projects across the religious spectrum, the architects of reaction understand perfectly well that dedicated mass actors can only be overcome by ruthlessly zealous counter-actors.[27] The energetic agendas pursued by those corporations that dominate the aptly named "commanding heights" of our economy—from munitions and fossil fuels to the new monopolies of high tech—offer another obvious illustration of the way capitalist control is maintained less by sub-voluntary tendencies than it is by the perfectly deliberate efforts and priorities of capitalist class actors. The massive coercive pressures engineered by capital flight and by "targeted economic sanctions" are a further case in point.[28]

2. The proposal that "the actor comes after the subject" can be taken in a second sense. If in the usage that has come to prevail since Kant, "subject" means something like the human being in general, the bearer of those qualities and faculties that allow us to lead distinctively human lives, we should say first the subject, *then* the actor; what the latter might do builds on what the former can be. Subject, *sub-ject*, was and remains originally "underneath", and its

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[24] See in particular Alain Badiou, *Rhapsody for the Theatre* (London: Verso, 2013); Alain Badiou with Nicolas Truong, *In Praise of Theatre* (London: Polity, 2015).

[25] See in particular Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Donald Trump* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[26] For a good recent overview of the Club Massiac and its leading actors, see Marc Belissa, *La Révolution française et les colonies* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2023), Chapter 10.

[27] See for instance Vincent Bevins, *The Jakarta Method: Washington's Anticommunist Crusade and the Mass Murder Program that Shaped Our World* (New York: Public Affairs, 2021); John Cooley, *Unholy Wars: Afghanistan, America and International Terrorism* (London: Pluto, 2002); Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos: The US and the Disaster in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia* (London: Penguin, 2008); Tariq Ali, *The Clash of Fundamentalisms: Crusades, Jihads and Modernity* (London: Verso Books, 2003). A suggestive case to consider (if space allowed) would be how far Theodore Allen might be vindicated, against sympathetic critics like Noel Ignatiev and Charles Post, when he argues that the institution of racist or proto-apartheid policies in Britain's American colonies itself began with a "deliberate act by the plantation bourgeoisie," one that "proceeded from a conscious decision in the process of establishing a system of racial oppression," rather than as the unintended effect of sub-voluntary causes. See Theodore Allen, "Summary of the Argument of *The Invention of the White Race*," *Cultural Logic*, vol. 2 (1998), [https://ojs.library.ubc.ca/index.php/clogic/article/view/191851/188820], accessed June 4, 2024; Noel Ignatiev, "My Debt and Obligation to Ted Allen" *PM Press* (2019), [https://blog.pmpress.org/2019/09/02/my-debt-and-obligation-to-ted-allen/], accessed June 4, 2024.

[28] See for instance Jessica Whyte, "Economic Coercion and Financial War," *Journal of Australian Political Economy*, no. 90 (2022), 5–25; Whyte, "The Opacity of Economic Coercion," *Yale Journal of International Law* (2023), [https://www.yjil.yale.edu/the-opacity-of-economic-coercion/], accessed June 4, 2024.

primary meaning irreversibly conditions its political usage.[29] To foreground the subject is "always-already" to be oriented by necessary presuppositions; an actor, by contrast, is something that subjects become. For reasons explored as much by Sartre as much Chomsky, what an actor can do, what they can learn to think or say or will, is in immeasurable excess of what that performer or speaker *is*, as a subject or individual. In somewhat the same way, if to be a subject is always-already to be within a situation, the discovery or erection of a *stage*, or the political equivalent of a stage—the sort of expanded or metaphorical stage that Rancière explores in his work on *les scènes du peuple*[30]– is something that happens to a situation, and transforms it.

A human being may learn many things, but does not learn to be a human being. To become an actor, by contrast, is first and foremost a learning process, a matter of "actor training," in both the general and specific senses of that term. A stage actor might learn on the job, they might go to drama school, they might become versed in the methods developed by Konstantin Stanislavski or Vsevolod Meyerhold or Michael Chekhov, and so on. They learn their trade, and then develop it by practising it.

Political actors, likewise, must learn, one way or another, how to combine, to organise, to inform, to educate, to agitate, to contest, to struggle, and so on. As Rosa Luxemburg insists, proletarian victory, guided by "mass idealism" and the transformative "ideals of the struggle," "requires a high degree of political education, of class consciousness and organization"—"conditions [that…] can only be fulfilled by the living political school, through and in the fight, in the continuous course of the revolution."[31] Should this course offer the workers an opportunity to seize power, everything will depend on their organised political capacities, on how far they have become willing and able to do what is required. On the precarious revolutionary stage erected in late 1918 by German efforts to emulate the Soviets' achievements of the previous year, Luxemburg told her party, to great applause, that

> the problem of the seizure of power assumes this aspect; what, throughout Germany, can each workers' and soldiers' council achieve?…Step by step, by hand-to-hand fighting, in every province, in every town, in every village, in every commune, all the powers of the state have to be transferred bit by bit from the bourgeoisie to the workers' and soldiers' councils. But before these steps can be taken, the members of our own party and the proletarians in general must be schooled and disciplined…. Against the attacks, insinuations, and rumours of the bourgeoisie must stand the inflexible clarity of purpose, vigilance, and ever ready activity of the proletarian mass.[32]

Though famously critical of the Bolsheviks' authoritarian tendencies, when Luxemburg was herself confronted with an apparently comparable opportunity to transfer "all power to the Soviets" or councils, she did not hesitate to follow in their footsteps. "By their determined revolutionary stand, their exemplary strength in action, and their unbreakable loyalty to international socialism, they have contributed whatever could possibly be contributed under such devilishly hard conditions." Even in her most vigorous polemic, Luxemburg applauds above all their foregrounding of the revolutionary actors themselves, *i.e.* "the capacity for action of the proletariat, the strength to act, the will to power of socialism as such. In this, Lenin and Trotsky and their friends were the *first*, those who went ahead as an example to the

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[29] On the primary sense of subject or *sujet* as *hupokeimenon*, see Étienne Balibar, Barbara Cassin, Alain de Libera, "Sujet," in *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies: dictionnaire des intraduisibles*, (ed.) B. Cassin (Paris: Seuil, 2004), 1233–54.

[30] Jacques Rancière, *Les Scènes du peuple: Les Révoltes logiques, 1975–1985* (Paris: Horlieu, 2003).

[31] Rosa Luxemburg, *The Mass Strike*, in *The Essential Rosa Luxemburg* (Chicago: Chicago: Haymarket, 2008), 149, 130.

[32] Rosa Luxemburg, "Speech to the Founding Convention of the German Communist Party" [31 December 1918], in *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks* (New York: Pathfinder Books, 1970), 425–26; Rosa Luxemburg, "What Does the Spartacus League Want?" [14 December, 1918], in *Selected Political Writings of Rosa Luxemburg* (New York: Monthly Review, 1971), 371.

proletariat of the world; they are still the *only ones* up to now who can cry….'I have dared!'"[33]

3. What is being learned via such schooling and disciplining processes might be understood in general terms as the kinds of capacities required for acting, doing, or making, on the understanding that, as Sartre liked to put it, "we can always make something of what is made of us."[34] In its most generic sense, "actor training" is a kind of capacity building, a building whose limits are not essentially demarcated or circumscribed by its anthropological "foundations" or natural conditions. The great actor trainers, like Stanislavski or Chekhov, propose a series of exercises that mobilise and develop our most basic faculties—feeling, intellect, and will, the "three impelling movers in our psychic life," as Stanislavski calls them, "three masters who play on the instrument of our souls"[35]; such exercises enable actors to do and feel and think more than they can initially. The eventual goal is to be able to make a character live, as fully and as intensely as possible, in a transformative excess over what any given performer might "be" as an individual or subject. The great director Peter Brook puts this nicely: "I think there is one thing that I have found that can help every actor in every part he plays: that is for him to believe, by some basic act of faith, that whatever the part is, the part is greater than he…If you're playing a witless cretin, that witless cretin is more magnificently witless and more cretinously cretin than you can ever be."[36] Shakespeare's Iago, for instance, is more devious and malignant and deceptive than any ordinary person with a chip on their shoulder, and as a recent London production of Shakespeare's *Othello* has shown very effectively, such a part is perhaps better played by several actors rather than one.[37]

Needless to say, recollections of a distinct but comparably heightened intensity recur in the memoirs and reflections of a great many revolutionary actors—to limit ourselves to the Russian sequence, think of the accounts composed by John Reed, Nikolai Sukhanov, Leon Trotsky, Victor Serge, and so on. From the actors' perspective, what's most important is not whether a role is scripted or improvised, but how fully and vividly it is played; what matters is how far an actor, confronted by an unexpected situation, can draw on all of the experiences, capacities, and precedents at play in it. Not for nothing was the short-lived but world-expanding revolution of 1905 quickly understood, both in its wake and in 1917, as a great "rehearsal" for the full revolution that must follow it. Those thousands of far-flung actors who, in early March 1917, so quickly and forcefully reinvented the Soviets or councils that some of them had improvised a dozen years before were that much better prepared to take up

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[33] Rosa Luxemburg, "The Russian Revolution" [November 1918], in Rosa Luxemburg, *The Russian Revolution and Leninism or Marxism?* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1961), 80. György Lukács's sharp critique of Luxemburg's analysis of the Russian Revolution is best read, then, largely as a matter of relative emphasis—he accuses her of failing to appreciate the full importance of "*the role of the party* in the revolution and of its conscious political action." See György Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* [1923] (London: Merlin Press, 1967), 275. "The conscious, organised planning of the economy can only be introduced consciously", by an actor willing and able to do so, Lukács insists, "for socialism would never happen 'by itself,' and as the result of an inevitable natural economic development" (282).

[34] "The idea which I have never ceased to develop is that in the end one is always responsible for what is made of one. Even if one can do nothing else besides assume this responsibility. For I believe that a man can always make something out of what is made of him. This is the limit I would today accord to freedom: the small movement which makes of a totally conditioned social being someone who does not render back completely what his conditioning has given him." Jean-Paul Sartre, "Itinerary of a Thought," *New Left Review* vol. I/58 (November 1969), 45.

[35] Konstantin Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares* (New York: Routledge/Theatre Arts, 1936), 247.

[36] Dale Moffitt, *Between Two Silences; Talking with Peter Brook* (London: Methuen, 1999), 60. Expanding on Diderot's *Paradox of the Actor*, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe takes this a step further: "the less actors are 'themselves,' the better they are able to act." See Peter Hallward, "Stagings of Mimesis: An Interview with Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe," *Angelaki*, vol. 8, no. 2 (2003), 62.

[37] Shakespeare's *Othello*, (dir.) Sinéad Rushe, Riverside Studios, London (4–29 October 2023), [https://www.sineadrushe.co.uk/othello].

the demanding and thoroughly "excessive" or transgressive role that this new situation required, and to insist on the eventual transfer of "*all* power to the Soviets."[38]

4. At the root of this general capacity for action, and for this excess or discrepancy between the performer and the role, is the essential principle, as ancient as theatre itself, that any performer can play any role. It is precisely this versatility, of course, that famously led Plato to banish theatre from his well-ordered republic, one in which everyone should identify with their duly assigned role—in which shoemakers make shoes, navigators navigate, guardians guard, and so on. Disorder threatens if servants can play their masters, or if peasants can pretend to perform the roles of kings or warriors. Such pretensions already anticipate a world in which, as C.L.R. James liked to note, after Lenin, "any cook can govern."[39]

This is the claim taken up by Jacques Rancière, not least via his far-reaching critique of Plato's republic as the paradigmatic instance of a "police order," and explored to great effect all through his neo-Maoist and most radically egalitarian works of the 1970s and 80s in particular: in principle anyone, however they might be socially positioned or classified, can learn to think and do whatever anyone else can think or do.[40] It's also the principle developed over a lifetime of remarkable work, both as a philosopher and a dramaturg, by Jean-Luc Nancy's collaborator Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe.[41]

The broader philosophical point is still best evoked, I think, via Rousseau: since the qualities he assigns to a basic human "nature" are too indeterminate and open-ended to do more than encourage people to pursue what they take to be their well-being or *bien-être*, and (via compassion or pity) the well-being of others with whom they might "identify,"[42] so then the decisive political question concerns the ways in which people may "denature" themselves, by expanding their capacity for identifying and acting with others. What someone might want or will is fundamentally in excess of who they might "be," and the more collective or general a will becomes, the more it grows in power and capacity.[43] It is this essentially relative and relational quality of the will, our essentially variable "will-power," which explains why we can never "know what our nature permits us to be."[44] It is our willing and acting, and not our being or nature, that demonstrates what is possible or practicable. "We are always strong enough to do what we strongly will," Rousseau insists: "*Volenti nihil difficile*—nothing is difficult for those who will." Nothing is difficult, in particular, for those whose will is "de-natured," and expanded via voluntary association with others, and who thus identify above all as participants of collective projects that are bigger than themselves.[45]

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[38] For an especially compelling and detailed account of this sequence, see David Mandel, *The Petrograd Workers in the Russian Revolution: February 1917–June 1918* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

[39] C. L. R. James, "Every Cook Can Govern: A Study of Democracy in Ancient Greece and its Meaning for Today" [1956], *Marxists.org* (2003), [https://www.marxists.org/archive/james-clr/works/1956/06/every-cook.htm], accessed June 4, 2024. For the same reason, as long as this condition does *not* apply, in politics as in theatre, so then it must be corrected by whatever affirmative action is required.

[40] See in particular Jacques Rancière, *Proletarian Nights: The Workers" Dream in Nineteenth-Century France* (London: Verso Books, 2012); Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991). Cf. Hallward, "Rancière and the Subversion of Mastery," *Paragraph*, vol. 28, no. 1 (Summer 2005), 26–45; Jussi Palmusaari, *For Revolt: Rancière, Abstract Space and Emancipation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023).

[41] For an overview, see Hallward and Lacoue-Labarthe, "Stagings of Mimesis."

[42] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origins and Foundation of Inequality Among Men* [1755], in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, (ed.) V. Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 152–53.

[43] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or, On Education* [1762], in *Collected Writings of Rousseau*, *Vol. 13,* (ed.) C. Kelly (Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2010), 215.

[44] Rousseau, *Emile*, 190.

[45] Rousseau, *Emile*, 494, 164. A person "denatured" and thereby "expanded" via voluntary association with others soon discovers that "his faculties are exercised and developed, his ideas enlarged, his sentiments ennobled, his entire soul is elevated to such an extent" that he becomes—unlike the "stupid and bounded animal" that subsists in a solitary state of nature—an actor equipped with "moral freedom, which alone makes man truly

As ordinary English usage again suggests, actors can be individuals or groups, and one of Sartre's great achievements was to have proposed, over the course of his philosophy, an account of action that encompasses both dimensions. In his early work, Sartre explored the solitary dramas of a consciousness that, though entirely "exposed" to its situation (and lacking any inward "reserve" or interiority), found itself condemned to make decisions based on an ultimately opaque and "unanalysable" freedom; to appeal to explicit motives or intentions, in *Being and Nothingness* (1943), is already to deny the radically indeterminate spontaneity of freedom per se. Sartre's later and palpably neo-Rousseauist work, however, refined in part through his critique of French colonialism and then developed more systematically in his unfinished *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960), foregrounds collective action and collective commitments over time: in conditions of scarcity and competition, an initially atomised gathering of people can come together to make common cause as a "group in fusion," can "pledge" their dedication to the unfolding project, then organise its forces and build the institutions required to achieve it—while at the same time, and for the same reason, running the unavoidable risk of creating newly bureaucratised forms of domination and alienation.

Fanon was among the first and most enthusiastic readers of Sartre's *Critique*.[46] Drawing expressly on Sartre's dialectical logic, and again echoing Rousseau, Fanon likewise stressed the transformative effect of personal commitment to the revolutionary cause, as much during the period of armed struggle as

> during the period of national construction, [when] each citizen ought to continue in his real, everyday activity to associate himself with the whole of the nation…and to will the triumph of man in his completeness here and now. If the building of a bridge does not enrich the awareness of those who work on it, then that bridge ought not to be built and the citizens can go on swimming across the river or going by boat….In this way, and in this way only, everything is possible.[47]

5. If in principle any actor can play any role, what an actual actor actually plays, in any given situation, is always a specific role or combination of roles. A performer does not just learn to become an actor in general; they prepare for a particular character or role, for a particular stage in a particular context, and aim to learn to do whatever the part requires.

When it is a matter of political action, Rousseau and Marx, as well as Lenin or Fanon, speak less of political "actors" in general than they do of the specific roles that people can come to play, as "citizens" or "patriots" or "proletarians" or "communists" or "Algerians" or "pan-Africanists," or as members of a trade union, a popular militia, a vanguard party, and so on. The communist actors in Marx and Engels's conception of things, for instance, "do not form a separate party opposed to the other working-class parties," and nothing about their being or interests sets them "apart from the proletariat as a whole." What distinguishes the communists of the *Manifesto* is only their learned capacity to play a vanguard *role*—their ability to foreground, in any given struggle or course of action, "the common interests of the entire proletariat, independently of all nationality." Having learned how to identify and pursue the objectives of the workers' movement as a whole, the Communists then figure as, "practically, the most advanced and resolute section of the working-class parties of every

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the master of himself." Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *On the Social Contract* [1762], in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writing*s (ed.) V. Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 53–54.

[46] David Macey, *Frantz Fanon: A Biography* (New York: Picador, 2000), 452. Robert Bernasconi, "Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* as the Fulfillment of Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason*," *Sartre Studies International* vol. 16, no. 2 (2010), 36–46. Ben Etherington, "An Answer to the Question, What Is Decolonization?: Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* and Jean-Paul Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason*," *Modern Intellectual History*, vol. 13, no. 1 (2016), 151–78.

[47] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* [1961] (New York: Grove, 1968), 200–201; cf. Leah Gordon, *Creolizing Political Theory: Reading Rousseau Through Fanon* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).

country" and, theoretically, as their most lucid and understanding leaders.[48] What most distinguishes Lenin from other early followers of Marx and Engels is surely the intensity and scope of the "heroic scenario" he inferred from their work, a scenario that cast the Russian proletariat in the role of an inspired political leader so heroic, so lucid, and so resolute as to deserve the support and loyalty of the people as whole.[49]

It is by playing the particular roles of citizen or militant or patriot or internationalist that actors develop what the sociologist and historian Charles Tilly usefully calls a "repertoire of collective action" or "contention," a range of possible actions that might include demonstrations, petitions, rallies, tax revolts, food riots, boycotts, strikes, and so on. Contending pairs of actors ("bosses and workers, peasants and landlords, rival nationalist factions," etc.) make competing claims upon each other, and as Tilly explains, "the theatrical metaphor" of a repertoire

> calls attention to the clustered, learned, yet improvisational character of people's interactions as they make and receive each other's claims…Like a jazz trio or an improvising theatre group, people who participate in contentious politics normally have several pieces they can play, but not an infinity….On the whole, when people make collective claims, they innovate within limits set by the repertoire already established for their place, time, and pair. Social movement activists in today's European cities adopt some mixture of public meetings, press statements, demonstrations, and petitions, but stay away from suicide bombing, hostage taking, and self-immolation. Their repertoire draws on a long history of previous struggles.[50]

The point is easily illustrated by the sorts of repertoire developed by insurgent actors over the course of the great revolutionary sequences in Russia or France. Close-knit working class districts like the Vyborg in Petrograd played a pivotal role in the massing and mobilising of popular pressure in 1917, for instance, just as the sans-culotte faubourgs of Saint-Antoine and Saint-Marcel played a decisive role in the great *journées* of 1792 and 1793. Fine-grained studies of these neighbourhoods testify to the decisive role repeatedly played by a number of leading figures or spokespeople (for instance, in the district of Saint-Marcel, people like Claude François Lazowski and Mathias Hu), in combination with disciplined and well-organised expressions of mass support.[51] In the French case, it was the shared experience of sustained mobilisation, in their local neighbourhoods, their market-places, their sectional assemblies, their political clubs, their National Guard units, and so on, that served to organise the forms of solidarity and shared sense of purpose required to prepare and carry out the great mass actions of 13–14 July or 5–6 October 1789, and above all the régime-changing

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[48] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* [1848], part 2, in *Marx & Engels Collected Works, Vol. 6* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 497.

[49] The scope and sequence of this scenario is already fully sketched out by the famous concluding sentence of Lenin's first major work: "When the advanced representatives of this class assimilate the ideas of scientific socialism and the idea of the historical role of the Russian worker—when these ideas receive a broad dissemination—when durable organisations are created among the workers that transform the present uncoordinated economic war of the workers into a purposive class struggle,—then the Russian worker, elevated to the head of all democratic elements, will overthrow absolutism and lead the Russian proletariat (side by side with the proletariat of all countries) by the direct road of open political struggle to the victorious communist revolution." Vladimir Lenin, *Who are the Friends of the People* [1894], cited and discussed by Lars T. Lih, *Lenin* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011), 46–51.

[50] Charles Tilly, *Contentious Performances* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 14–15; see also Tilly, *From Mobilisation to Revolution* (New York: Random House), 229–30; Alpaugh, *Non-Violence and the French Revolution*, Chapter 2.

[51] Haim Burstin, *Une Révolution à l'œuvre. Le faubourg Saint-Marcel (1789–1794)* (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 2005); Burstin, *Révolutionnaires*, Chapter 3; Mandel, *Petrograd Workers*, Chapter 2; S. A. Smith, *Red Petrograd: Revolution in the Factories, 1917–1918* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2017), Chapter 1. See also Paul Friedland, *Political Actors: Representative Bodies and Theatricality in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2002).

insurrection of the 10th of August 1792.[52] At the same time, it was the readiness of a sufficient portion of the rest of the country to authorise insurgent Paris to act on their behalf that allowed this insurrection to proceed as a national and not merely municipal project—as Robespierre put it, since their action saved *la patrie*, "the friends of liberty," who gathered in Paris that August "acted in the name of all the departments," and their actions "ought to be regarded as justified by tacit proxy for the whole of society."[53] In 1792 as again in 1793, and again in 1830, 1848 and 1871, perhaps the single most decisive part in the revolutionary drama will be played by a new institution established under popular pressure in the summer of 1789: the National Guard. A recurring source of tension, across these several decades, through to its bloody last stand in May 1871, will remain the principle of recruitment to this critical para-military body: which people, which actors, are authorised to play this role, don this uniform, and enforce the will of the people or the decrees of the government? Will it be reserved to the "respectable" and responsible tax-paying few, as urged by moderates like Mirabeau and Le Chapelier? Or will it be open to everyone and anyone, as demanded by Robespierre and Marat?[54]

Likewise, in revolutionary Petrograd, it was the shared experience of working in the same factories, serving in the same regiments, attending the same meetings, living in the same crowded and impoverished neighbourhoods, and so on, that allowed for an epochal shift in the level of popular expectations, and in a readiness to act on them, including a readiness to enlist in their own improvised militia or "Red Guards."[55] In a distant echo of the pivotal women's march on Versailles on 5 October 1789, such readiness tipped over into decisive action on 23 February 1917 when the working women of Petrograd, in defiance of the prevailing caution, resolved to celebrate international women's day *en masse*—and by doing so, forced a confrontation that soon toppled the tsar and triggered a crisis of sovereignty that only the Bolsheviks would prove able to resolve.

If the Bolshevik leader Lenin emerged not only as a dominant figure in revolutionary *émigré* circles but also among the local militants or *praktiki* of the capital city, it is above all thanks to his indomitable confidence in the urban working class as a vanguard actor, as the insurgent leader for the nation as a whole. Lenin is carried, and carries others, by his faith in the transformative power of conscious awareness and purpose, and by his faith in the proletariat as an actor inspired by the grandeur of its historic role, its mission to free itself and the world as well.[56] "The time has come," as he puts it in *What Is To Be Done?* (1902), "when Russian revolutionaries, guided by a genuinely revolutionary theory, relying upon the genuinely revolutionary and spontaneously awakening class, can at last—at long last!—rise to full stature in all their giant strength." In this as in so many of his polemical arguments, Lenin is most condemning of those who doubt the workers' capacity to play the new and demanding role that Marxist theory prescribes for them. Such doubt "means belittling the initiative and energy of class-conscious fighters, whereas Marxism, on the contrary, gives a gigantic impetus to the initiative and energy of the Social-Democrat, opens up for him the widest perspectives and (if one may so express it) places at his disposal the mighty force of millions

[52] See in particular Marcel Reinhard, *La Chute de la Royauté: 16 août 1792* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969); Wahnich, *La longue patience du peuple*, 375–428.
[53] Maximilien Robespierre, "Answer to Louvet's Accusation" [5 November 1792], in Maximilien Robespierre, *Virtue and Terror*, (ed.) S. Žižek (London: Verso, 2007), 43.
[54] Maximilien Robespierre, "On the Silver Mark" [April 1791], in *Ibid.*, 5–19; cf. Florence Devenne, "La Garde Nationale: création et évolution (1789–août 1792)," *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, no. 283 (1990), 49–66.
[55] Smith, *Red Petrograd*; Alexander Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks Come to Power: The Revolution of 1917 in Petrograd* (London: Pluto Press, 2017).
[56] See in particular Lars T. Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered: What is to be Done? in Context* (Leiden: Brill, 2005); Lih, *Lenin*.

and millions of workers 'spontaneously' rising for the struggle!"[57] Fifteen years later Lenin's confidence in "the people's initiative and independence," in the "strength, majesty and invincibility of the workers and peasants," remains undaunted, and underlies his commitment to the transfer of all sovereign power to their collective councils or Soviets:[58]

> If the Soviets now take full state power exclusively into their own hands for the purpose of carrying out the [the people's most pressing demands], they will not only obtain the support of nine-tenths of the population of Russia, the working class and an overwhelming majority of the peasantry; they will also be assured of the greatest revolutionary enthusiasm on the part of the army and the majority of the people.[59]

6. To prioritise action and the actor (over subjection and behaviour) is likewise to privilege the actor's will and intentions, and with this, the whole vexed but unavoidable domain of "moral incentives."[60] In our theatrical register, the will is at the centre of Stanislavski's influential "system" for actor training, connecting the other two human faculties of feeling and intellect or judgement, and serving as the mainspring of the role and of the play as a whole, its "common" and "fundamental purpose," its guiding "channel" or "throughline of action," aiming at a specific "super-objective." In this as in every case, to will the end is to will the means. "The mistake most actors make," Stanislavski notes, "is that they think about the result instead of the action that must prepare it. By avoiding action and aiming straight at the result you get a forced product which can lead to nothing but ham acting." The priority should be instead to work on specific purposes, to develop specific means to specific ends, and to orient this series of actions towards an overarching goal. "In a play the whole stream of individual, minor objectives, all the imaginative thoughts, feelings and actions of an actor, should converge to carry out the super-objective of the plot."[61] As a result, what a director or ensemble needs to clarify is "a super-objective which is in harmony with the intentions of the playwright and at the same time arouses a response in the soul of the actors. That means that we must search for it not only in the play but in the actors themselves."[62] Or as Brook puts it,

> something is given to you from the exterior, which is different from the free movement you made previously, and yet if you assume it totally, it is the same thing, it has become yours and you have become its. If you can experience this, it will throw light on the whole question of texts, of authorship, of direction. The true actor recognises that real freedom occurs at the moment when what comes from the outside and what is brought from within make a perfect blending.[63]

As both philosopher and playwright, Sartre foregrounds the fundamental choices and decisions that give a life or a project its direction and momentum. In a 1948 interview about

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[57] Vladimir Lenin, *What is To Be Done?* [1902], in *V. I. Lenin Collected Works, Vol. 5*, (ed.) V. Jerome, (tr.) J. Fineberg and G. Hanna (Moscow: Progress, 1960), 448, 392.
[58] Vladimir Lenin, "One of the Fundamental Questions of the Revolution," [September 27, 1917], in *V. I. Lenin Collected Works, Vol. 25,* (ed.) and (tr.) Stephan Apresyan and Jim Riordan (Moscow: Progress, 1964), 270.
[59] Vladimir Lenin, "The Tasks of the Revolution," [9 October 1917], in *V. I. Lenin Collected Works Vol. 26*, (ed.) G. Hanna, (tr.) Y. Sdobnikov and G. Hanna (Moscow: Progress, 1964), 68.
[60] On Che Guevara's insistence on the centrality of moral incentives, see for instance Che Guevara, "A New Culture of Work," in *The Che Guevara Reader: Writings on Politics and Revolution*, (ed.) D. Deutschmann (Melbourne: Ocean Press, 2012), 146; Che Guevara, "Socialism and Man in Cuba," in *Ibid*., 217. See also Olivier Besancenot and Michael Löwy, *Che Guevara: His Revolutionary Legacy* (New York: Monthly Review, 2009), 69–70; Helen Yaffe, *Che Guevara: The Economics of Revolution* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 203–04, 257–61.
[61] Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, 117, 271. "Above all preserve your super-objective and through-line of action. Be wary of all extraneous tendencies and purposes foreign to the main theme" (278). It's the working out of one's purpose and will that is decisive, and not empty appeals to "inspiration": "devote yourself to what lies within the realm of human conscious control. Put a role on the right road and it will move ahead. It will grow broader and deeper and will in the end lead to inspiration" (280).
[62] Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, 301.
[63] Peter Brook, *There Are No Secrets: Thoughts on Acting and Theatre* (London: Methuen, 1993), 69.

his 1943 play *The Flies*, for instance, he foregrounds the decision that settles the fate of the central character Orestes, who confirms his choice of freedom through alignment with his people. "In the theatre, on the stage as in life, this free choice always means a genuine liberation, and the main thing in the end is the will to liberation. It is the expression of a freedom asserting itself."[64]

The broader category of action is itself fundamentally bound up with "the execution of a volition," as a well-known dictionary of philosophy puts it,[65] or as at least "intentional under some description."[66] Genuine intentions lead to actions when their actors acquire the capacities required to act on them. "An adequate theory of agency must be a theory of the causal *powers* persons have," adds Alex Callinicos, and "intentional explanations of human action, invoking beliefs and desires as reasons for acting, are necessary because of the peculiar kind of living organisms human beings are," organisms equipped with the capacity to reflect on our preferences and to change our minds, our priorities, and our chosen course of action. If all "action-explanations contain a hidden premiss referring to the agent's power to perform the action in question," the actual scope of such power varies with what Callinicos calls an actor's "structural capacities," themselves largely shaped (in our capitalist societies) by the prevailing relations of production, *i.e.* the relative balance of class forces.[67] The enduring argument in favour of the working class as the only organised actor powerful and determined enough to challenge capital's grip over society is well summarised by Ellen Wood: despite all attempts to co-opt, divide, or distract it,

> the working class is the only social group possessing not only an immediate interest in resisting capitalist exploitation but also a collective power adequate to end it…however difficult it may be to construct socialist practice out of popular consciousness, there is, according to this view, no other material out of which it can be constructed and no other socialism that is consistent with both political realism and democratic values. Perhaps the point is simply that socialism will come about either in this way or not at all.[68]

To prioritise the actor, then, is first of all to pay attention to what actors say and do, and to what they say they want to do. It is also to address head-on the fraught question of an actor's sincerity or integrity. What does it mean to judge an actor's intentions or declarations as genuine and reliable? This is a question whose complexity, in a theatrical context, was anticipated as much by Diderot's *Paradox of the Actor* as by Rousseau's *Letter to d'Alembert*; its political urgency is self-evident for any group in which—as for Babeuf's Conspiracy of Equals, or the organisations led by figures like Blanqui or Lenin, or by Emiliano Zapata and Charlemagne Péralte—trust is unavoidably a matter of life or death. It should be equally clear, however, that in these contexts sincerity can be nothing more or less than a dimension of acting itself, and can only be judged according to its manifestations, as "just an act." As Robespierre and some of his associates would learn to their cost, it is a tragic category error (and a version of Othello's disastrous mistake) to seek out "ocular proof" of actors' intentions as such, as if these might be discerned in hidden isolation from what they do.

7. The scope and capacity of an actor's will varies most obviously with its extension and reach, its ability to expand or generalise across the limits of a situation. Michael Chekhov, in his *To the Actor*, gives an evocative sense of the transformative effect of what happens when the general "atmosphere" of a situation, in life or on stage, comes to align the will of the

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[64] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Sartre on Theatre*, (ed.) M. Contat and M. Rybalka (New York: Pantheon, 1976), 196.
[65] André Lalande et al., "Action," *Vocabulaire technique et critique de la philosophie* [1926] (Paris: PUF, 1997), 20–21.
[66] Donald Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events* [1980] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 50.
[67] Alex Callinicos, *Making History: Agency, Structure and Change in Social Theory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 274–77.
[68] Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism*, 103.

actors involved, such that the atmosphere of the moment—for instance one of grief, or happiness, or of awkward silence, etc.—appears to transcend its participants. "Have you ever noticed how," he asks, "unwittingly, you change your movements, speech, behaviour, thoughts and feelings as soon as you create a strong, contagious atmosphere, and how it increases its influence upon you if you accept it and succumb to it willingly?" This influence, or "urge," Chekhov argues, arises from "the *will*, from the dynamic or driving power (call it what you like) which lives within the atmosphere. Experiencing, for instance, an atmosphere of happiness, you will find that its will awakens in you the desire to expand, extend, open, spread yourself, burst forth, gain space….There is no atmosphere deprived of the inner dynamic, life and will," since a prevailing atmosphere is itself nothing other than a generalising of the wills of its participants.[69]

In Rousseau's political variant of this logic, what is at stake here is the expansion of a common purpose or priorities, the generalising of a will across the myriad differences and particularisms that tend to divide people and undermine their commitment to the common good. As a rule, the more an association or "state expands, the more its real force increases," and "the most general will is also the most just."[70] A good example is the way the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) came to play a decisive role in the early years of the civil rights movement, when, guided by Ella Baker and led by the likes of Bob Moses and James Forman, it developed expansive means of encouraging mass participation and direct confrontation with local power structures.[71] Tested by their experience as freedom riders and then as community organisers,

> after 1961, SNCC members were increasingly viewed as the movement's shock troops. They were able to quickly mobilize people to go to sites of intensified racial conflict: Birmingham in 1963, Selma in 1965, and James Meredith's short-circuited one-man march from Memphis, Tennessee, to Jackson, Mississippi, in the summer of 1966. And the activists were willing to take on difficult and dangerous organizing challenges— such as voter registration in the Mississippi Delta—that other civil rights groups were unwilling to touch.[72]

8. If willing leads to acting, and if to will an end is to will the means, so then the capacity of an actor's will also varies with its intensity and resolve, its ability to act on a decision or to realise a purpose. There is a principled difference between merely wanting or *wishing* something, and actively *willing* its achievement.[73] For Chekhov as for Stanislavski, clarity in acting is above all clarity about a character's objectives, and their development of specific strategies for pursuing them.[74] As is well known, on this score Rousseau immediately complicates his own position: the more general or extended a will the more its exercise will tend to slacken, for people care most about what most directly concerns them. "The people's force acts only when concentrated, it evaporates and is lost as it spreads."[75] Any increase in extensity must be compensated by an increase in intensity. Hence the recurring challenge that

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[69] Michael Chekhov, *To the Actor* (New York: Harper and Row, 1953), 50–51.
[70] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, 88; Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on Political Economy* [1755], in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writing*s (ed.) V. Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 8.
[71] See in particular Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Clayborne Carson*, In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).
[72] Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 267; see also 278–281.
[73] See for instance Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, (ed.) M. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 8; Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, (ed.) Q. Hoare and G. Nowell-Smith (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1973), 175.
[74] See for instance, Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, Chapter 15; Chekhov, *To the Actor*, 154–66; see also Sinéad Rushe, *Michael Chekhov's Acting Technique: A Practitioner's Guide* (London: Methuen, 2019), 255–57, 266–71.
[75] Rousseau, *Social Contract*, 104.

confronts any mass organisation that aims to be both effective and democratic, *i.e.* the challenge addressed by versions of a "democratic centralism," a "mass line," a vanguard leadership, and so on. Hence too the particular challenge posed by the need to retain control over what remains the most decisive means of action: the use of coercive force.

Having understood, in the midst of the revolutions of 1848, that if the workers were to retain independent revolutionary initiative they "must be armed and organized,"[76] in 1871 Marx was quick to applaud the Paris Commune's "first decree": its immediate "suppression of the standing army, and the substitution for it of the armed people."[77] Themselves informed by the Commune's fate, Lenin and Trotsky never forgot that what ultimately decides the outcome of a revolutionary sequence is the relative balance of forces. In situations where the ultimate determinant of this balance rests in the hands of an army or its equivalent (and leaving to one side the question as to how far this remains the case for us today), "the fate of every revolution at a certain point is decided by a break in the disposition of the army."[78] In his *History of the Russian Revolution*, Trotsky includes an account of the collective psychological drama that culminates in such a point, and it's an account that might serve as a model for organised resolution more generally. As a crisis grows more acute and the ranks of rebels or would-be rebels grows (as came to be the case in January-February 1917), more and more soldiers may be ready to mutiny, but they will hesitate so long as they are not confident of their leadership and success. Eventually, however, "the critical hour of contact" between the soldiers and the rebels will reach its "critical minute," and then its "critical second," when the actions of one side or the other will decide the issue:

> In this process there are many elements imponderable or difficult to weigh, many crosscurrents, collective suggestions and autosuggestions. But out of this complicated web of material and psychic forces one conclusion emerges with irrefutable clarity: the more the soldiers in their mass are convinced that the rebels are really rebelling—that this is not a demonstration after which they will have to go back to the barracks and report, that this is a struggle to the death, that the people may win if they join them, and that this winning will not only guarantee impunity, but alleviate the lot of all—the more they realise this, the more willing they are to turn aside their bayonets, or go over with them to the people. In other words, the revolutionaries can create a break in the soldiers' mood only if they themselves are actually ready to seize the victory at any price whatever, even the price of blood. And the highest determination never can, or will, remain unarmed.[79]

This is a point that Haiti's revolutionaries had already learned, in the most bitterly contested conditions, as over the course of the 1790s and early 1800s they confronted and defeated the most powerful imperial armies of the day.[80] It's a lesson that many thousands of these victorious revolutionaries remembered when, as they settled on a post-revolutionary

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[76] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "Address of the Central Authority to the League" [March 1850], in *Marx & Engels Collected Works, Vol. 10* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 283.
[77] Karl Marx, *The Civil War in France* [1871], in *Marx & Engels Collected Works, Vol. 22* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 331.
[78] Leon Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution* [1930] (Chicago: Haymarket, 2008), 89.
[79] Leon Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution*, 89–90. "He who desires the end must desire the means," repeats Trotsky in 1922. "Pacifist propaganda among the workers leads only to weakening the will of the proletariat, and helps counter-revolutionary violence, armed to the teeth, to continue." See Leon Trotsky, "The Path of the Red Army" [21 May 1922], in *The Military Writings of Leon Trotsky, Vol. 1,* (tr. Brian Pearce), [https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1918/military/ch02.htm], accessed June 4, 2024; see also Leon Trotsky, *Terrorism and Communism: A Reply to Karl Kautsky* [1920] (London: Verso, 2007).
[80] See in particular C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* [1938] (New York: Random House, 1963): "What happened in San Domingo after Leclerc's death is one of those pages in history which every schoolboy should learn, and most certainly will learn, some day…. For self-sacrifice and heroism, the men, women and children who drove out the French stand second to no fighters for independence in any place or time. And the reason was simple. They had seen at last that without independence they could not maintain their liberty, and liberty was far more concrete for former slaves than the elusive forms of political democracy in France" (356–57).

order for their liberated territory, they retained their weapons and secured what they most wanted: access to their own land, and the freedom to work and live on it as they pleased.[81]

It's no accident, too, that Haiti remained a pre-eminent point of reference for radical abolitionists in the USA, in the years running up to the civil war. As W.E.B. Du Bois showed in his pioneering account of the war and the compromised reconstruction that followed it, what decided its orientation and outcome was mass slave rebellion in the South.[82] The slaves' "general strike" undermined the war effort in the southern states, while their mass enlistment greatly strengthened the military capacities of the North. When the war ended, however, the former slaves were quickly disarmed by their Union commanders. In the postwar southern states, unlike postwar Haiti, the destitute freedmen lacked the means to secure those "forty acres and a mule" they were briefly promised in 1865, and were left largely defenceless in the face of what became the Ku Klux Klan and Jim Crow. No guns in hand, no redistribution of land. (It's also no accident that the state-sanctioned history of America's "second reconstruction," *i.e.* the battle for legal or civil rights in the 1950s and 60s, invariably emphasises the transformative moral power of non-violence, and downplays or ignores entirely the various ways in which, to quote Charles Cobb's telling subtitle, "guns made the civil rights movement possible").[83]

9. Assertion of an actor's will, however, is not just a matter of scope and execution; a will remains a will only to the extent that it persists as freely chosen, *i.e.* as *voluntary*. A will is sustained not only by enthusiastic commitment to a role that is always "bigger" and more expansive than the performers themselves, but also by their ability to retain a degree of critical distance from the role itself. As any actor knows, to be an "authentic" performer is to refuse the "bad faith" of full identification with their role, however sympathetic this role might be. Sartre was again right about this, as much in his early discussions of *mauvaise foi* as in his later analyses of the way a committed group or collective may degenerate over time, into an increasingly rigid bureaucrat machine.[84] Always on the look-out for the traps that may lead us to make "deadly theatre," Peter Brook too is eloquent here, in his retention of Brecht as an essential point of reference for our day:

> The hardest task of all for an actor is to be sincere yet detached—it is drummed into an actor that sincerity is all he needs. With its moral overtones, the word causes great confusion. In a way, the most powerful feature of the Brecht actors is the degree of their *insincerity*. It is only through detachment that an actor will see his own clichés.[85]

An actor only remains an actor, in short, on the same condition that a will remains actively willing—both actor and will may avoid cliché, and may resist developing into new routines or new machines, insofar as they remain self-critical and self-questioning.

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[81] See in particular Carolyn E. Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991). As Johnhenry Gonzalez shows in an important recent study, Haiti's densely populated peasant society, and its apparently "disorderly" landscape, are best understood as "the willful creations of an independent-minded people who historically took advantage of an impenetrable and fiscally illegible landscape in order to flee forced labour, predatory taxation, and state repression." Johnhenry Gonzalez, *Maroon Nation*: *A History* of *Revolutionary Haiti* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 2.

[82] W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction* [1935], (ed.) E. Foner (New York: Library Of America, 2021).

[83] Charles E. Cobb Jr. *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed: How Guns Made the Civil Rights Movement Possible* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014); Lance Hill, *The Deacons for Defense: Armed Resistance and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006). See also Robert F. Williams, *Negroes with Guns* [1962] (Mansfield Centre, CT; Martino Publishing, 2013); Joshua Bloom and Waldo Martin, *Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), 27–28, 42–43, 85–90.

[84] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* [1943] (London: Routledge Classics, 2003), 70–90; Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason, Vol. 1: Theory of Practical Ensembles* [1960] (London: Verso, 2004).

[85] Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (New York: Atheneum, 1968), 116.

Every form of essentialism, from appeals to the "natural" categories of gender and race to the historically sanctioned authenticities of culture and history, undercuts the critical distance between actor and role required for any voluntary account of action. Exemplified as much by Stalinist workerism as by racialist supremacy, the general logic of bad faith was already exposed by Hegel's famous reading of *Antigone*, in his recognition that what destroys both Creon and his defiant niece is their wholesale identification with the roles that their society prescribes for them: their actions have been decided in advance, and the consequences of their "immediate *decisiveness*" are then doomed to unfold like mere forces of nature.[86]

In summary, to prioritise the actor, as an answer to the question of what or who comes after the subject, is to affirm a series of related principles. An actor's action begins with a beginning, with some kind of entrance or excess over what could previously be done in a situation. An actor wills and acts in excess over their subjective being or identity, beyond the limits of who they apparently *are*. In both its political and theatrical dimensions, actor training is a kind of general capacity building. Actors' capacities are not limited in advance by natural or social constraints, for instance by their scale, scope, place of origin, or terrain of emergence; in principle anyone can play any role, if they are prepared to learn and do what the role requires. Every role and action, however, is in each case particular to its context and specific to its purpose. What is determinant of action in the first instance is an actor's will and intentions, *i.e.* their chosen moral incentives, but the capacity of an actor's will to realise its intentions varies with both its extension or generality and its intensity or means of execution. Any actor, finally, if their action is to remain voluntary, must retain a degree of critical distance from their role, and cultivate a readiness for self-criticism.

On these conditions, what comes after the subject are actors, in all of the roles we are willing and able to take on. There is much to be done.

[86] Georg W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit* [1807], (ed.) and (tr.) T. Pinkard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), §465.