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SECOND SERIES

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PROGRAMME NOTES

Susan Watkins: The Political State of the Union

Debt, deflation and stagnation have now become the familiar economic stigmata of the EU. But what of its political distortions? A survey of the three principal—and steadily worsening—imbalances in the outcome of European integration: the oligarchic cast of its governors, the lop-sided rise of Germany, and the declining autonomy of the Union as a whole in the North Atlantic universe.

Bhaskar Sunkara: Project *Jacobin*

Opening a series on new radical media, the founder of the most imaginative, and successful, US socialist journal of the new century explains how it was created, what its editorial and political strategy has been, and why it has met such a warm response.

Daniel Finn: Rethinking the Republic

Nowhere else in the West does a single figure occupy the same position in national life as the political writer Fintan O'Toole in Ireland. The first full consideration of the *cursus* and *corpus* of this powerful critic of the island's establishment, and the society over which it has presided. Merits and limitations of another understanding of 'republicanism' in Ireland.

Francesco Fiorentino: Ambition

How and when did ambition cease to be a moral fault in the European mind and acquire the trappings of ambiguous virtue it possesses in modern times? The ardent hero of Stendhal's novel of Restoration France as cynosure of the change, and its implications for the social order.

Enrica Villari: Duty

In diametric contrast, a sense of duty as the condition of an ethical life in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. No longer, however, dictated by tradition or convention, but designed as individual choice—in illusion or fulfillment—through the modest routines of daily life.

Gopal Balakrishnan: The Abolitionist—i

Opening salvo of a two-part reconstruction of Marx's intellectual passage through the Hegelian—then Ricardian—conceptual landscape of his early years, taking him to the threshold of his mature architectonics of capitalism as a mode of production. From a starting-point in the philosophical empyrean of the 1830s to a turning-point with the economic upturn of the early 1850s, the development of one sketch of an historical materialism to the brink of another.

BOOK REVIEWS

Vivek Chibber on Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen, *An Uncertain Glory: India and its Contradictions*. Sombre balance-sheet of the failures of Indian development, and remedies insufficient for them.

Michael Denning on Nikil Saval, *Cubed: The Secret History of the Workplace*. Transitions from counting-house to typing-pool to playpen, as capital's designers sought to contain the discontents of labour.

Blair Ogden on Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life*. The lost wanderer of legend in new and more searching biographical light.

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SUSAN WATKINS

Editorial

THE POLITICAL STATE OF THE UNION

If economic malaise is now becoming a global phenomenon, with the slow-down in China and Japan, its most acute political manifestations are still concentrated in Europe. One reason for this is the severity of the slump in the Eurozone, where output and investment are still far below 2008 levels, unemployment is pegged at double digits and the combined effects of fiscal retrenchment and credit crunch have depressed demand still further, while surplus capital floods to London and Zurich. The fall in Italian and Spanish bond spreads has more to do with short-term central-bank liquidity than any improvement in underlying conditions: national debt levels are higher than ever, vulnerable to the least tremor of volatility; over-extended banks are exposed to emerging-market shocks; the German powerhouse is dependent on weakening external demand.

But Europe's political imbalances are now at least as stark as its economic ones. The financial crisis caught the EU's monetary and fiscal systems half-built, and emergency structures have been thrown up in the midst of the storm. Far from disintegrating, as catastrophists predicted, the EU has tightened and hardened, twisting its supra-national institutions to serve purposes undreamt of by their architects, while sharpening divisions between its citizens. Yet these asymmetries have a pre-history. Since the onset of the long downturn in the early seventies, the European polity has been subject to a set of structural torsions, encompassing three distinct dimensions: civic-democratic relations, between the rulers

and the ruled; inter-state relations, between the member countries; and geo-political relations, characterizing the bloc's external role. They have been structured in large part through European rulers' attempts to grapple with a series of shocks exogenous to the EU: the collapse of the Bretton Woods system in the early seventies, the fall of the Soviet bloc in the nineties, and the world financial crisis that exploded in 2008.

Each in turn served as a 'signal crisis', to adapt Giovanni Arrighi's term, ushering in a new political-economic configuration that would itself help to shape the subsequent shock: in the seventies and eighties, the neoliberal assault of capital against labour and the second Cold War; from the nineties, the era of globalization, financialization and the rise of China; since 2008, the new age of debt-logged stagnation, which doesn't yet have a name. What follows will trace the forms the EU's asymmetries have taken against this backdrop, arguing that the conventional solution to them—to bolster the position of the Europarliament—is a dead-end, if there is to be any hope of a re-democratization of the Union.[1]

First shocks

The political scientist Walter Dean Burnham famously noted that, while the economic system of the United States had transformed itself with unparalleled energy, the American political system had hardly changed at all: the institutions designed by the eighteenth-century planter aristocracy were still in place. Much the same could be said of the EU. The architects of European integration were born in the age of the horse-drawn carriage: Monnet and Schuman in the 1880s, Adenauer in 1876. The institutions they designed—the Commission, an over-arching executive staffed by dedicated technocrats; the inter-state Council of Ministers; the supra-national court and parliamentary assembly—embodied a very 1950s view of a modern united Europe. They were built to oversee the partial but progressive pooling of sovereignty between three large states, France, Germany and Italy, whose populations were still in good part rural—peasant farmers made up nearly 40 per cent of the French electorate—and the three small Benelux countries. This strange institutional complex contained a finely balanced set of relations:

[1] An earlier draft of this paper was given at the 2014 EuroMemorandum conference in Rome. Thanks to the organizers, especially Trevor Evans, John Grahl and Marcella Corsi, and to Dominique Plihon and Joachim Becker for their helpful criticisms.

- In geo-political terms, European integration was from the start a Cold War project supported by the State Department to strengthen the continent's capitalist economies against the Soviet threat. But for its founders it also embodied the hope of Europe as a third force, independent of both the US and the USSR. The 1957 Treaty of Rome was a direct counter to Suez and the assertion of US hegemony in the Middle East—Europe's founding exogenous shock.

- In terms of inter-state relations, the core Franco-German axis offered a balance between French military and diplomatic strength—France had a seat on the UN Security Council, an overseas empire, and would soon be an independent nuclear power—and German economic weight. Strategically, their interests were distinct but complementary: France wanted to tie its bigger neighbour down in a diplomatic compact, under its direction; Germany wanted to regain its status as an established world power and ensure French support for its eventual reunification. They were flanked respectively by Italy, usually aligned with France, and by the Benelux countries swimming in Germany's wake, staunch supporters of a supra-national framework that would offer them a larger diplomatic stage.

- In political-democratic terms the Treaty of Rome was the handiwork of the elites; European electorates were not consulted. But nor was there any strong popular opposition to what remained, in the high-growth fifties and sixties, a rather distant and nebulous construction, with the bland but unobjectionable goals of prosperity and stability.

The first shock to hit the Europe of the Six was Washington's revocation of the Bretton Woods compact and imposition of a fiat-dollar regime, against a background of intensifying economic competition in the seventies. The European response, still under French leadership, was to accelerate moves towards a unified monetary system, based on the Werner Plan, as a bulwark against international turbulence. To this end, Paris lifted the veto on British membership imposed by De Gaulle—who had warned that the UK would serve as a Trojan Horse for US interests—in the belief that the City of London would provide vital financial ballast for the new system. These changes—deeper economic integration, combined with enlargement—were complemented by a few tweaks to the EEC's institutional framework: regular summit meetings of the member-state governments in the European Council and direct

elections to the supra-national Parliament, whose seats had previously been filled by representatives from the national assemblies.

The seventies' monetary union foundered; the German economy powered ahead while the others weakened, and their currencies had to be devalued against the Deutschmark. But the conjuncture of the seventies and eighties altered the equilibria of the European Community in other, unintended ways. First, the entry of Britain brought Thatcher's forceful advocacy for financial deregulation and social-spending cuts. Backed by Mitterrand and Delors, this neo-liberal approach was written into the treaty framework with the 1986 Single European Act, albeit accompanied by a paper charter on labour rights. (The monetarist turn had a debilitating effect in France and, above all, Italy, whose national debt soared from 60 to 120 per cent of GDP in the eighties, as a result of the central bank's exorbitant interest rates; paying it down would put a long-term drag on the economy.) Second, with the overthrow of the dictatorships in Portugal, Greece and Spain in the seventies, the European Community discovered a new vocation: social engineering in its near-abroad, by building up capital-friendly centre-left parties—the Portuguese Socialists, PSOE, PASOK—often with money channelled through the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, and shepherding the new democracies into NATO. What were the outcomes for Europe's internal and external relations?

- In civic-democratic terms, the conjuncture of the seventies and eighties—the Europe of the Twelve—was rather successful. The European Community was still entirely run from above, by summit meetings and non-accountable supra-national institutions. But there was genuine popular support for European integration in Spain and successful referendums were held in the UK and Ireland; by the end of the eighties even the British Labour Party had turned pro-Europe. Living standards were generally rising; despite the free-market cast of the Single European Act, the project was seen as both socially liberal and mildly social democratic.

- In geo-political terms, the record was mixed. The attempt to create a European monetary system to compete with the dollar had failed. The second wave of enlargement was considered a success, and the European Community now had a population of 300 million, surpassing that of the US. But the project of Europe as a third force had been sapped by NATO expansion and the planting of US Cruise and

Pershing missiles in Britain and Germany; the Trojan Horse was very much inside the walls.

- In terms of inter-state equilibria, the Franco-German partnership seemed to be enjoying a golden age, with Delors leading a dynamic Commission and strong German economic growth. But in retrospect, French diplomatic leadership was already coming under pressure from Britain, which played a central role in drafting the 1986 treaty. Within France itself, the Gaullist outlook of political, intellectual and media elites was being displaced by an Atlantic liberalism that was alien to the tradition of independent strategic thought. Meanwhile the Deutschmark had emerged as Europe's currency anchor amid the monetary turmoil of the seventies; at the time of the Treaty of Rome the German economy had been just a sixth bigger than the French; by 1973, it was larger by half. France was therefore being squeezed both diplomatically, from the west, and economically, from the east. The balance between the two core states was beginning to change.

Turning point

The second exogenous shock was the disintegration of the Soviet bloc in 1989. This offered a moment of refoundation for the European polity, which had been conceived and had flourished as a Western institution, within the framework of the Cold War. The most immediate question was the unification of Germany—how should it proceed, and would the new state be neutral, or a member of the NATO alliance? How would a united Germany alter the internal balance of the EU, and what relation would Europe have to the other ex-Comecon states?

The question of German unification would provide the key to the rest. The choice was between two paths. The first was the full democratic-constitutional process foreseen by Article 146 of Germany's Basic Law, with popular consultation and input from both sides. This approach was implicit in Helmut Kohl's Ten Points of November 1989, staking the first claim for unification and calling for a transitional phase of 'confederative structures' between the two Germanies. But Article 146 would mean throwing open the question of neutrality or NATO membership, on which the West German political leadership was divided. Oskar Lafontaine, the SPD candidate for Chancellor, was sceptical enough about the Atlantic Alliance to alarm Washington. Public opinion tilted towards neutrality;

the expansion of NATO to the GDR was seen—not without reason—as an act of Western aggression, of a piece with Reagan's imposition of nuclear missiles.

International recognition for a united Germany lay in the hands of the four occupying powers: the US, Britain, France and the Soviet Union. Washington made NATO membership a condition for unification and swung its whole weight behind Kohl, who now called for fast-track accession by individual new *Länder* to the Federal Republic as it stood—i.e., inside NATO—under Article 23 of the Basic Law, an obscure mechanism which had been used for the accession of Saarland in the 1950s. This was backed by what seemed a glittering promise: a one-to-one exchange rate between the two German marks, which bought Kohl's CDU a landslide in the March 1990 GDR elections but would also bankrupt East German industry. The Soviet leaders at first dug in their heels over the expansion of NATO, but the rock-bottom oil price was proving economically catastrophic for the USSR. Gorbachev threw in his hand in May 1990 and settled for a DM15bn loan in the autumn of 1990. The voices of Günter Grass and others, calling for a constituent-democratic process, were marginalized.

Meanwhile the French—and European—response to the prospect of an economically preponderant Germany was to agree to unification only if the sovereignty of the Bundesbank could be pooled within a new, supranational institution. Delors and his committee of central bankers had already drafted a fresh blueprint for a single currency. Unlike the seventies Werner Plan, which envisaged a collective fiscal policy with a strong social dimension, the Delors Plan reflected the Friedmanite mindset of the eighties and turned upon an inflation-targeting European Central Bank. The euro was portrayed as a brilliant technocratic solution, which would not only dilute German influence but oblige old and new member states alike to streamline their economies, since devaluation would no longer be an option. Many warned at the time that the single currency envisaged by Delors would not neutralize German predominance, but enthrone it. Mitterrand, however, thought it a great diplomatic triumph to get Kohl's agreement to the Delors Plan in December 1989, formalized in the 1991 Maastricht Treaty. The French electorate and the political class would split down the middle on Maastricht—the referendum squeaked through, by 51 to 49 per cent. The Bundesbank duly exacted its price: the 1998 Stability and Growth Pact imposed strict

fiscal limits, although decisions on taxation, pensions, unemployment pay, health, education and social spending, considered sensitive enough to require electoral legitimation, were left in the hands of national governments. Creative accounting and the lavish credit of the globalization bubble helped to soften the impact of the ECB regime in the first decade of the euro's existence.

Relations with the ex-Comecon states followed the model of the GDR's absorption. Contrary to the French suggestion that Western and Eastern Europe should form a generic association, outside the EU framework, but in line with Anglo-American prescriptions, each state was individually recruited to the Union, which retained its existing form. There was no constitutional-democratic process, no refoundation of the European polity, despite the fact that its character had been radically altered: the Union now had a population of 500 million and possessed its own currency and central bank. In German terms, this was Article 23, not Article 146. The 1950s institutional complex was given a few more tweaks: voting weights in the European Council were adjusted, two new posts were created and an attempt was made to dress up the treaties as a constitution, with a high-sounding preamble—universal values, rule of law, equality, solidarity, peace.

The decisions taken at Maastricht took some years to roll out: the euro was fully operational from 2001; the incorporation of the first nine ex-Comecon states took place in 2004, followed by Romania and Bulgaria in 2007; the institutions were finally adjusted in the 2007 Lisbon Treaty, after the debacle of the Constitutional Treaty in 2005. How did they affect the asymmetries of the EU?

- In democratic terms, Maastricht brought a decisive widening of the gap between rulers and ruled. The architecture of the euro system was deliberately designed to be immune from electoral pressures. With the general shift to neoliberalism, the Maastricht era also saw the obliteration of any real policies for a 'social Europe'; levelling down replaced the levelling up of the Twelve, just as structural unemployment began to rise. Privatizations and shrinking social entitlements widened the gulf between 'above' and 'below'. Free-market competition was inscribed as a foundational principle in the 2004 Constitutional Treaty, one of the main reasons for its rejection in the 2005 referendums. The emergence of popular majorities against the post-Maastricht direction of

the EU in founder countries like France and the Netherlands signalled a new stage in this deterioration. They were brushed aside by Europe's rulers, as was the emergence of an organized Eurosceptic current in England. The Treaty, minus its preamble, was reaffirmed at Lisbon.

- In terms of inter-state relations, the Maastricht settlement formalized a further set of structural asymmetries. The establishment of the Eurozone bloc led to intensified integration in the core, combined with a centrifugal dynamic on the periphery, notably affecting Britain. Within the Eurozone, a new hierarchy of member states emerged in response to the constraints of the Stability Pact: powerful countries like Germany or France could break the fiscal rules with impunity in the recessions of 2001–02; weaker ones like Portugal were forced to comply. Third, expansion to the east abandoned the principle of member-state equality: the structural and regional funds made available by the Commission to the ex-Comecon countries were a pittance compared to what had flowed to Spain, Greece, Portugal and Ireland. Of the new entrants Poland, the principal target for German investment, got distinctly more lenient treatment than the rest.

- In geo-political terms, the end of the Cold War might have brought the dawning of genuine autonomy for the EU on the world stage. Instead, it brought a fuller subordination to US leadership under an expanded NATO, of which France now became a full member. The start of the Maastricht era did see a disastrous Austro-German initiative to encourage the secession of Slovenia and Croatia, while Washington was preoccupied in the Persian Gulf; but such ambitions were immediately blocked by the US once it woke up to what was happening. On questions of military and strategic importance, the effective chain of command ran from Washington to London, Paris or Berlin, in a classic hub-and-spokes structure. The 1999 NATO war on Yugoslavia was a deliberately exemplary operation in this respect: led by the US, with German, French and British forces and ideologues playing auxiliary roles. Supra-national EU diplomacy operated at a lower level, doing the groundwork for NATO through the Commission's now automatic meddling in its neighbours' political and economic affairs to make an ever-wider penumbra safe for capital accumulation.

The political imbalances of the European Union—even more than its economic ones—were set in place by the Maastricht compact. When the

question of Europe was thrown open by the end of the Cold War, the concern of the US—and the decision of the West European elites—was to avoid the risk of a democratic-constitutional moment. Washington asserted its superordinate status as NATO's leader, first at the heart of the German unification process, then over each new entrant. France, instead of insisting on a constitutional refoundation for the new Europe, bet on a technocratic fix through a supra-national monetary policy. Washington's position was entirely rational, in line with its own interests; the illusions of Mitterrand and Delors would help pave the way for the eclipse of France.

A crimped hegemony

Maastricht set in place three corrosive asymmetries—skewed interstate relations, oligarchic forms of rule, geo-political subordination. The financial crisis has since given each a still more toxic twist. The upshot has been a landmark extension of autocratic control by the Commission and, behind and above this, an unprecedented centralization of extra-legal power in the office of the German Chancellor. In a polity that once prided itself on the rule of law, decision-making at the summit is both informalized and personalized. German ascendancy was not the outcome of a unilateral power grab, however. It was wrought, step by step, through the protracted political struggle that ensued after February 2010, when the chains of debt that ultimately led back to Wall Street broke at their weakest link, Greece. French bank shares plummeted as Athens's cooked books came to light, infuriating the German Finance Ministry. Obama's Treasury Secretary offered a characteristically crude summary of Berlin's position: 'We're going to teach the Greeks a lesson. They lied to us—they suck and they were profligate and took advantage of the whole thing and we're going to crush them.'[2] Geithner's response set the pattern for what followed: 'You can put your boot on the neck of those guys if that's what you want to do', he told Schäuble, but Berlin must also give the investors what they wanted: Germany had to underwrite a significant amount of the Greek state's debt, rather than write it down—the 'haircut' for Greece's creditors that Merkel and Schäuble wanted—and permit large-scale bond-buying by the ECB, contrary to core German monetary tenets.

[2] See Peter Spiegel, 'Draghi's ECB management: the leaked Geithner files', FT Blog, 11 November 2014, drawing on raw interview transcripts for Geithner's memoir.

'No guarantees without control' was Merkel's famous answer. The Troika—ECB, Commission and IMF functionaries—was given command of the Greek economy and a bail-out loan agreed, on punitive terms; the money going not to 'the Greeks', of course, but to French and German banks.[3] October 2010 saw an attempted Franco-German rebellion, as Ireland's banks teetered on the brink. Merkel wanted to make debt restructuring a condition of future emergency loans; Sarkozy's support meant that France would be spared German fiscal 'control'. The American response was predictable—'I was fucking apoplectic', Geithner recalled—and the Irish bail-out went ahead without a creditor haircut; Lenihan's treasonous commitment to underwrite every penny of City of London lending was made to stand.[4] From the end of 2010, France became Washington's closest ally in the Eurozone crisis. The Sarkozy government played an aggressive role in forcing Greece and Italy into line; Hollande's first act as President was to instruct the Greeks to vote against Syriza in June 2012. But the US Treasury campaign also had the backing of virtually the entire European political establishment, including the German Social Democrats and the international media, which portrayed the investor bail-out as a progressive, pro-European and mildly social-democratic move, and bemoaned Germany's 'reluctance' to play the hegemon.

With debt restructuring off the table, the burden fell on 'control'. As strikes and riots spread across the continent, every German gesture towards the financial markets—the Greek bail-out and ECB bond-buying in 2010; its trillion-euro Long-Term Refinancing Operation, from December 2011; the Outright Monetary Transactions programme in September 2012, two months after Draghi's 'whatever it takes' speech—was matched, step for step, with an extension of autocratic executive power. The European Semester system (2010) obliged member states to submit annual budgets to the Commission for approval before they

[3] The EU's original €50bn bail-out was multiplied by ten on Geithner's instructions, barked over a G7 conference call: 'I interrupted before they could finish explaining their concept. "If you announce that you'll be laughed at—you should be thinking more like €500bn." After huddling for the weekend, the Europeans announced a €500bn rescue fund.' This tallied with the Treasury Secretary's broader assessment of the EU as 'publicly castigating any American proposal, before eventually adopting a renamed and often mangled version of it.' Timothy Geithner, *Stress Test: Reflections on Financial Crises*, London 2014, pp. 446, 475.

[4] See Spiegel, 'Draghi's ECB management'; Geithner, *Stress Test*, pp. 449–50.

could be discussed by national parliaments; the Euro Plus Pact (2011) committed them to reducing labour costs and raising productivity; the Fiscal Compact (2012) required them to inscribe Tea Party-style deficit limits in their national constitutions. Rafts of EU legislation—the Six Pack (2011) and the Two Pack (2013)—toughened the Commission's economic 'surveillance and enforcement' regime.

In the course of this, Germany's economic weight was leveraged into political primacy. The final deal—between Washington and the financial markets, on one side, and Berlin on the other—traded German guarantees and trillion-euro cash infusions to the banks for a decisive loss of economic sovereignty in the other Eurozone states; Zapatero, Berlusconi, Papandreou, Samaras, Coelho and Kenny were either forced to comply with German diktats on fiscal policy or to quit. Yet to date, this has been a strangely crimped hegemony. Though larger by a head than the other European powers, Germany has never been big enough for effortless primacy over them. Since the time of the Delian League, stable leadership of a federation of states has required a good third of the total's demographic, economic and military weight. Germany has around 17 per cent of the EU's population and GDP, and lags behind France and Britain in armaments. Its preponderance since 2011 rests, firstly, on coercive economic power, and secondly on a tacit recognition by the other states that the investors and the US Treasury see the German Chancellor as executive head of Europe. The other states can hardly contest her ascendancy, having backed the Washington–Wall Street campaign for Berlin to step up to its role. Germany is already starting to benefit from the accretive nature of power: Merkel is treated like the Empress of Europe on her rare visits to the other states and over the past year European rulers and opinion-makers have started turning to Berlin for decisions on purely political matters—Ukrainian policy; appointment of the Commission president—that have nothing to do with debt.

Yet Berlin is handicapped by domestic opposition to the ECB's activities among substantial sections of the German governing class and media; it has attained the leadership of Europe by betraying historic national beliefs about 'monetary financing'. Merkel's Eurozone policies are also resented by workers whose economic position has deteriorated sharply since the SPD's Thatcherite reforms in 2004; quantitative easing must proceed on tiptoe, lest German voters notice. The rise of Alternative für Deutschland is a particular irritant for Merkel, since the party noisily

broadcasts every last detail of what Frankfurt is up to. Within the Eurozone, German hegemony faces popular detestation of its instruments of rule—the Commission's Economic Directorate and the Troika. Coercion is open here; consent is grudging. And while Berlin's twenty-first century power is of a very different character to its earlier moments of imperial expansion—not least because this was not a sovereign decision on its part: Germany was pushed; sovereign determinacy ultimately lay across the Atlantic—its emissaries are nevertheless treading in their grandfathers' footsteps in many parts of Europe, including Greece, where the great 'No' of 2011 was a direct echo of the Resistance. How has its preponderance affected the asymmetries of the EU?

- In terms of inter-state relations, the core Franco-German balance has been destroyed for good. Why has France offered so little opposition to what Ulrich Beck has dubbed 'German Europe'? The conventional answer is that the French economy is too weighed down by statist legacies for the Elysée's word to carry much authority; but the figures don't bear this out. In many respects—public debt, household income, infrastructure, manufacturing—France is in better shape than the UK. French leadership in Europe depended on diplomatic and military advantage, not economic output; it is these that have now been undermined, both ideologically, with the growth of French Atlanticism, and geopolitically: the end of the Cold War collapsed much of the space for an independent French diplomacy, balancing between the two superpowers. Alignment with the US during the Eurozone crisis has sealed France's fate. A telling moment came at the 2010 Deauville summit, with the failed Franco-German attempt to carve a line independent of Washington. Sarkozy, in the words of the Treasury Secretary, hoped 'to get Merkel to back off her "fiscal union" stuff, which was very hard for him politically—it meant France was agreeing to come under the thumb of Germany on fiscal policy'.[5] Paris is currently waiting to hear whether its 2015 budget will satisfy Schäuble's men in Brussels.

- On the geo-political front, Berlin has taken charge of Europe's Ukrainian policy in a manner that would have been unthinkable only three years ago. Paris and London have been sidelined, and the Chancellor has established herself as coordinator of the West's sanctions against Putin while Obama is occupied elsewhere. Since

[5] Spiegel, 'Draghi's ECB management'.

Maastricht, the NATO–EU symbiosis has had a built-in expansionist logic; the Eurozone crisis has done nothing to cramp its ambitions. Commission policy has given free rein to the member states with the most aggressive Eastern policies—Sweden, Poland, the Baltic states—who have long been agitating for a NATO build-up on Russia's border. When the brutality of Yanukovych's police catalysed a mass anti-government protest in late 2013, it was automatic for the State Department to try to direct it, and for EU aides to be thick on the ground. The pecking order was evident in the placement of their candidates: the US favourite, Yatsenyuk, became Prime Minister, while Germany's man Klitschko is merely Mayor of Kiev. It was the refusal of the Yatsenyuk government to negotiate a regional settlement in March 2014 that produced a parallel set of protests in the east, with backing from Russia which veered between defensiveness and adventurism. Western strategy has been equally contradictory. Russia is not the USSR but a capitalist state, which the US wants to pull into its orbit, while also blocking a Sino-Russian alliance. But it has consistently pushed for NATO–EU expansion; having trampled on the understandings of 1990 with Moscow, it has advanced across most of the ex-Soviet *glacis* and has been halted only at the Donbass Basin.

- In civic-democratic terms, the stark class politics of the bail-out/austerity regime has put a heavy strain on representative democracy in member states. Historic parties of government have been virtually destroyed in Ireland and Greece. National coalitions of Centre Left and Centre Right—'government by cartel', as Peter Mair called them—are becoming crisis Europe's new norm.[6] In Greece, the New Democracy–PASOK coalition had the support of just 30 per cent of the total electorate in 2012, mainly pensioners, housewives and rural voters; the cities and the working-age population voted for Syriza. In France, popular disgust has driven an unprecedented surge in support for the National Front, which swept the stage in the 2014 European Parliament election and is likely to propel Marine Le Pen into the second round of the presidentials in 2017. Nearly two-thirds of Germans, Austrians and Dutch expressed 'distrust' of the EU in last year's Eurobarometer polls. Across the continent, the transformation in attitudes towards the Union since the eighties has been dramatic. One upshot of this widespread disaffection is institutional

[6] Peter Mair, *Ruling the Void*, London and New York 2013, p. 68.

deadlock: Europe's leaders dare not risk popular consultation on any new treaties.

The cure?

Defenders of the post-Maastricht Union have a very simple answer to these imbalances: the European Parliament. Every extension of Commission control has been accompanied by nods towards a compensating extension of the Parliament's powers of 'co-decision'. What does this mean in practice? Its objective, as the term suggests, is consensus—three-way agreement between the Commission, which alone can initiate European directives and regulations, the Parliament, which can amend them, and the Council, the inter-state body which has the ultimate power of decision. The Parliament thus has a choice between being consensual—offering acceptable amendments—or being ignored.

The nitty-gritty of co-decision is managed by the leaders of the political groups. The two largest—the centre-right European People's Party and centre-left Socialists and Democrats—established themselves in the first decades of the Parliament. With the advent of direct elections in 1979, they took the neophyte MEPs in hand. In the eighties Egon Klepsch, head of the EPP, and Rudi Arndt, leader of the Social Democrats, were both veteran politicians of the Bonn Republic—the first an associate of Erhard's, the second a mayor of Frankfurt—and ran a *Große Koalition*, oiled by long-standing familiarity with the minutiae of Europarliamentary procedures and the commanding positions that German delegations held within each group.[7] Given the scale of their joint majority, anything the two leaderships agreed would be automatically voted through. The conference of the group leaders, together with their staffs and those of the Secretariat, thus became the real nerve centre of the Parliament, brokering appointments to the two dozen committees—fisheries, farming, competition, finance, economics and so forth—that do the actual work of drafting amendments to the Commission's directives, the target

[7] Seats are allocated per country in terms of population size, as with the American House of Representatives. Germany, with a population of 80m, gets 96 seats; France, Britain and Italy, with over 60m, get 70+ seats; and so on down to the smallest, Luxembourg and Malta, which get 6 seats. The result is that the big-party delegations from the four largest countries—CDU, SPD; UMP, Parti socialiste; Tories, Labour; Forza Italia, Partito Democratico—usually dominate their respective groups.

of large-scale lobbying by corporations and (to a much lesser extent) trade unions and NGOs. Once the committees have agreed the wording for an amendment, it is almost guaranteed to be adopted by Parliament. The party bosses then present the amendment to representatives of the Commission and the Council, with the aim of reaching a final agreement there. The consensual dynamic of co-decision is reinforced by etiquette: dragging out meetings—the only opposition tactic available—is considered bad form.

When 'outsider' forces were elected—the left and the Greens in the eighties, Euro-sceptics in the nineties—they were offered funds, offices and support staff to join the party-group system at lower levels, proportionate to their size. The rebels were smoothly absorbed into the Parliament's mechanisms for neutralization and depoliticization; Gramsci would have smiled. The limits to non-consensual activity were illustrated in the nineties when the Centre Left temporarily enjoyed a 60-seat lead over the EPP. Group leader Jean-Pierre Cot (Parti socialiste), followed from 1994 by Pauline Green (Labour), tried to mobilize the Parliament's 'progressive majority' in favour of a social Europe and workers' rights. They made no headway in tangible terms against the prevailing, anti-labour trend of the Maastricht convergence criteria, and the Labour and SPD delegations pulled back once their parties entered government at home and abandoned 'social Europe' agendas. Green's attempts to defend corrupt centre-left Commissioners backfired, helping to bring about the mass resignation of the disgraced Santer Commission. In the 1999 elections the EPP improved its position, and by 2004 the *Große Koalition* was reinstalled—the best way to ensure the assembly was 'governable', in the revealing phrase of the Parliament's chief functionary.[8]

Across Europe, national legislatures have become increasingly immune to pressure from below, as the major parties' programmes have grown almost indistinguishable. But the Europarliament is further advanced than any of them in terms of non-accountability and absorption into executive-administrative power. Accountability here only operates upwards—the need to achieve a consensus with the Commission and the Council, if any amendment is to have effect—never downwards. The political-group leaders never have to answer to party memberships

[8] See Julian Priestley and Stephen Clark, *Europe's Parliament: People, Places, Politics*, London 2012, p. 103.

at annual conferences; they are non-recallable, their seats effectively guaranteed. The model is that of nineteenth-century Parties of Notables, rather than twentieth-century mass parties. The Parliament's role during the Eurozone crisis was exemplary in this regard: the *Große Koalition* leaders, Joseph Daul and Martin Schulz, orchestrated Parliament's assent to every extension of autocratic power, fast-tracking some of the most egregious measures. Once the outcome was assured, they posed as people's champions by tightening up one or two of the loopholes in the Commission's directive to limit bankers' bonuses, and were rewarded with admiring coverage in the European press.

Power grab

The Europarliament is now a substantial institutional entity. It occupies over a million square metres in Brussels and employs some 10,000 officials, aides and translators, in addition to its 751 MEPs. It has accumulated significant bureaucratic weight and, by the logic of institution-building, it fights for more turf, better seating and a greater role within the EU's dominant structures; its Constitutional Affairs committee, with a large staff of seasoned officials, is dedicated to this purpose—though tellingly, there has never been a mass, extra-parliamentary campaign to back it up. Europe's autocratic lurch since the crisis has come as a golden opportunity for the Parliament and its supporters, who claim that it alone can provide compensatory legitimation for the behaviour of the Troika, the hardening of the Commission's power and the entirely extra-constitutional role of the German Chancellor.

The political logic of this bid for influence was on display in the 2014 campaign to get Jean-Claude Juncker, the disgraced former Prime Minister of Luxembourg, appointed as President of the Commission. This was riding roughshod over European law—the treaties are clear that the Council should select the President, for the Parliament to endorse or veto. As part of their push for influence the Parliament's party-group leaders insisted that they would choose *Spitzenkandidaten* for the presidency; the candidate of the group that won most votes in the 2014 elections would be considered the rightful head of the Commission. Though the leaders of the Centre Left (Schulz), Liberals (Guy Verhofstadt) and Greens (Dany Cohn-Bendit) were noisiest about the *Spitzenkandidaten* system, it was obvious that the EPP would get the largest popular vote—around 12 per cent of the total European electorate, as it turned out.

In their choice of candidate, the EPP leaders presumably intended to reward an old friend. Juncker, chair of the Eurozone group during the crisis and an archetypal practitioner of EU crony politics, had for nearly two decades been Prime Minister of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, notorious for its laxly regulated financial industry and 'comfort letters' relieving multinationals of corporation tax. Juncker was finally forced to resign in July 2013 for having covered up the scandalous doings of SREL, the Duchy's intelligence agency—illegal surveillance, leaking of confidential information for commercial gain, systematic corruption and Gladio-style skullduggery, including a series of bombings of public buildings in the mid-eighties that were intended to heighten political tension and create a 'red scare'. Responsibility for the explosions apparently led back to the royal family, the rotten heart of this picturesque statelet. SREL had a recording from the early 2000s of Juncker in conversation with Grand Duke Henri, discussing the involvement of the Grand Duke's brother, Prince Jean, in the bombing campaign. In early 2013 a Luxembourgeois parliamentary investigation, in parallel with a long-delayed trial of junior police officers over the *Bommeleeër* scandal, brought much of this to light.[9] In March 2014 the EPP caucus meeting in Dublin had no hesitation in nominating Juncker for Commission President.

There was still some uncertainty after the May 2014 elections about whether Parliament would succeed in imposing its candidate, in defiance of treaty law. But there was no doubt at all about who would decide the matter. In the new, informal polity of post-2011 Europe, it was naturally assumed that only one person—the German Chancellor—could rule on whether the EPP's decrepit *Spitzer Kandidat* would be appointed to Brussels' top job. There was scarcely a murmur about this in the European media; it was treated as entirely acceptable that Merkel's word would amount to Europe's law. In the event, her decision was not even prompted by German national interests—Germany wants to keep Britain in the EU, as a fellow conservative force, while Juncker's appointment was a gift to UK Eurosceptics—but by the CDU's domestic position. At home, a *Große Koalition* of the mind between the Springer Press, the SPD and the last representative of the Frankfurt School, Jürgen Habermas, declared that it would be scandalous if Juncker failed to get

[9] *Bommeleeër*: local parlance for bomber. For the whole story, see Luxpol: 'What led to early elections in Luxembourg?', 17 July 2013, luxpol.wordpress.com.

the job—Habermas exclaiming that it would be 'a bullet to the heart of the European project' if this malodorous fixer was not made President.[10] After canvassing opinion, Merkel adjusted her line to reap the benefit of the Springer campaign; Juncker was duly anointed. Shortly afterwards, a trove of documents was released detailing 'special' Luxembourg tax breaks worth billions of dollars for transnational companies operating in the EU, on Junker's watch. Unflinchingly, Parliament's majority passed a vote of confidence in him. As Schulz, now chief of the assembly, had put it earlier: 'He's *our* president.'

It defies political logic to suggest that this extra-legal annexation of powers by the Parliament amounts to a democratization. Juncker is not accountable to the European electorate, nor even to the 12 per cent of it that voted for candidates of the Centre Right. He is de facto answerable to the figure who actually appointed him, the German Chancellor. The distribution of posts in his new Commission, and the unilateral creation of special vice presidents, all of them hardline pro-austerity figures like the German Finance Minister, bear this out. This was the predictable outcome of the *Spitzenkandidaten* process. The Left group in the Parliament should have known better than to lend it legitimacy by going along with it, constructing an 'Alexis Tsipras list'. It is one thing to participate in the electoral process and to make the most of possibilities for transnational solidarity and debate. It is quite another to lend credence to the notion that Parliament's egoistic pretensions and turf wars make the EU more democratic. The business of the Europarliament is co-decision. It cannot, structurally, supply the one essential component a functioning democracy requires: opposition.

A genuine democratization of Europe, Wolfgang Streeck argues in the conclusion to *Buying Time*, would be obliged to take account of the manifold, historically rooted differences between and among its peoples:

> No European democracy can develop without federal subdivision and extensive rights of local autonomy, without group rights protecting Europe's many identities and spatially based communities . . . a European constitution would have to find ways of allowing for the very different interests of countries such as Bulgaria and the Netherlands, as well as addressing the

[10] Jürgen Habermas, 'Europa wird direkt ins Herz getroffen', FAZ, 29 May 2014.

> unsolved problems of incomplete nation-states like Spain or Italy, whose internal diversity of identity and interest would have to be accommodated . . . a democratic Europe can come about only if these differences are recognized, in the form of autonomy rights.[11]

Central to any heterogeneous polity are its constitutional rules governing finance, Streeck goes on. Extensive federal subdivisions would be needed to balance regional autonomy with collective solidarity and determine what fiscal claims each part should have on the whole. This perspective is the diametrical opposite to one that would stretch Europe's archaic political institutions into a unitary and autocratic continental government, with an unaccountable co-decision assembly serving as a democratic façade.

Prospects

What are the implications of Europe's torsions—inter-state, geo-political, democratic—for the years ahead? They will operate against the dismal social and political background of the Eurozone crisis: high unemployment and depleted welfare systems; resentful electorates; institutional deadlock; states paralysed by debt, with interest payments swallowing a large part of their budgets. The brittle nature of German hegemony will be put to multiple tests.

- In terms of inter-state relations, the limits of German leadership are more likely to be set by fudge and foot-dragging than outright rebellion, though Merkel's attempt to force all Eurozone governments to sign a 'contract' outlining their economic goals, the latest step towards fiscal union, was voted down last spring. (Like 'reform', which once signified improvements for the majority and now means reducing labour costs, 'union' in the European context no longer implies a voluntary association for mutual solidarity but the imposition of hard-line ordo-liberal controls on countries' social spending.) France and Italy are intent on saving their own budgets and are in no mood to lead an anti-German alliance. The only potential wild card would be a mass revolt—or Le Pen.

[11] Wolfgang Streeck, *Buying Time: The Delayed Crisis of Democratic Capitalism*, London and New York 2014, pp. 179–80.

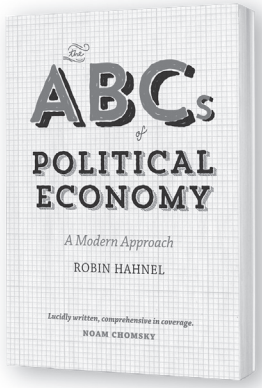
- In civic-democratic terms, though Eurozone governments saw off the first round of mass mobilizations against the new order, there are good reasons to hope that there will be more on the way—signalled, perhaps, by Ireland's nationwide wave of protests against water charges. For the disinherited generations, at once educated and underemployed, the social and economic crisis has accelerated the hollowing out of representative democracy in Europe and the programmatic homogenization of the establishment parties. New political organizations of varying hues have exploded into the vacuum. Electoral battles may see the Berlin consensus begin to fray from below. In Spain, the complicit silence that long governed political-business dealings has broken down under financial pressure. Tit-for-tat leaks about embezzlement and corruption have implicated a swathe of top figures, starting with Rajoy and the royal family, on a scale reminiscent of Italy's Tangentopoli scandals in the nineties. Podemos, the newly founded party of the *indignados*, is polling over 20 per cent, ahead of the PSOE, and has built local 'circles' all over the country. With an election looming, there is talk of a PP–PSOE *Große Koalition* to fend it off. Tension is highest in Greece, where an election could be triggered in February 2015 if the coalition government can't muster the 180 votes it needs to install the next president. Current polls give Syriza a clear lead—33 per cent, with New Democracy on 26 and PASOK on 5 per cent. Syriza's policy has not yet been fully formulated in public, but its broad outlines involve negotiations with the Eurozone leadership—that is, Berlin—over debt restructuring and a sustainable development plan, while ruling out unilateral defaults or gaping deficits. Concretely, as Tsipras suggested in a speech in Thessaloniki in September, this could involve launching emergency food and healthcare programmes, restoring pre-2010 minimum-wage and pension levels, and abrogating the regressive new taxes. From its first day in office a Syriza government would confront financial-market strikes and an iron front from Berlin, Frankfurt and Brussels—no doubt Paris, too. It risks facing a choice between mobilizing for a confrontation over its demands, or surrender and retreat—to the benefit of Golden Dawn.

- In geo-political terms, German ascendancy has so far made little substantive difference to EU–NATO policies; but it may be changing Germany itself. The Atlanticist press has long encouraged the FRG to become a 'normal' nation—that is, able and willing to inflict the

appropriate punishment on nominated opponents of the ruling order. The general assumption in the West is that Germany is a force for moderation vis-à-vis Russia. Yet, in line with Washington, Merkel has been taking an increasingly hawkish stance. One of her foreign-policy spokesmen has said that good relations with Russia could not be restored 'without dramatic political changes in Moscow'.[12] While France and Germany had called in 2008 for Ukraine and Georgia's NATO entry to be delayed, the Chancellor is now proclaiming that the EU 'will not yield to Moscow'— 'and that doesn't just apply to Ukraine. It applies to Moldova, it applies to Georgia. If the situation continues, we'll have to ask about Serbia, we'll have to ask about the western Balkan countries.'[13] This is the new German Europe—the very outcome that integration was designed to prevent.

18 November 2014

[12] Stefan Wagstyl, 'German diplomacy: Dominant by default', FT, 5 August 2014.
[13] 'Putin's Reach: Merkel concerned about Russian influence in the Balkans', *Der Spiegel*, 17 November 2014.



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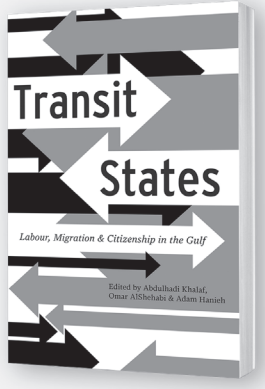

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NEW MASSES, NEW MEDIA

The last years have seen the eruption of one unexpected urban uprising after another—in New York, Athens, Madrid, Cairo, Kiev, Sao Paulo, Istanbul, Hong Kong. The occasions, forms and compositions of these have each been particular, though patterns of long-distance inspiration and emulation are also clear. These popular insurgencies have been the most striking phenomenon within a broader gamut of different kinds of resistance to the established order of capital, the 'new masses' whose potential or actual components were surveyed by Göran Therborn in NLR *85; articles on the explosions in Brazil and Turkey have followed. Alongside the emergence of new masses has come, in the same period, the arrival of new media, challenging the system of inequality in its own ways. With this issue we begin a series of interviews and reports on these too. Their appearance has also been local in origin and variegated in kind. But at least three broad determinants can be detected behind them. The first is the altered political and economic landscape since the continuing round of imperial wars in the Middle East, and above all the financial crash of 2008 and its global consequences. The second is the technological ease and reach of internet publication, transforming the possibilities of well-judged, adventurous intellectual start-ups. The third is generational renewal, bringing new levies of radical thinkers, writers and activists into ideological battle. Taken internationally, these forces have overlapped to produce a wide spectrum of forms of expression: dailies, weeklies, monthlies, quarterlies, bulletins and blogs, audio podcasts or online video. We open the series by publishing an interview with Bhaskar Sunkara, founder in his early twenties of one of the most remarkable socialist enterprises of the decade, the stylish* US *periodical* Jacobin*, which within four years of its creation now reaches over half a million readers on its website—an example to creative rebels everywhere.*

BHASKAR SUNKARA

Interview

PROJECT *JACOBIN*

Could you tell us about your background and personal formation?

I was born in June 1989. My parents had come to the US from Trinidad about a year before I was born. My mother's family, originally indentured labourers from Punjab and Bihar, had been on the island since the 19th century, but my father had arrived there from Andhra Pradesh as a young man, training as a doctor. In the US, though, his medical qualifications didn't count for anything, so he became a clerical worker; my mother worked as a telemarketer. So I had a typical immigrant lower-middle class background. We were some of the least wealthy people in the particular town in Westchester County where I went to school, but it was a pretty affluent suburb. I had my first inklings of political engagement in middle school, with the rallies against the war in Iraq. But my actual political development came mainly through my reading. Both my parents worked late, so after school I would spend a few hours in the library. I read *1984* and *Animal Farm*, and reading about Orwell and the POUM got me interested in the Spanish Civil War, and also in Trotsky. It was a very detached kind of politicization—at the age of 12 or 13, *My Life* was more important to me than going to protests or what have you. I guess it's the fickleness of the middle class—I'm lucky I didn't pick up Ayn Rand or Milton Friedman before I got to Trotsky. From there I worked my way through the Deutscher trilogy, I read *New Left Review*, the work of Lucio Magri, Perry Anderson, Ralph Miliband and others. At 17, I joined the Democratic Socialists of America's New York chapter.[1] I edited *The Activist*, the blog of the DSA's youth branch, which gave me some experience of editing and commissioning. It was also where I got to know a lot of the people who would become writers

and editors for *Jacobin*—Chris Maisano and Peter Frase, for example, who were also on the left wing of the DSA.

Did your parents' backgrounds have an influence on your politics?

They were always supportive of left populists, in a very broad sense. People like my mother, from a rural background in Trinidad, felt positive about anyone running a developmentalist state of any kind, or even figures with vaguely progressive policies; the same went for my father, coming from India. They liked both Castro and Clinton in equal measure. They weren't very actively political, but there was always passive support for the kind of ideas I was getting interested in. Plus their generation tended to have books lying around that one would associate with the left—we had a lot of C. L. R. James in the house, since he was Trinidadian, but also *The Wretched of the Earth*, and so on. I actually heard of the Haitian Jacobins before I heard of the French ones. *The Black Jacobins* was probably in the back of my mind when I first started thinking about the magazine.

When was that?

While I was in college. I studied international relations at George Washington University in DC, where I got more involved with the anti-war movement and student activism. Between my sophomore and junior years I was sick and had to take two semesters off—I was throwing up three or four times a day. I was off for all of 2009. During that time I disciplined myself auto-didactically. I would read a couple of non-fiction books a week as well as one work of fiction. The fiction was useless, I regret that. But I read through the canon of Western Marxism and socialist thought more generally, taking a lot of notes. By the summer of 2010, when I turned 21, I was feeling better and getting ready to go back to school, and that's when I conceived of *Jacobin*. I'd spent a year doing very little apart from thinking and reading within this very particular

[1] The DSA came out of a split in the Socialist Party of America, which became fiercely anti-communist during the Vietnam War and changed its name to Social Democrats of the USA in 1972; a group gathered around Michael Harrington left SDUSA in 1973, and in 1982 their organization merged with NAM, a populist tributary of the new left of the sixties, and a more left-wing tendency closer to today's Solidarity.

niche, and I had this excess of ideas to work through and pieces I wanted to commission. Initially it was going to be an online magazine, but then I felt there was such a glut of stuff on the web that it would have more impact if it was also a print journal. We launched online in mid-September 2010, and the first print issue came out at the start of 2011. At the time I had no particular idea of how to run a publication—I still have my first expense sheets, and I remember worrying about having spent all of my $240 annual budget too quickly.

What about the magazine as a political project—what were you aiming to do that wasn't being done by other publications?

For me, it was a way of representing a politics that was neither Leninist nor the kind of broad liberal-left opinion you get in, say, *The Nation* or *In These Times*. It's not a middle ground: I wanted to stake out a vision that was uncompromisingly socialist, but that married some of the accessibility of *The Nation* with the political seriousness of publications further to the left. A lot of what I was learning during the year I spent reading was how to convey these ideas in as simple a way as possible. Young Marxists have a tendency to use lots of jargon, partly as a crutch for insecurity; there are some things we do need specialized terminology for, but a lot of these ideas are not actually very complex. So I was thinking about how best to popularize and mainstream them. *Jacobin* was meant to be bold, young, easy to read. The look of the magazine was part of that too—publications like *Monthly Review* or *Dissent*, for example, tend to have extremely long paragraphs, and there's no 'dek' underneath the headline explaining what's in the article.

Design has been a really integral feature of Jacobin. *What was the philosophy behind that?*

What I was originally aiming for in the early issues—and I failed, since I didn't have the technical ability—was to make things as accessible and compelling as possible; so there was colour, photography and art, there was a conscious attempt to break from the old Courier New fonts, the black-and-white style of the SDS or the zines of the eighties and nineties. But it was really only when Remeike Forbes joined in 2011 that our visual identity took shape. Remeike designed the Toussaint logo we've

been using since issue 6; originally the name of the publication wasn't meant to be historically located in a particular way—it was more of a floating signifier.

Who else was involved in the early stages?

To begin with, I more or less did the editorial and production work myself, and there was a group of writers who contributed. It was a fairly motley collection of people—Peter Frase, one of our editors, likes to say he should write an essay called 'Considerations on Internet Marxism', because the way things developed was totally un-organic. Frase and Maisano I knew from DSA activism. Then there were Seth Ackerman and Mike Beggs, whose writing I'd seen on Doug Henwood's *Left Business Observer* listserve, and who I reached out to, asking them to contribute. I'd read Max Ajl's 'Jewbonics' blog, and we'd been in contact because of our shared anger at certain liberal bloggers. Others I found randomly on the internet, like Gavin Mueller. These and a few others—my most trusted writers, and people I was constantly asking for advice anyway—made up the editorial board. Remeike got in touch with me in late 2011, saying how much he liked the politics of the publication, and offering to design a T-shirt for us; but then when he saw how bad the physical magazine looked, he offered to take on designing the rest of it. Megan Erickson and Connor Kilpatrick also came on board in 2011, and the following year Alyssa Battistoni, who's been a key commissioning editor, joined. It's only in the last couple of months that anyone has worked full-time, though—and only three people take a salary.

What's the relationship between the print and online components of the magazine?

We have a tremendous volume of online content—one or two pieces every day, so that over the course of the year we post over 500 original pieces, not including cross-posts, reprints and so on. There's a Soviet saying: quantity is a quality of its own, and in a lot of ways that's the spirit of the model we've set up. We try to attract web traffic, and then try to turn a certain proportion of visitors to the site into subscribers. That said, the web pieces are very high-quality; but they tend to be shorter and more time-sensitive. Overall, we're moving towards a pattern where the print issue has themed content—so the Fall 2014 issue is on the city—while the website is for everything else.

And how does the editorial process work, for both?

With the print magazine, often Remeike or I will come up with a broad idea or theme, and we'll present it to the editorial board, who will then suggest particular commissions. Then one or two people from the board will volunteer to serve as issue editor, so there will be a point person tracking the commissions. Depending on who the editor is, they'll sometimes take over the first rounds of line-editing, but most of the time that's something I'll do. Generally, the other editors' role is to comment on texts and work on the print issues, though where they have areas of expertise they will originate a lot of pieces—Max Ajl on the Middle East, for instance. With the online content, it's such a constant stream that there's no time for deliberative processes. We've now reached a point where we're flooded with submissions—maybe ten a day—so we filter those and get around five articles a week out of that.

Could you tell us who your contributors are, in sociological terms? And politically?

I would say that all of our writers fit within a broad socialist tradition. We do sometimes draw on social democrats and liberals, but every article is coherent with the vision of the editors—so we might publish a piece by a liberal advocating single-payer healthcare, because they're calling for the decommodification of a sector; and since we believe in the decommodification of the whole economy, it fits in. More sociologically, there are a lot of grad students, young adjunct professors or tenured professors. We also have quite a few organizers and union researchers involved, like Chris Maisano, and people working in NGOs or around housing rights, that kind of thing.

And they're predominantly under 35, say?

I think so, yes, with a few exceptions. Since we run 500-plus pieces a year, we publish a lot of new writers. It's probably easier to break in with us than with other venues, though maybe this will become more difficult over time. But there are also many other people we publish and call on for advice, like Robert Brenner, Vivek Chibber, Kathi Weeks. There's a lot of goodwill from the earlier generations on the left—people see how our project overlaps with theirs, but also how it reaches a different audience.

What are Jacobin*'s vital statistics—number of subscribers, print and online readership, distribution?*

This is the topic I most like to talk about. Our subscriber base is currently slightly over 7,000—though of course it varies because of the way the renewal cycles of print publications work. Still, at the moment we're making a net gain of 80 subscribers a week, and I imagine we'll hit 10,000 subscribers in 2015. Most of our subscribers are in the US, but we also have some in the UK, South Africa and elsewhere in the Anglophone world. With regard to the web readership, we average around 600,000 unique visitors a month; occasionally it spikes up, so that we get close to a million page views in stretches. Distribution of print copies to bookstores and newsstands is obviously much smaller: around 1,000 in total. The market has changed in the last decade, with the death of those big-box stores, so being on newsstands is just a matter of exposure, really—we have an incentive to make people buy issues directly from our website.

What about finance? Does it all come from subscriptions?

Yes, it's primarily subscription-driven. We're a non-profit, so we do get some donations, which account for under 20 per cent of our budget. But we operate almost entirely on our subscription income, and use donations for development or expansion.

You mentioned that most Jacobin *subscribers are in the US. What's the pattern in terms of regional dispersion?*

The largest number are in New York City, and there's a very large base of subscribers in the Bay Area—Oakland, San Francisco. We also have a disproportionately large pocket in Chicago, partly because of our work with the Chicago Teachers' Union and our coverage of the strike.[2] In per capita terms we have a lot of subscribers in places like Cambridge, MA—university towns that are flooded with underemployed grad students, who are our bread and butter. People are often surprised to hear how dispersed the subscriber base is, but I think it comes less from any organic reach we might have than the fact that, in this country of 330 million

[2] See *Class Action: An Activist Teacher's Handbook*, New York 2014—a booklet produced by *Jacobin* in conjunction with the CTU—and Micah Uetricht, *Strike for America: Chicago Teachers Against Austerity*, London and New York 2014.

people, we're primarily selling the magazine on the internet as opposed to radical hubs in a select few urban areas.

And can you tell us about the Jacobin *reading groups?*

We have about fifty reading groups, internationally, forty or so of which are in the US and Canada. They're very geographically dispersed—we have four in the Carolinas, we have groups in Alabama, Iowa, Texas . . . one of the reasons we have them in those kinds of places is that they don't have existing chapters of socialist organizations. So *Jacobin* is the only game in town, the only ones trying to get people together as open socialists. It's an interesting dynamic. In a place like Salt Lake City, our group will have events in a Unitarian Church, because compared to the Mormons they're the progressive force in the city.

Where does the impetus for these groups come from—is it from readers themselves or is it something you're actively driving?

Well, it's both. We let people know that we have resources they can use—sample syllabuses, free magazines—and that we can help with finding space, with logistics. But it's the coordinators who are actually on the ground, and who feel motivated to start the reading group. Obviously, we're doing everything we can to encourage these groups. They're now connected to each other in a sort of community, talking about their readings and discussing them online. The process is very organic, though we do try to offer guidance and a framework.

You've talked about your own formation, but what are the intellectual reference points for the magazine more generally?

One of them would definitely be Michael Harrington, even though we disagree with him politically. Those of us who are on the left wing of DSA often fight against a lot of Harringtonite ideas, like his softness towards the trade union bureaucracy and the Democratic Party. We're much more comfortable with independent political action, and I'd hope for a break with the Democrats much more than Harrington did. But intellectually, I think he's very underrated as a popularizer of Marxist thought. For myself and for a few others, Ralph Miliband is another important influence, because, more than anyone, he represented that middle ground I mentioned before, between Leninism and social democracy. Though

I don't want to speak for everyone else, several of us came from traditions intellectually inspired by Trotskyism, without ever quite becoming Trotskyists—which is similar to Miliband or someone like Leo Panitch in that respect. We were very interested in the experience of the Italian Communist Party and other mass parties in Europe, and in the theorists of Eurocommunism—something that distinguishes us from a lot of Trotskyists. The Second International radicals were also very important for us—from the time before the SPD voted for war credits in 1914, of course! So we read Lenin, but also Kautsky's *The Road to Power*. On the whole, we come from various traditions on the left, but you could say that there's been a convergence of sorts between those who come from post-Maoist and post-Trotskyist milieux, and those from left social-democratic traditions.

What about literary style—were there particular models or writers you had in mind?

There's been no particular influence. If anything, we've tried to avoid the traditional left-wing style of writing, minimizing jargon, and sought instead to be more aggressive, more confident—and more programmatic.

What considerations are involved in your coverage—the choice of themes, as well as the overall balance between politics, economics, culture?

In general, we try to publish things that interest us. We recently had a piece on the anniversary of the Portuguese revolution, which has always been a topic that fascinated me; I thought it wouldn't necessarily interest others, but it was a huge hit, because we have a readership that thinks seriously about social change and transformation in the West, and the legacy of the Portuguese revolution looms larger in their thinking than one might have thought.[3] I think the first few years of a publication are all about making people like what you like. And one reason why we now get so many submissions is because there are people who've been reading *Jacobin* for three years, and who are now ready to write *Jacobin* pieces. We've essentially trained a new group of contributors.

What about culture?

We generally try to avoid cultural content. To the extent we do cover culture, it's mass culture. So we'll run something about the latest

[3] Mark Bergfeld, 'The Next Portuguese Revolution', *Jacobin* online, 22 May 2014.

Planet of the Apes movie or the latest *Superman* movie, covering mass culture in a way that's reminiscent of Michael Gold—my favourite Stalinist writer of the 1930s.[4] Our cultural content is intentionally very directly political, very polemical. But we'd never cover an opera or a play, or avant-garde culture.

Because?

Maybe it's just a reaction—I don't like the Frankfurt School. In any case, there are plenty of good places to get that kind of coverage. One of the advantages of *Jacobin* is that it's crassly political, and programmatic, in a way that other venues aren't. When we do criticism, we do it well, but we also make sure there's a political take-away for people who aren't particularly interested in culture for its own sake. Obviously, if we were a cultural magazine, we'd be failing spectacularly; but luckily, there are other, very good magazines that do focus on culture.

This brings us to the question of how you see Jacobin *fitting within the broader ecosystem of left-oriented publications in the* US.

We relate fraternally to these other publications. A journal like *n+1* operates at a stylistic level far superior to what we could do. That said, I think we're the only publication in this sphere that's directly political. *n+1* might address politics through literature, while other venues might in some way be political. But *Jacobin* is nothing without its politics—it has no lasting significance otherwise. In some ways we're more akin, in the US context, to *Against the Current*, *Monthly Review* or *New Politics*, not just because we come from the same Marxist tradition, but because they're directly political journals. But I actually don't see *Jacobin* as part of a wider publishing scene. It's not a theoretical journal like *Historical Materialism*; it's fundamentally a mass-oriented publication, without striving to be a broad, reportage-heavy movement publication like *In These Times* or *The Nation*. In some ways we're trying to be the equivalent of what *The New Republic* is for liberals. I don't even mind using the word 'middlebrow'. *Jacobin* is like nothing else in this space: it's explicitly Marxist, it's programmatically socialist, yet our goal is to speak to as many people as possible.

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[4] Michael Gold (1894–1967): pen name of Itzok Granich, CPUSA stalwart and columnist for the *Daily Worker*, known for vicious criticisms of bourgeois literature.

You've published a lot on international issues, but would it be fair to say that Jacobin *is mainly oriented to the US domestic context?*

It is and it isn't. In terms of the raw number of pieces, I think we publish more on the Middle East and North Africa from a Marxist perspective than almost anyone else, especially online. And that's also some of our most popular content, reaching hundreds of thousands of people. But I would also say that it can be very easy, as American radicals, to look abroad constantly—to look at other problems and political formations as opposed to our weak and fragmented socialist movement in this country. I think the best service we can offer people in the so-called periphery and elsewhere is to build a vibrant socialist movement that would combat US imperialism at home. I also think there is something more difficult and also more noble in focusing on struggles in the United States, as opposed to more advanced struggles elsewhere. That's something we emphasize, compared to other publications: that we do understand American particularities, and have some sense of what it would take to actually build a movement here.

Are the Jacobin *reading groups part of that effort?*

When I started the magazine, I wanted people to read it because they thought of themselves as active members of a political project. I was very wary of *Jacobin* being seen as just a consumer product, something that looks nice and is enjoyable to read, and especially wary of our success among liberal-left literary types—it's good that we're winning them over, of course, but we didn't want them to see *Jacobin* as a more radical version of *n+1*, or be drawn to us because we're less pessimistic than *The Baffler*. The broader political project of rebuilding the socialist movement in the US is the only reason for the magazine to exist in the first place. So our strategy is to produce the resources needed for that project, and creating spaces where people can meet and discuss ideas is one way to use the magazine to instigate something more real and concrete, and less ephemeral than the experience of reading. At the moment, there's nowhere for people to go if they want to talk about socialist politics, besides joining a cadre organization. I personally think that joining a cadre organization in the current period is a leap few would be willing to take—I've nothing against those who do, they often do good and honourable work; but the *Jacobin* reading groups are a nice alternative, or at least a complement, so that people can link up and discuss ideas without the organizational

burdens often imposed by that kind of activism. I think of it as a holding action. Maybe in ten, fifteen, twenty years, there will be organizations that will take on a lot of the energy that would otherwise be going to things like the reading groups—and that'll be a good thing.

To what extent is Jacobin *feeding off changes in US political culture in the last few years?*

I think there has been a shift of sorts. You no longer find as many people actively defending the system—there's a sense of dejection, a sense that the system can't be changed, but there's less active defence. This has happened in my generation, and I think it leaves an opening to show people that there is an alternative. There's definitely an audience for the idea that the immiseration people are experiencing is actually very easy to fix—technically, we have plenty of resources to do so, the only barriers are political. Generationally, I think there's also been a change in the perception of socialism. When the Berlin Wall fell, there was this idea that it would open the way for a democratic socialist thought no longer bound by Cold War paradigms. But it immediately became apparent that this wasn't true—there was a tremendous swing to the right, and in the 1990s life for people in the former Eastern Bloc, and the developing world more generally, was considerably worse than when the Soviet Union was around. We may now be getting to the point, though, where socialism is no longer so closely associated with the USSR. For example, according to a Pew poll from 2011, people in the US between the ages of 19 and 30 have more positive sentiments towards socialism than capitalism. Of course, what they mean by socialism is something like the Scandinavian welfare state, but that's still progress over an association with gulags and military parades.

At the same time, the leftward shift people tend to see in the New York publishing scene is often overstated—it's definitely a welcome development, but we're talking about fairly small circles. A lot of the most significant gains that have been made organizationally are on the right. Progressives often describe it as astroturf, but there is a degree of grassroots energy in the Tea Party that has helped them make inroads, for example against reproductive rights. There have been some shifts, and there is an opening for us on the left, but I would say we're at the very beginning of what we need to be doing.

What was Jacobin*'s relationship to Occupy?*

Most of us were involved as individuals—we were either in universities or major urban centres where the occupations happened. At the time we were only a year old, and had a circulation of less than 1,000. We played no direct role in organizing, though we did host a panel that became one of the more famous Occupy events, partly because the *New York Times* freelancer Natasha Lennard lost her job after participating in it. We did some online pieces on Occupy that were very widely read at the time, too. It certainly opened up space for *Jacobin*, partly because people were looking for something that was neither the prefigurative politics of the anarchists nor MoveOn.org-style liberalism. Just by virtue of being socialists we offered a more compelling political alternative—not only the moral and ethical critique of capitalism, but a plausible transition to a successor society.

You've talked about Jacobin *operating in the middle ground between Leninism and social democracy. What does that mean in terms of strategy—does it imply a kind of neo-Popular Front politics?*

It's true that we wouldn't see liberals as our enemies, and we'd envisage common action with them where possible. It's also useful to make a distinction between the Democratic Party and a section of its base. The mainstream of the party, as represented by Obama, as well as the more technocratic DLC types, hold economic views diametrically opposed to a substantial part of the base, who still largely buy into the New Deal, the Great Society, welfare, social goods and so on. If we want to build a socialist or even left-liberal opposition movement today, one to the left of the mainstream Democrats, its votes and support will have to come from some of these people—they're the ones we need to be engaging with and directing our activism towards.

Isn't there a tension, though, between the social-democratic and radical socialist perspectives being offered in Jacobin*?*

I don't think so. One day, in a dream scenario where you have a socialist movement pushing for full social ownership, say, and it's encountering active opposition from the bourgeoisie, then you would have a clash. But that debate is very much in the future. In the short and medium term, I don't think there's a tension between the two poles. There are

tensions with our liberal supporters, though. One of the reasons *Jacobin* has grown so much is that we're attracting liberals who are interested in left-wing ideas, and at the moment we serve a useful purpose for them—having someone intelligent to the left of them allows them to assume their natural position as centrists. But it's not clear we would get that kind of support from those people if there was actually a proper movement advancing views diametrically opposed to theirs, or at least challenging their dominance within a broader left movement.

What's Jacobin's *view of the Obama administration?*

Obama obviously represents a centrist element in US politics—there are many more reactionary people than him, which has been used by liberals to block any opposition or movements to the left of Obama. We reject that kind of blackmail, and stand in total opposition to the Obama administration. As anti-imperialists, we oppose any intervention in any circumstance by capitalist states—so we've opposed, in very strident terms, the interventions in Libya and now Syria. At the same time, there's no doubt that a lot of people who voted for Obama in the swing states because they didn't want to see the right get elected were acting quite rationally. In 2012, we didn't really have an editorial stance, but the general view among us was that there was no candidate to vote for in that particular election—most of us in non-swing states voted for third-party candidates. It seemed to make sense to vote for Obama in a swing state, where there was no progressive ballot option, as a lot of unions and progressive formations did. But the logic of that position was to forestall any possible opportunity of electing a left candidate in the future.

Isn't there a political duty to focus one's attacks on the White House, as Enemy Number One?

Of course—we have been pointing this out and we continue to do so. Unlike most of the US left, we definitely didn't jump on the progressives-for-Obama bandwagon. There's a very big difference between shrugging your shoulders at people voting for Obama in places like Virginia and actually lauding the Obama presidency as something that presents hope. Fundamentally, our main task is to try to build protest movements; but this is not something you can will out of nothing—the old Marx line is that people create their own history but not under conditions of their own choosing, and I think that applies very much now. What's needed

is to build movements until we reach a point where electoral options are actually viable.

What's next for Jacobin*?*

I have a three-year and a five-year plan. Within three years we should be able to hit a stable paid circulation of 25,000, which would be much higher than the historic peaks of any other publication of our type, with our politics. At some point we're going to reach an uppermost limit, unless political conditions change, but I believe that happens to be well above 25,000. If you think about a publication like *Adbusters*, which mainly offers an anti-consumerist politics, it had a peak circulation of over 100,000. It did that through its catchiness and its visuals. There are lots of ways *Jacobin* can reach a very high paid circulation. I've already conceived of one way, which is to resurrect J. A. Wayland's 'Appeal Army'. The *Appeal to Reason*, representative of the right wing of the Socialist Party of America at the time, was the highest-circulation socialist publication in US history, and in the early 1900s had the fourth largest circulation in the country—over half a million, a million-plus for special editions. Part of this was down to the network of volunteers who sold their subscriptions. I think we could use things like that, which bourgeois publishers wouldn't be able to do, to boost our circulation. Besides that, we have plans to send a quarter of a million direct mails over the next couple of years. And we want to develop our infrastructure at the back end—our paywall, subscriber management systems and so on are largely proprietary and built to our needs. With the reading groups, the goal is to raise enough money so that we can hire a second organizer. It's very difficult for one person to coordinate that many groups. And I'd obviously like to hire more editorial and production staff, to spread the burden more, and pay writers more.

But it's primarily a political project. We want to reach as many people as possible not just for the sake of having a high circulation, but as a way of laying down a flag for a certain variety of socialism—attracting people to it, politicizing them as best we can, and hopefully playing some small role in the emergence of movements that will take us to a point where a magazine like *Jacobin* has at most an ancillary function. Because we don't think a magazine should be playing the role of an organization. Ultimately, what a socialist movement needs is active militants on the streets, and then eventually a mass party.

Is that the five-year plan?

More like the twenty-seven-year plan . . . I'd actually be very happy if, by the time I die, there's an opposition current in the US of 5 to 7 per cent that identifies as socialist or would support a socialist candidate. If that happened in the core of the imperialist world, it would create a lot of space for others, and allow the weak link in capitalism to be broken somewhere else. We'd be able to press on and make our own great advances in those conditions and be prepared to not just react, but benefit from capitalist crises.

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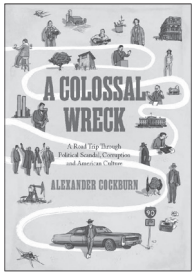

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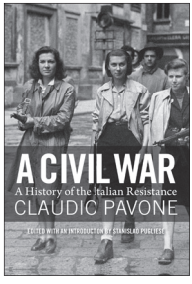

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DANIEL FINN

RETHINKING THE REPUBLIC

Fintan O'Toole and the Irish Crisis

It seems clear that the Eurozone crisis has been stabilized, for the time being, on terms dictated by Brussels, Frankfurt and Berlin. The price that has been paid to preserve the single currency and sustain a dysfunctional banking system hardly needs recounting here: from Athens to Dublin, mass unemployment remains a crippling burden. Yet, to paraphrase Tolstoy, all bail-out countries are unhappy in different ways. Greece has witnessed the stormiest opposition, with the emergence of Syriza as a potential, if fragile, counter-hegemonic force. In Spain, years of street protest have begun to leave their mark on the political system, and there is a gathering storm over Catalan independence. Rolling strikes in Portugal have seen public-sector wage and pension cuts blocked by the constitutional court. In Ireland, however, where the economy has been bled dry to reimburse the bad loans of British, French and German banks, resistance has been muted. Cabinet ministers have boasted of their ability to impose 'remarkable' cuts in public spending without provoking social unrest.[1] For their part, European officials have repeatedly held Ireland up as an example of good citizenship to its unruly counterparts on the Eurozone periphery, much to the delight of local media outlets.

But if mass protests have been comparatively few in Ireland, it is not for lack of spirited polemical broadsides against its ruling elites by native writers. Pre-eminent here, in terms of impact and visibility, has been *Irish Times* columnist Fintan O'Toole, the country's leading public intellectual. Published in the immediate wake of the crash, O'Toole's *Ship of Fools* (2009) was a coruscating attack on the crony culture and bubble economy fostered by Ireland's political leaders, soon followed by *Enough*

Is Enough (2010), another onslaught on the myths of the Republic, which proposed a comprehensive reform programme with fifty action points. Is there any writer in another EU—or OECD—country who has produced such a comprehensive indictment of the ruling establishment's record, in such damning detail and in such sparkling prose? O'Toole's latest works form part of a cycle dating back to the 1980s that testifies to his formidable range as a social commentator. In seeking to explain the 'Irish exception', it may thus be helpful to explore O'Toole's writing in more depth: what distinguishes the critical character of his work, what causal explanation does it offer of his country's predicament, and what light can it shed on Ireland's post-crisis trajectory?

Life and times

Born in 1958, O'Toole spent his early years in Crumlin, a working-class housing project on the fringe of Dublin's inner city, one of several constructed by Fianna Fáil in the 1930s as part of its slum clearance programme. Built on the cheap, the new district was largely devoid of social infrastructure, with the revealing exception, as he later recalled, of 'a magnificent granite police barracks overlooking the estate, easily Crumlin's finest building until the permanent church was erected'.[2] O'Toole's father was a bus conductor with a passion for literature whose hero was George Bernard Shaw; his schooling came from the Christian Brothers, a clerical fraternity whose traditional diet of mawkish nationalism and social conformity was sharply at odds with the temper of the times:

> While the students of Paris were on the barricades, and my father and the other busmen of Dublin were on strike, I was reading in *Our Boys* about Maurice, who got a nice girl, joined the Saint Vincent de Paul Society, and became a good boy: 'He was getting on better with his boss. Before, he had always been pushing for more pay, or looking for easier work, or something. But now he didn't mind getting the toughest job—and the dirtiest—and he was always willing to change his shift to suit someone else.'[3]

O'Toole took his degree at University College Dublin, arriving in the mid-70s when the campus ferment of earlier years had already begun to

[1] Harry McGee, 'Public service reforms have been "remarkable" claims Howlin', *Irish Times*, 14 January 2014.
[2] Fintan O'Toole, *Black Hole, Green Card: The Disappearance of Ireland*, Dublin 1994, p. 119.
[3] Fintan O'Toole, *The Ex-Isle of Erin: Images of a Global Ireland*, Dublin 1997, pp. 84–5.

subside. The political and social landscape that confronted O'Toole as he began his career in journalism was easily the most conservative of any country in Western Europe. Long-established reactionary power structures had crumbled in Spain, Portugal and Greece, with left-wing parties and militant unions spearheading resistance to dictatorship, and generational revolt transforming national cultures. In the Republic of Ireland, however, the twin pillars of conservative hegemony, secular and clerical, appeared to be unshakable. National politics still followed the pattern established in the early years of the state, with two right-wing parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, often harvesting more than 80 per cent of the vote between them, while a small, anaemic Labour Party struggled to break the 15 per cent barrier, occasionally serving as a coalition footrest for Fine Gael. This 'two-and-a-half' party system derived from a split in the movement for national independence over the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921: the pro-Treaty camp emerged victorious in a brief civil war, and ruled the Irish Free State for its first decade. Their political vehicle, Cumann na nGaedheal, later rebranded as Fine Gael, retained the mark of its origins as a party of clerics, businessmen and strong farmers.

Fianna Fáil, on the other hand, had become the principal home for anti-Treaty holdouts by the end of the 1920s, and cultivated a much more populist image, winning support from farm labourers and the urban working class. Yet on taking power for the first time in 1932, the party would follow the main lines of economic policy laid down by its opponents, tinkering with the ultra-conservative Free State rather than transforming it. All but ten of the years between 1932 and 1981 saw Fianna Fáil in sole possession of government office. There was little room for explicit class politics in this configuration. A modest economic boom in the 1960s boosted industrial militancy—for a time, the Republic had the highest strike rate in the developed world—and briefly emboldened the Labour Party to advance its own claims, promising to break the conservative duopoly. By the time global recession had plunged the Irish economy into steep decline from 1979 onwards, such impertinence was a fading memory: Fine Gael–Labour coalitions would alternate with Fianna Fáil during the 1980s, both presiding over deep cuts in public spending, high unemployment and mass emigration.[4]

[4] The emergence of new political forces towards the end of that decade—Progressive Democrats on the right, Workers' Party on the left—suggested that the two-and-a-half party system might finally have reached the end of its unnatural lifespan.

A second distinguishing feature of the Irish scene was the powerful hold of a ferociously authoritarian church over the Republic's social and cultural mores. Gramsci once claimed that 'nobody attaches himself to Catholicism as a norm of life, even when calling himself a Catholic. An integral Catholic, one, that is, who applied the Catholic norms in every act of his life, would seem a monster.'[5] It was the peculiar, monstrous achievement of Irish Catholicism that it should have attempted to do so and succeeded for a time, at tremendous psychological cost to vast swaths of the country's population. Over the course of the nineteenth century, a rigidly puritanical code was grafted onto a peasant society that had traditionally been far more relaxed in its approach to religious observance. This became one of the defining attributes of the new Irish state in the decades after independence. By the 1970s, the Church's grip was being contested by brave liberal and feminist vanguards, who challenged the prohibition of divorce, abortion and contraception. In the following decade—energized by the papal visit of 1979, which attracted a third of the population to gigantic outdoor spectacles—defenders of Catholic power launched a counter-attack against social liberalization. The 1980s were dominated by a bitterly contested war of attrition between the clerical-conservative bloc and its secular opponents. A constitutional ban on abortion—already proscribed by law—was imposed by referendum in 1983, while attempts to legalize divorce were beaten back in a plebiscite held three years later.[6]

To compound the mood of national pessimism, the long-running conflict in Northern Ireland showed no sign of burning itself out. Another legacy of the struggle for national independence, which had left six northern counties under British rule, the Republic's closest neighbour was characterized by systematic discrimination against its Catholic-nationalist minority. When British troops were deployed to contain civil disturbances at the end of the 1960s, hopes for reform were quickly dashed as London chose to prop up the sectarian Unionist government with escalating measures of repression. By the time it abandoned that policy in the spring of 1972, a low-intensity war was in progress, pitting the Irish Republican Army (IRA) against British state forces and unionist

[5] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, London 1971, p. 351.
[6] In contrast, Italy had lifted the ban on divorce in a 1974 referendum; Portugal liberalized its divorce law in 1977 and Spain followed suit in 1981.

paramilitaries: it would last for another two decades, claiming three and a half thousand lives.

The Northern Irish 'years of lead', incomparably more destructive than those in Italy or West Germany, largely bypassed the southern state and its citizens, but left a profound mark on the Republic's culture nonetheless. Members of the southern political class were chiefly determined to prevent the violence from spilling over into their domain, and to maintain good relations with London as far as possible: any residual commitment to Irish unity was overshadowed by these priorities. Many intellectuals went further in their hostile reaction to the IRA campaign. Nationalist mythology would have found itself under scrutiny from a new generation of historians under any circumstances, and deservedly so; but the form assumed by that questioning of received wisdom was inseparable from the northern conflict. 'Revisionism', as it came to be known, was intensely suspicious of revolutionary nationalism, its practitioners often extending their dislike of the modern IRA to the entire republican pantheon from the eighteenth century onwards. A sanitized view of Britain's role in Irish affairs that frequently veered towards outright apologetics was the flip side of this approach. Roy Foster's *Modern Ireland*, published in 1988, provided a brilliant synthesis of revisionist historiography while condensing many of its flaws.[7]

Within this constellation, O'Toole's affinities lay with the forces of social liberalization and modernization, and with the revisionist backlash against Irish nationalism. His abiding passions were literature and the theatre: he read English and philosophy at UCD, and began his career as a drama critic for the listings magazine *In Dublin*, going on to perform

[7] As one (highly sympathetic) commentator noted: 'Lord Mountjoy, who "successfully commanded the English forces that drove the rebels from the Pale 1601–1603", is described as "a humane man". On the other hand, the United Irishman Napper Tandy who, in a biographical note, is said to be "eulogized in national folklore", is described by Foster as "the ludicrous Napper Tandy". I do not know how it is possible to apply such adjectives from the 20th-century perspective to any figure from the 16th century, especially a figure sent by England to Ireland with an army, nor to any figure in the 18th century, even one eulogized in national folklore . . . underneath the brilliant insights and real originality in Foster's *Modern Ireland* there is an ideology perhaps not as crude as that of any nationalist historian writing school texts in the Twenties, but just as clear.' Colm Tóibín, 'New Ways of Killing Your Father', *London Review of Books*, 18 November 1993.

the same role for the *Sunday Tribune*. O'Toole expanded his range with political and cultural reportage for *Magill*, a monthly current affairs magazine, and would serve as its editor for a year in 1986–87 (*Magill* provided the launchpad for several journalistic careers: the novelist Colm Tóibín was one of O'Toole's predecessors in the editorial chair). At the same time O'Toole was working on his first book, a study of the playwright Tom Murphy, whose early work had provoked clerical fury and denunciation.[8] In 1988, the year he turned thirty, O'Toole was hired by the *Irish Times* as a columnist and feature writer, which gave him a platform at the heart of Ireland's media establishment; he has stayed with the paper ever since.

The *Times* has followed a curious path since it was established as the mouthpiece of Irish Unionism in the late nineteenth century. Dublin-based, the paper found itself stranded in the new state after independence and had to adapt to its new surroundings. For much of the twentieth century it was overshadowed by two rival broadsheets, the *Independent* and the *Press*: each sold 200,000 copies a day in the 1950s, while the *Times* lagged far behind on 35,000.[9] At that point it was still the paper of choice for a residual Protestant middle class, concentrated in business and the professions: for that reason, although the *Times* was always a conservative newspaper, it could never be *the* conservative newspaper, and stood at some remove from Dublin's political elite. Like other Protestant bastions—Trinity College, the Anglican and Presbyterian churches—the *Times* adopted a position of social liberalism by default, serving to distance the paper's editorial line from an establishment that remained profoundly Catholic in its ethos.

During the long stewardship of Douglas Gageby—editor from 1963 to 1986, apart from a brief gap in the mid-70s—the *Times* shed its Commonwealth allegiances and began to expand its circulation, gradually moving within sight of the *Independent* and the *Press*. Its traditional liberalism proved an asset as Gageby recruited a new generation of writers in tune with the emerging women's movement, and there was even room for a small leftist cohort on the editorial staff, although Gageby himself was close to Fianna Fáil and its leader Charles Haughey; the fact that cultural issues occupied centre stage throughout the 1980s made

[8] Fintan O'Toole, *Tom Murphy: The Politics of Magic*, Dublin 1987.
[9] John Horgan, *Irish Media: A Critical History Since 1922*, London 2001, pp. 62–3.

the paper's dominant perspective seem more radical than it actually was.[10] By the time O'Toole joined the *Times*, it had completed its transformation into a 'paper of record', cast self-consciously in the mould of *El País* or *Le Monde* (and with a comparable sense of its own importance). Gageby's successor Conor Brady continued to boost the paper's circulation figures, benefiting from the demise of the *Press* in the mid-90s: at time of writing, its per capita sales exceed those of the *Guardian*, *Times*, *Independent* and *Financial Times* put together. Under Brady, the paper's editorial sympathies lay with those who supported modernization and the liberal agenda while remaining within respectable boundaries, from the Progressive Democrats to Labour's centrist leader Dick Spring, a Kinnock clone who acted ruthlessly to smash the party's left wing.[11]

Early themes

O'Toole's speedy ascent owed much to his gifts as a writer, which stand out even in a country where literary talent is not in short supply. His prose is both fluent and controlled, with a sharp eye for detail and a fine sense of narrative cadences. But his political viewpoint was also a neat fit for the *Times* consensus, representing the liberal strand of conventional opinion. Three main issues attracted O'Toole's attention during the initial stages of his journalistic career: Catholicism, corruption and conflict. The decline of clerical power was the most prominent of these subjects. His first collection of articles, *A Mass for Jesse James*, took the temperature of Irish Catholicism in the 1980s, when the conservative backlash appeared triumphant. O'Toole suggested that in retrospect, the decade would be seen as 'a time when the gap between private action and public expression became total. Traditional values needed to be publicly reinforced precisely because they had ceased to have private meaning.'[12] It would not take long for the truth of this observation to become manifest. The strongest blow against religious authority came from the abuse scandals that began with the arrest of Father Brendan Smyth, a serial

[10] Mark O'Brien, *The Irish Times: A History*, Dublin 2008, pp. 175–6.

[11] Brady would later recall his admiration for Spring's purge of the Militant Tendency, whose supporters had 'made life intolerable for Labour ministers, persistently seeking to subvert any policies that they saw as compromises with the centrist parties . . . Spring took them on with his own cabal of tough men.' Conor Brady, *Up With The Times*, Dublin 2005, p. 210.

[12] Fintan O'Toole, *A Mass for Jesse James: A Journey Through 1980s Ireland*, Dublin 1990, p. 9.

predator who had been shuffled complacently from parish to parish by his superiors. As O'Toole noted, the controversy aroused by the Smyth case was as much a symptom of upheaval as it was a catalyst:

> Rather than changing what we know about reality, it confirms it. It puts a face to the dark, faceless knowledge that has clung to Irish childhood for generations. It names a nameless truth. At the level of raw experience, hundreds of thousands of people in Ireland have known for most of their lives that there is a problem of paedophilia within the Church.[13]

From schools where 'the risk of being molested was taken for granted', to residential institutions characterized by systematic abuse of children in care, the nameless truths of Irish Catholicism would soon be exposed to harsh public scrutiny.[14] The insolence with which the Church hierarchy continued to stigmatize those who rejected Catholic moral teaching, after its own record of complicity with abuse had been documented so abundantly, compounded the malaise.

The signature note of O'Toole's writings on the Church during this period was often more soothing than triumphalist, with an eye clearly directed towards that large body of Irish Catholics who had experienced the disgrace of the clergy 'not as a liberation but as a trauma', having seen their faith in 'the one thing that seemed stable and trustworthy throughout the breathless decades of change' so comprehensively betrayed.[15] O'Toole was keen to offer reassurance to this unsettled layer as they gradually embraced a more tolerant and pluralist outlook, arguing that everyday practice had long been at odds with religious doctrine: 'One of the strange things about Ireland is that, perhaps uniquely among societies, we have insisted on proclaiming a public morality that is in many ways worse than our private values. Our peculiar form of hypocrisy has been not a whitened but a blackened sepulchre.'[16] By 1997, he could observe that 'Catholics have become markedly Protestant in their attitude towards Church teaching . . . the most important tenet of Protestantism—the right of individual conscience—is now accepted by the great majority of Irish Catholics.'[17] Mass attendance and clerical ordinations have plummeted, and the traditionalist bloc has been defeated in every set-piece battle since the early 90s: divorce, contraception and

[13] *Ex-Isle of Erin*, p. 198. [14] *Ex-Isle of Erin*, pp. 198–200. [15] *Ex-Isle of Erin*, p. 221.
[16] *Ex-Isle of Erin*, p. 219. [17] *Ex-Isle of Erin*, pp. 16–17.

homosexuality have all been legalized, although the ban on abortion has yet to be repealed and the bishops retain their stranglehold on public education, their right to discriminate against teachers and students on religious grounds formally enshrined in law.

A second major theme of O'Toole's writing was the crisis afflicting secular power-holders in the Republic. The stench of political corruption emanating from the Fianna Fáil hierarchy was at its most pungent during the controversy incited by financial malpractice in the meat industry. O'Toole was assigned by the *Irish Times* to cover a long-running tribunal that scrutinized the affairs of Larry Goodman, Europe's leading beef exporter and one of Ireland's most powerful men, who had exploited his contacts with Fianna Fáil to secure access to vast government handouts. O'Toole later published a full-length book based on his work at the inquiry, *Meanwhile Back at the Ranch*, the greater part of which consisted of a meticulous, step-by-step reconstruction of the tribunal report, which had compounded the inherent obscurity of the subject matter with a tendency to pull its punches whenever possible. The book also placed Goodman's empire in the context of an economy that had long been dependent on cattle exports, and neatly captured the preposterous self-image of the man himself, whose business model was almost entirely based on the manipulation of state subsidies, yet who cultivated the persona of a dynamic, thrusting, free-market entrepreneur held back by a shadowy 'Establishment', in whose ranks he was definitely not to be counted. O'Toole quoted Goodman's ingenuous reply to a tribunal lawyer who had suggested that Goodman Meats was 'dominant' in the European beef industry: 'I don't like the word "dominant". I wouldn't agree with that . . . we don't like the word "power". That is a sort of Leninist idea.'[18] The cattle tycoon was closer to the mark than he realized, for Lenin's view of the capitalist state would prove a better guide to Irish reality in the years to come than the verities of political science textbooks.

Taking Goodman's 'anti-establishment' pretensions as his starting-point, O'Toole offered an illuminating take on the country's social hierarchies, identifying a cultural dislocation at the heart of its bourgeoisie: 'Because there is, in Ireland, a self-conscious elite created by a certain number of fee-paying schools, to be outside of that elite,

[18] Fintan O'Toole, *Meanwhile Back at the Ranch: The Politics of Irish Beef*, London 1995, p. 34.

however much power and wealth and control of other people's lives you may have, is to be allowed the luxury of feeling yourself to be outside of the establishment.'[19] This elevated caste had its origins in the decades before independence, when a Jesuit-trained professional elite had clustered around the Irish Parliamentary Party, ready to assume a position of real authority as soon as Ireland was granted Home Rule, before finding itself upstaged by 'a crowd of Christian Brothers boys with Webley revolvers' after the 1916 Rising: 'Thus was born that fascinating phenomenon—a well-established, highly privileged upper-middle class that, without being in any way economically discommoded, was politically usurped.'[20] The dislocation that ensued had lasted to the present day: while in the UK, the public-school transmission belt dispatches its alumni into every section of Britain's ruling class, from City boardrooms to the front bench of the Conservative Party, the Irish equivalents tend to be less ecumenical in their reach. Although the business elite still draws many of its luminaries from Leinster's private-school complex—among them the newspaper mogul Tony O'Reilly, Ryanair's chief executive Michael O'Leary and the poster boy of Irish capitalism, Peter Sutherland, who has served as chairman of BP and Goldman Sachs—the political class attracts fewer recruits from such circles. On the other hand, the 'negative logic' described by O'Toole—'the establishment talks through its noses. I talk through the side of my mouth, therefore I am not a member of the establishment'—has allowed many Irish businessmen (property developers in particular) to adopt the brash, outsider persona developed by Larry Goodman: 'We end up with two sets of people who have immense power but yet manage, through their complementary myths of persecution and marginalization, to avoid responsibility for the state of the place.'[21]

The abortive push for 'clean hands' in the early 90s was very much part of the *Irish Times* house orthodoxy.[22] So, too, was support for the nascent peace process in Northern Ireland: the *Times* was strongly in favour of engagement with Sinn Féin, the IRA's political wing, while

[19] *Black Hole, Green Card*, pp. 208–9.
[20] *Black Hole, Green Card*, p. 213. James Joyce was the most famous product of this embryonic governing class, albeit an entirely atypical one.
[21] *Black Hole, Green Card*, pp. 209, 215–6.
[22] This high-minded crusade, spearheaded by Dick Spring and the Labour Party, ran into the sand after the 1992 election, when Spring took Labour into government with Fianna Fáil—much to Conor Brady's annoyance: Brady, *Up With The Times*, p. 231.

the *Independent* took a much more hostile view. These contacts led in due course to a permanent IRA ceasefire, in place from 1997, which cleared the way for a power-sharing agreement to be negotiated between unionist and nationalist parties the following year. O'Toole was enlisted by the *New York Review of Books* to write a series of articles explaining the northern peace talks to its readership.[23] His analysis was very much in tune with the revisionist school of thought, absolving Britain of any historic responsibility by concentrating on internal factors: 'Though Irish nationalists tend to regard the partition of the island by the Westminster parliament in 1920 as a heinous British crime, it was in reality an inevitable product of Irish political, economic and religious divisions.'[24] O'Toole's account of the modern period likewise downplayed British culpability: 'The IRA's campaign has not been a war of national liberation, waged on behalf of the majority against an oppressive minority or a foreign power. Its enemies have not been illegitimate regimes but two liberal democracies—the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland—and the majority Protestant population in Northern Ireland itself.' He qualified this picture of the UK as a benign, liberal-democratic state confronting the menace of terrorism by referring to internment of suspects without trial, the Bloody Sunday massacre of 1972, and Margaret Thatcher's 'hard-line attitude' to republican hunger strikers, but described these actions as 'blunders', arising from a 'lack of understanding' on the part of British politicians (no such leeway was granted to Irish republicans for their own 'mistakes').[25]

In assessing Britain's role in Northern Ireland, O'Toole let conservative ideology override his critical faculties and put forward arguments with a strongly apologetic flavour. He glossed over the flagrant injustice of the partition settlement, which granted the Unionist Party a block of territory far in excess of its popular mandate. There was no ideal solution to the problem of Ireland's conflicting identities, and the arrangements imposed by London in the 1920s certainly made no attempt to provide one, based as they were on the most sordid calculations of imperial strategy. O'Toole's account of the modern conflict also effectively whitewashed the record of the state forces, whose agents collaborated extensively with

[23] Fintan O'Toole, 'The End of the Troubles?', NYRB, 19 February 1998; 'Are the Troubles Over?', NYRB, 5 October 2000; 'Guns in the Family', NYRB, 11 April 2002; 'The Taming of a Terrorist', NYRB, 27 February 2003.
[24] 'The End of the Troubles?'.
[25] 'The End of the Troubles?'.

unionist paramilitaries responsible for hundreds of sectarian killings (in addition to the 186 civilians killed directly by British forces during the 'Troubles').[26] To speak of 'blunders' in the face of these systematic abuses is an evasion of reality. There is still a strong case to be made against the IRA campaign, which unquestionably produced its own horrors, but not on the grounds advanced by O'Toole.

Nordic visions

By the time the Belfast Agreement was signed, the gloomy economic vista of the 1980s had been replaced by a triumphalist mood in the Republic, as growth accelerated and unemployment fell. In the preface to *The Ex-Isle of Erin*, published in 1997, O'Toole informed his readers that Ireland's 'Celtic Tiger' economy was 'not so much on the prowl as on the razzle-dazzle', its GDP per capita surpassing that of the UK for the first time in 1996.[27] Combined with the psychological impact of cultural liberalization and the Northern Irish peace process, the decade-long boom generated a mood of national self-confidence that would endure in one shape or form until the crash of 2008. O'Toole was now firmly established as one of the stars of Irish journalism: his political commentary for the *Irish Times* was accompanied by substantial work as a drama critic, including a widely praised biography of Sheridan and a 'radical guide to Shakespeare' aimed at secondary-school students.[28] In the new context created by the boom, he would use his media platform to set out the positive vision that had underpinned earlier critiques of Fianna Fáil, the Catholic Church and the IRA: a moderate, left-of-centre outlook, rooted in the belief that Ireland should emulate the Nordic model of social democracy.

The most comprehensive statement of this outlook could be found in *After the Ball*, which was published by the left-liberal think-tank TASC in

[26] For a good summary of the evidence, focusing on the 1970s, see Anne Cadwallader, *Lethal Allies: British Collusion in Ireland*, Cork 2013; for more recent examples of state complicity, see in particular the 2007 report delivered by the then-Police Ombudsman Nuala O'Loan on the murder of Raymond McCord (available at the University of Ulster's CAIN website).

[27] *Ex-Isle of Erin*, p. 19.

[28] Fintan O'Toole, *A Traitor's Kiss: The Life of Richard Brinsley Sheridan*, London 1997; *Shakespeare is Hard, but so is Life*, London 2002.

2003. TASC had been established two years earlier with funding from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Irish-American billionaire philanthropist Chuck Feeney; O'Toole would serve as chair of its advisory board, along with a cross section of Irish soft-left luminaries. *After the Ball* tacitly assumed that the problem of how to generate wealth had been solved: now it was a question of what Ireland chose to do with the resources available. O'Toole noted that Irish investment in social protection was uniquely stingy among its European partners: 'The EU average is 27.3 per cent, and no country spends less than 20 per cent. Except, that is, Ireland, which spends a spectacularly low 14.1 per cent.'[29] After several years of unprecedented growth, levels of poverty and inequality remained second only to the United States among western nations. Private patients were guaranteed speedy access to hospital treatment, while their less fortunate brethren languished on waiting lists, with alarming consequences for public health:

> The general death rate from heart attacks in Ireland is 176 per 100,000 of population, compared to 108 in the EU as a whole. In those under 65, the death rate from heart attacks is nearly double the EU rate: 46 per 100,000, compared to 25 in the EU as a whole. Treatment for cancer is often astonishingly poor for a wealthy, developed society. Less than one-third of the 12,000 patients who require radiotherapy in the Republic each year receive it. Public patients face a three-month delay for radiation treatment that they have been told is both necessary and urgent.[30]

O'Toole rejected the claim that any shift towards Scandinavian levels of taxation and social expenditure would kill off the Irish boom. Ireland's economic success had never been simply a matter of keeping taxes low and letting the free market work its magic: it should in fact be seen as 'a complex product of left-of-centre values which has not ended the spectacle of social squalor even while removing the excuse for it'. Contributory factors deriving from such values included large-scale investment in public education, EC/EU structural funding, greater female participation in the workforce, and national wage agreements to guarantee industrial peace.[31] There was sufficient room for manoeuvre to make a social-democratic reform programme viable without compromising economic growth.

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[29] Fintan O'Toole, *After the Ball*, Dublin 2003, p. 62. The percentage is of GDP.
[30] *After the Ball*, p. 80.
[31] *After the Ball*, pp. 168–9, 17–26.

After the Ball's final chapter qualified the picture of a successful economy whose fruits now simply had to be put to good use. O'Toole pointed to a divergence between foreign and Irish-owned companies, the former concentrated in areas like software, chemicals and electronic engineering, the latter 'still dangerously dependent on the export of bulk commodity food (mostly beef and milk in a raw, unbranded, low value-added form) and live animals, which account for almost half of total indigenous exports but under 6 per cent of the total'.[32] But overall, readers were given little sense of the problems that were being stored up as the boom progressed: in particular, the increasing dependence on construction and finance as engines of growth, and the spectacular rise in transfer pricing by US multinationals from the late 90s on, which completely distorted the figures for Irish GDP.[33]

There was also no discussion of the political forces that might be expected to put O'Toole's programme into effect. Readers of his *Irish Times* columns, however, would have known that O'Toole looked to the Irish Labour Party as the chief domestic vehicle for his ideas. This was a classic example of hope triumphing over experience: having always stood on the right wing of European social democracy, Ireland's centre-left party now clearly had no intention of disturbing the political peace. Dick Spring had led Labour to its highest-ever share of the vote in 1992, only to bring it back down to its previous level in the following election, after forming coalitions with both of the main conservative parties. Amid the flux of the 1990s, the venerable two-and-a-half party system seemed to be the only rock of continuity, with the challenge of the Workers' Party on Labour's left flank proving ephemeral, and the hard-right Progressive Democrats happy to serve as (very) junior partners to Fianna Fáil. Fianna Fáil itself gained a new lease of life after the corruption scandals of the early 90s, resuming its place at the head of government in 1997, where it would remain for the next decade and a half.

O'Toole's advice to the Labour leadership fluctuated sharply in the wake of national elections, depending on the immediate possibilities

[32] *After the Ball*, pp. 162–3.

[33] Between 1990 and 2010, employment at US-owned companies rose by 127 per cent, while declared income for the same firms rose by 2,457 per cent: Jesse Drucker, 'Man Making Ireland Tax Avoidance Hub Proves Local Hero', *Bloomberg*, 27 October 2013.

that seemed to lie before them. When Fine Gael lost almost half of its TDs in 2002, after one of the worst performances in the party's history, a left-of-centre bloc comprising Labour, the Greens, Sinn Féin and left-independents now had more seats in parliament than Fianna Fáil's principal rival. O'Toole urged Labour to break with its traditional partner so as to lend greater cohesion to this emergent bloc: 'No Labour leader can credibly convince his party that the way forward lies in working with Fine Gael rather than seeking to replace it as the second party.'[34] But the chances of Labour displaying such audacity were negligible: its left-wing elements had been clobbered decisively by Spring and his allies in the early 90s, their spokesmen either co-opted or expelled. With the unerring instinct familiar to students of the party's history, the Labour hierarchy grasped hold of this opportunity to miss an opportunity with both hands, negotiating a pact with Fine Gael that helped the latter to recover over the next five years while Labour itself stagnated and its would-be partners were left out in the cold.

As he digested the results of the 2007 election, O'Toole looked ready to throw in the social-democratic towel: having spent much of the preceding decade railing against Fianna Fáil and its leader Bertie Ahern, he was now prepared to endorse a coalition between Fianna Fáil and Labour with Ahern as prime minister. Although his post-election analysis criticized Fine Gael, Labour and even Sinn Féin—'a party of protest that was protesting too little'—for their timidity in posing alternatives, he went on to argue that Labour had 'no realistic route to government, either now or in the foreseeable future, except in partnership with Fianna Fáil'; the moment for supplanting Fine Gael as the main opposition party had passed, and the best that could be made of a bad business was to negotiate a deal with Ahern after his third successive electoral triumph (letting his imagination run riot, O'Toole suggested that Labour could implement radical health-care reform from within the cabinet, ensuring that 'its swallowed pride would not taste so bitter').[35] No such alliance materialized in any case, as Ahern struck a bargain with the Green Party to form a government that would lead the Republic into the worst economic crash of its history.

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[34] Fintan O'Toole, 'Ahern, master of a quiet revolution that produced a slick FF machine', *Irish Times*, 20 May 2002.

[35] Fintan O'Toole, 'Rejection of "same, only different"'; 'Bertie deal is Labour's best option', *Irish Times*, 28, 29 May 2007.

Manna from Brussels

If Labour showed no sign of repaying O'Toole's faith on the domestic front, there was another putative agent of reform that he had in mind: the European Union. O'Toole's published output bore witness to a growing Europhilia from the mid-90s on. In 1997 he had referred to the 'paradox' of Ireland's position in the modern world: 'Its sovereignty is a power that can be exercised mostly by giving it up. Its separation 75 years ago from one political and economic union, the United Kingdom, is justified by its membership of a bigger political and economic union, the EU.'[36] So far as O'Toole was concerned, this was a transformation of quality as much as one of quantity. Far from constituting another form of alien rule, European integration had strengthened democracy and the power of states to act constructively on behalf of their citizens. *After the Ball* went further still, crediting the Union with averting civil conflict in the 1980s:

> The EU gave conservative Ireland a stake in its own destruction. Would it have died anyway? Yes. Would it have died without a potentially disastrous struggle? Probably not. For when we look back over the last 30 years, the astonishing thing is not that there were sometimes bitter social tensions in the Republic but that they were contained with relative ease. With massive levels of unemployment and social exclusion, with a fierce struggle between secular and religious forces and with a violent conflict on its doorstep, Irish society should not have been able to accommodate huge economic and cultural changes. Without the EU's success in luring conservative Ireland into the modern project, it almost certainly could not have done so.[37]

O'Toole's warmest assessment of the European Union was set out in another book for TASC, 2005's *Post Washington*, which he co-authored with Tony Kinsella. Subtitled *Why America Can't Rule the World*, it was one of a batch of works by centre-left intellectuals contrasting US-style capitalism with an allegedly superior European variety (Will Hutton's *The World We're In* and Tony Judt's *Postwar* being notable examples of the genre). The main polemical thrust of *Post Washington* was directed against those commentators who believed that Ireland should be 'closer to Boston than Berlin'—a rhetorical trope first deployed in 2000 by the Progressive Democrats leader and deputy prime minister

[36] *Ex-Isle of Erin*, p. 20.
[37] *After the Ball*, p. 21.

Mary Harney, which proved sufficiently inane to become a staple of Irish political discourse. The bleak picture of American society that emerged in *Post Washington* was plainly intended as a rebuke to this tendency, with European virtues standing out more clearly against the transatlantic backdrop.

Kinsella and O'Toole listed the factors that set the US apart from European societies, giving particular emphasis to the more exotic features of the American cultural landscape, before drawing up a negative balance sheet of recent economic trends.[38] With the Bush–Cheney team at the peak of its international notoriety, much of the book was devoted to a critique of the foreign-policy doctrines underpinning the 'war on terror' and their roots in the military–industrial complex. A final chapter drew out the implied contrast between the Unions in plain sight, posing Europe as a superior alternative, whether in terms of economic models—'the ultra free-market US system does not work; derivatives of the European social market economy do'—or of international relations: 'The EU has succeeded because it has expanded peacefully and voluntarily. It has spread its ethic—legality, democracy and the global market—much more effectively than the neo-conservatives in the US have spread theirs.'[39]

Written at a time when Donald Rumsfeld's 'Old Europe' barb was still fresh in the memory, the book greatly exaggerated the differences between Washington and Brussels in matters of war and peace. A quotation from the EU's foreign policy chief Javier Solana was rather more double-edged—and thus more honest—than the authors appeared to believe: 'There is no inherent opposition between power, supposedly the "US method", and law, the "European method". Law and power are two sides of the same coin. Power is needed to establish law, and law is the legitimate face of power.'[40] Solana himself would hardly have been able to serve as NATO secretary general if he had held any principled objection to militarism, or to US hegemony in world affairs. Tensions over Iraq proved to be short-lived: quite apart from the presence of major European states among the 'Coalition of the Willing' whose soldiers

[38] Tony Kinsella and Fintan O'Toole, *Post Washington: Why America Can't Rule the World*, Dublin 2005, pp. 63–81.
[39] *Post Washington*, pp. 312, 317.
[40] *Post Washington*, p. 217.

marched into Baghdad, from Britain and Denmark to Italy and Poland, the main opponents of the war in Paris and Berlin swiftly gave their assent to the occupation that followed.

The 'social market economy' held up by Kinsella and O'Toole as an example to the world had an equally tenuous grounding in reality. To begin with, a number of European countries—notably Ireland and Britain—stood closer to the American 'social model' than to its idealized European counterpart. Elsewhere in the EU 15, citizens did enjoy more rights in the workplace and better access to public services outside it, but these social gains owed nothing to the process of European integration, having been won at the level of the nation-state. Neither of O'Toole's TASC publications made any reference to the neo-liberal framework that had been put in place for the Eurozone, or to the obstacles that any social-democratic agenda would now face in Brussels and Frankfurt: *After the Ball* dwelt admiringly upon the long-defunct vision of a 'social Europe' advanced by Jacques Delors in the 1980s, but said nothing about developments since the ink had dried on the Maastricht Treaty.[41]

These questions had been aired in Irish political debate during the referendums on the Nice and Lisbon treaties, both of which were voted down by the electorate (in 2001 and 2008 respectively), only to be pushed through at the second time of asking.[42] The Irish No campaigns included right- as well as left-wing forces, posing conflicting arguments on a range of subjects and along separate organizational tracks. The broad public sentiment behind the No votes probably owed more to dislike of the political establishment and a desire to give its leaders a sound kicking than to any explicitly ideological critique of the EU. While we should thus be careful in presenting the referendums as evidence of a leftwards shift in popular opinion, the fact remains that the Euro-critical left has been a real political force over the past decade and a half—unlike the right-wing Euro-sceptics whose attempts to capitalize on Nice and Lisbon at the ballot box were crowned in abject failure.

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[41] *After the Ball*, pp. 18–9. O'Toole had referred explicitly to the constraints imposed by Maastricht in his reporting on the 1992 general election campaign, but appeared to have lost sight of those shackles in the meantime: 'Avoiding the hard choices'; 'Promises blowing in the wind', *Irish Times*, 18, 24 November 1992.

[42] Because of a court ruling in the 1980s, Irish governments are obliged to seek popular approval of new European treaties—much to the annoyance of EU officials, whose aversion to such consultations is well known.

Yet O'Toole responded to the emergence of this progressive constituency, which held much greater promise than the plodding efforts of the Labour Party, by brushing it aside. Calling for a Yes vote on all four occasions, he concentrated his fire on the most reactionary elements in the No camp, and accused left-wing No campaigners of mendacity in their arguments: 'The process they want us to fear is actually a progressive and civilizing one that can be used to support real political struggles by people against power.'[43] The course followed by Irish politics since the crash tells its own story: the fault-line between those who gave their support to European treaties and those who campaigned against them can be mapped almost exactly onto the present divide between those who preach submission to the Troika and those prepared to challenge its authority.

Class dismissed

Behind O'Toole's trust in wildly inappropriate agencies for reform, from the Labour Party to the European Union, lay a shaky grasp of the social constituencies that could be mobilized behind such a programme. *After the Ball* listed a series of marginal groups who were 'on the outside' of Celtic Tiger Ireland: women and children, gays and lesbians, immigrants and asylum seekers, Travellers and the disabled. The discrimination faced by these social categories was beyond dispute. But one group was notable by its absence: the working class. O'Toole might have argued that in Ireland as elsewhere, wage-earners were far from being a monochrome social layer whose experience of life was more or less identical—but the same could be said *a fortiori* of women or children, which did not stop him from including them on the list of those facing discrimination in Irish society. In *Post Washington*, Kinsella and O'Toole dismissed the whole concept as a relic of the past: 'In our post-industrial societies it is almost meaningless to talk of a working class in nineteenth-century terms . . . twenty-first-century society can be divided into three social sectors: a rich elite, an underclass and a large, if multi-layered, middle class.'[44]

One would gather the impression from this passage that class analysis had not moved forward since the *Communist Manifesto*, or made any

[43] Fintan O'Toole, 'The real fight has always been to achieve social justice', *Irish Times*, 3 June 2008.
[44] *Post Washington*, p. 39.

attempt to grapple with mutations in the social terrain of advanced capitalism. Ralph Miliband, among others, argued for a definition of the working class as 'all those people whose main, and usually exclusive, *source of income* is the sale of their labour power, or transfer payments from the state, or both; whose *level of income* places them in the lower and lowest income groups; and whose individual *power* at work and in society at large is low or virtually non-existent'. Miliband also referred to the presence of a sub-professional lower-middle class, whose members were more likely to ally themselves with the working class proper than the traditional petty-bourgeoisie had been, and were also capable of taking industrial action in their own right.[45] These definitions can be accepted or rejected, but they clearly represent a departure from the stereotypical image of a Victorian industrial proletariat alluded to by Kinsella and O'Toole, and offer a better foundation for political action than the idea of a vast middle class, whose layers are not specified, standing over an impoverished and excluded sub-proletariat.

It was easier for O'Toole to entertain such debilitating notions during the boom years, when the number of days lost to strike action fell to historic lows—thanks not least to the system of national wage agreements known as 'social partnership'. O'Toole's brief reference to this process in *After the Ball* gave it a positive spin: by embracing corporatism, Ireland's union leaders had shown evidence both of intelligent pragmatism and concern for social justice.[46] When a group of train drivers who had joined a breakaway union stepped outside the partnership framework in 2000, O'Toole responded with a stinging attack on the strikers, accusing them of 'aristocratic' pretensions, and contrasting their 'old-fashioned' union leadership with the wise heads to be found elsewhere in the Irish labour movement: 'subtle, sophisticated and, in the broadest sense, political'.[47] Fellow-pundit Gene Kerrigan's retrospective take on the corporatist experiment is far more pointed:

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[45] Ralph Miliband, *Divided Societies: Class Struggle in Contemporary Capitalism*, Oxford 1989, pp. 22–3, 47 (emphasis in original).

[46] *After the Ball*, p. 26.

[47] Fintan O'Toole, 'Train drivers' mystique no longer makes sense', *Irish Times*, 15 August 2000. O'Toole's otherwise deeply conventional polemic was spiced up with some eccentric ramblings about the place of trains in popular culture—'somewhere in the dream life of men over 40, the locomotive driver forever rides the rails'—much to the amusement of the strike's leader Brendan Ogle: Ogle, *Off the Rails: The Story of* ILDA, Dublin 2003, pp. 222–3.

> While 'social partnership' produced stability, and it gave the union leaders a certain status, and the leaders could point to social achievements, there was a price. Society was becoming more unequal. Union membership was falling. It was harder to organize the increased numbers of casual and part-time workers; increasing numbers of companies were actively anti-union. At rank-and-file level, with little to do but accept the agreements negotiated by the union leaders, the sinews of the movement had atrophied. A generation of union officials hadn't ever organized a strike or a campaign of any sort and wasn't very good at recruiting. Trade union membership in 1980 was 55 per cent of the workforce. By 1999, it was 38 per cent. By 2010, it would be 31 per cent.[48]

Corporatism also had a baleful effect on working-class community organizations, which had posed a significant challenge to the state and its priorities in the 1980s before finding themselves absorbed and neutralized during the period that followed, with government funding used to direct such groups away from political campaigning and towards the provision of services. The real legacy of the 'partnership' years was to have opened the door to Thatcherism by stealth, in contrast to the British experience—avoiding the trauma of defeat, but also the memory of struggle. The relative weakness of social mobilization in Ireland since 2008 cannot be understood unless we take this background into account. Without a dynamic labour movement at the heart of a social bloc able to press its demands upon the Irish political system, there was no chance of O'Toole's blueprint for reform being translated into reality.

After the crash

Ireland's spectacular rise to the top of the European ladder was followed by an equally dramatic fall after the collapse of Lehman Brothers precipitated a global financial meltdown. The Irish economy suffered the largest decline in GNP of any industrialized nation during the first three years of the crisis, while unemployment soared from 4.6 per cent in 2007 to 14.2 per cent by June 2011.[49] The cost of bailing out the major banks rose

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[48] Gene Kerrigan, *The Big Lie: Who Profits from Ireland's Austerity?*, London 2012, p. 29. Kerrigan, who writes for the *Sunday Independent*, Ireland's best-selling newspaper, stands closer to O'Toole in political terms than any other columnist in the Irish media. Their contrasting views of 'social partnership' may reflect a generational divide: Kerrigan is older than O'Toole, and began his career in journalism writing for the Trotskyist *Worker* during the heyday of Irish labour militancy in the 1970s.

[49] Stephen Kinsella, 'Is Ireland really the role model for austerity?', *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, vol. 36, no. 1, January 2012.

exponentially, eventually reaching €70 billion—a crushing liability for one of the Eurozone's smallest economic units. By 2013, Eurostat would estimate that Ireland had absorbed 42 per cent of the *total* cost of the European banking crisis: a larger share than Germany's, even in absolute terms, and vastly greater when the size of their respective economies was taken into account.[50] The prohibitive cost of the now-infamous bank guarantee drove Ireland into the arms of the Troika at the end of 2010, burying the triumphalism of the boom years once and for all.

O'Toole responded to this calamity by moving left, just as the *Irish Times* was shifting in the opposite direction. With the waning of clerical power from the 1990s, the paper had lost whatever dissenting profile it may once have possessed, and its residual left-wing contingent was gradually eroded by death or retirement, leaving O'Toole as an isolated voice on the comment pages, where boosterism and complacency held sway. O'Toole himself was passed over in the search for a new editor after Conor Brady stepped down in 2002: management opted instead for Geraldine Kennedy, a one-time Progressive Democrats TD. The slump that began in 2008 has seen the *Times* give full rein to its essentially conservative nature as the self-appointed champion of 'Middle Ireland' and principal cheerleader for the Troika. The paper's most influential columnists have argued ceaselessly for a permanent regime change in the economic sphere, taking all important decisions out of the hands of elected politicians so as to guard against 'populist' temptations.

Against this backdrop, O'Toole's post-crisis works stand out all the more sharply. *Ship of Fools* was published in 2009, followed by *Enough Is Enough* in 2010 and *Up the Republic!* in 2012—the last title being a collection of essays edited by O'Toole, with his own contribution making up one-quarter of the book's length. *Ship of Fools* put forward the author's explanation of the crisis, while its two successors answered the call for an alternative blueprint that might serve as a guide to constructive political action. In addition, O'Toole has continued to write his weekly column for the *Irish Times*, and has made regular appearances on radio and television challenging the government's response to the crisis. His analysis has probably been the most influential alternative to the stultifying consensus shared by the three main parties and the great bulk of the Irish media.

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[50] Ann Cahill, '42 per cent of Europe's banking crisis paid by Ireland', *Irish Examiner*, 16 January 2013.

Ship of Fools offered a blistering indictment of the politicians, bankers and property developers who had steered the Irish economy onto the rocks. The Fianna Fáil-led governments which held office from 1997 to 2011 had 'practiced the economics of utter idiocy, watching a controlled explosion of growth turn into a mad conflagration and aiming petrol-filled pressure hoses at the raging flames'.[51] They had encouraged the chaotic property bubble by providing lucrative tax incentives to developers, shelling out €330m of public money to subsidize the construction of hotels for which there was no demand, and €2 billion on 'renewal' schemes that built homes where nobody wanted to live. By 2006, the construction sector accounted for 19 per cent of total employment and almost one-quarter of Irish GNP—twice the average ratio for Western Europe.[52]

Such practices had a long pre-history. O'Toole looked back at the ruling order's tolerance of outright criminality in the financial sector during the 1970s and 80s—a time when the state lost billions to various tax evasion schemes that were organized by its own banks, and government inspectors would respond to evidence of wrongdoing with all the tact and discretion of 'a maiden aunt who has peered through a neighbour's window and inadvertently seen him indulging in a private and intimate pleasure'.[53] The *modus operandi* of Irish banking had not changed in the slightest during the intervening years, although its leaders had certainly become more ambitious: Anglo Irish, the piggy-bank for property developers that would leave stratospheric debts to be paid back with public money after the crash, saw its assets rise from €15.8 billion in 2001 to almost €100 billion seven years later—including €44 billion of soon-to-be-worthless property loans in Ireland alone.[54] The same culture of impunity was applied on a grander scale at the International Financial Services Centre. Launched with great fanfare by Charles Haughey's government in the late 1980s, the IFSC provided all the benefits of a tax haven

[51] Fintan O'Toole, *Ship of Fools: How Stupidity and Corruption Sank the Celtic Tiger*, London 2009, pp. 19–20.

[52] *Ship of Fools*, pp. 116–8. Construction's share in the Spanish economy was 15.7 per cent of GDP in 2007. The European figure is also expressed in terms of GDP: because of transfer pricing and profit repatriation by foreign companies, GNP is a more useful benchmark for the Irish economy (uniquely in Western Europe, Ireland's GNP is significantly lower than its GDP).

[53] *Ship of Fools*, p. 57.

[54] *Ship of Fools*, pp. 197–8.

without the stigma attached to micro-states like Bermuda or the Cayman Islands. By 2005, three-quarters of all foreign investment was destined for the centre, which became the locus of 'a spectacular tri-continental triple crown of dodgy dealing—Europe's biggest ever fraud, the largest bankruptcy in Australian history, and a $500 million scam in the US'.[55]

Peculiarities of the Irish

Beyond greed and incompetence, what deeper causes were identified by O'Toole? In the book's opening chapter, he suggested that the crash had been 'induced by a lethal cocktail of global ideology and Irish habits'.[56] The ideology alluded to was, needless to say, that of free-market, neo-liberal capitalism, which had picked out Ireland as one of its great success stories during the boom. But when the time came to draw together the strands of his narrative, O'Toole put all the explanatory weight on the other side of the question, referring to Irish cultural traits grounded in 'nineteenth-century revenants' as the decisive factor:

> A primitive, pre-modern land hunger created the new feudalism in which an elite puffed up the price of land and inflated a fatal property boom. The political system, embodied most thoroughly in Fianna Fáil, remained rooted in the Tammany Hall politics of the nineteenth-century Irish-American Democratic Party machines . . . in business, and especially in banking, there remained an anarchic attitude to law and morality, rooted both in a colonial habit of playing games with authority and in a religious culture that saw sex, rather than money, as the currency of sin . . . the heroic powers of denial, the ability to know and not know at the same time, that had been formed by the peculiar circumstances of Irish history, remained remarkably intact.[57]

In this reading, Ireland's greatest problem had been its failure to become truly modern and shake off the dirt of the past. The effect of such arguments could only be to obscure the social dynamics of the Irish construction boom—and to encourage the sort of cultural fatalism that O'Toole has been quick to deplore in other contexts. Asset-price bubbles and financial crises have been recurrent features of the neo-liberal era. On the eve of the crash, wildly overheated property markets could be

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[55] *Ship of Fools*, pp. 126, 140. The fraud: Parmalat. The bankruptcy: HIH Insurance. The scam: AIG.

[56] *Ship of Fools*, pp. 23–4.

[57] *Ship of Fools*, pp. 214–5.

found in four western countries—Ireland, Spain, Britain and the United States—with a wide range of cultural and political idiosyncrasies: big and small, Protestant and Catholic, monarchy and republic, colonized and colonizer. That fact alone would suggest the need for a broader perspective than one which emphasized the 'peculiar circumstances of Irish history'.

This does not require us to overlook those factors that left Ireland especially vulnerable to such afflictions. But talk of a 'primitive, pre-modern land hunger' came uncomfortably close to the obfuscatory waffle about a supposed 'Irish property-owning gene' that has become a staple of conservative punditry. At one point, O'Toole asserted that '87 per cent of Irish households own their own homes, compared to an EU average of 61 per cent', without supplying a reference for his statistics; Eurostat, however, gave a figure of 78 per cent for 2007, against a European average of 73.6 per cent, placing Ireland thirteenth out of twenty-nine countries listed.[58] Irish exceptionalism in this field is greatly overstated. If there is a stronger bias towards home ownership than can be found in some European countries, we need not seek its roots in a primordial attachment to the land, deriving from ancestral memories of dispossession; more immediate causes can be identified, notably the run-down of public housing by successive Irish governments.[59]

A more selective version of the 'property-owning gene' could perhaps be said to afflict members of the Irish business elite. While bank lending rose by 466 per cent in the space of a decade after capital gains tax was slashed in 1998, just 2.5 per cent of that funding went towards the much-vaunted high-tech manufacturing sector; construction and real estate attracted 28 per cent, with commercial property absorbing the lion's share.[60] But that surge towards property speculation was enabled by a flood of capital from US, UK and Eurozone banks, which removed any barriers to credit expansion that might have been imposed by the size of the Irish economy. The 'anarchic attitude to law and morality'

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[58] *Ship of Fools*, p. 102; *Europe in Figures: Eurostat Yearbook 2010*, Luxembourg 2010, p. 332. The 29 states listed were the EU 27 plus Iceland and Norway; the average for the EU 15 was 71 per cent.

[59] Conor McCabe, *Sins of the Father: The Decisions that Shaped the Irish Economy*, Dublin 2013, pp. 32–60.

[60] Seán Ó Riain, 'The Crisis of Financialization in Ireland', *Economic and Social Review*, vol. 43, no. 4, Winter 2012.

referred to by O'Toole also typified banking practice in Wall Street and the City of London, where it cannot have owed much to Catholic religious doctrine or the heritage of colonialism. The rotation of personnel between leading investment banks and the US Treasury Department was conducted with a cheery shamelessness that put Fianna Fáil's notorious fund-raising tents in the shade. This strand of US political culture had a much greater impact on Ireland's property bubble than the influence of Tammany Hall.

There was nothing uniquely Irish about a bourgeoisie that channelled much of its wealth into property and financial speculation, nor about a state that worked tirelessly to facilitate such dispositions. Ireland's main curse has not been incomplete modernization, but the wholehearted embrace of 'modernity' in its predominant form: neo-liberal, financialized capitalism. No change of heart has been discernible since the crash. The Department of the Environment decided to lease excess housing supply from private developers instead of buying it outright. No cost saving was at stake, but the class logic was impeccable, as Peadar Kirby and Mary Murphy observed: 'In choosing to lease rather than purchase these houses, policy works to bail out developers and to transfer national wealth from the state to the private sector, rather than acting as a mechanism for rebuilding the national social housing stock.'[61] The ambitions of the governing class stretch further than stoking up another domestic housing bubble: plans are now afoot to complement the IFSC with an 'International Property Services Centre' that could become a 'global centre of excellence' for such activity.[62] O'Toole's emphasis on 'nineteenth-century revenants' simply diverted attention from these impeccably modern developments.

A new republic

O'Toole described his next work, *Enough Is Enough*, as a response to the most frequently asked question on his promotional tour for *Ship of*

[61] Peadar Kirby and Mary Murphy, *Towards a Second Republic: Irish Politics after the Celtic Tiger*, London 2011, pp. 133–4.

[62] Predictably, the civil servant behind this scheme used the mythical property-owning gene as an alibi: 'We see this as producing a way for the Irish obsession with property, historically so individualized, to be more professionalized.' Aubrey Robinson, 'The Reboot of Irish Property Finance', *Irish Left Review*, vol. 1, no. 2, Autumn 2013.

Fools—'what do we do next?' The book bore the subtitle *How to Build a New Republic*, setting the stage for his emphasis on 'republican democracy' as the basis of an alternative politics. It opened with a story about Samuel Beckett that would also supply the title for its successor. Beckett had been asked to contribute to a famous volume in which writers took sides on the Spanish Civil War: his 'typically laconic' reply was to send a card with the message UPTHEREPUBLIC! As O'Toole noted, however, this clear declaration of support for the Republican cause 'also carried something else that was typical of Beckett, a sardonic irony':

> By taking possession of an Irish slogan that had been used by both Sinn Féin and Fianna Fáil, and that had little appeal for him, Beckett was making a joke on both himself and Ireland. He knew very well that in Ireland being a republican meant something quite different from what it meant in a broader European context. Beckett thus summarized in thirteen letters the strange situation of a country in which people who regarded themselves as republican might be at odds with the political realities of the republic itself.[63]

Those familiar with Irish history were left to recall that a few years later, when Beckett was working as a resistance courier in occupied France, the leaders of the rump IRA had made contact with German intelligence and were co-operating with agents of the Third Reich. This episode underlined the ambiguity of 'republicanism' in the Irish context: more often than not the term has been a synonym for militant nationalism, its associations with a particular form of government remaining much weaker. The allusion to Beckett was intended to cleanse O'Toole's neo-republican agenda of such connotations. But in a search for historical ballast to strengthen his programme, O'Toole nonetheless set about delving through the actually existing republican tradition for material. In *Up the Republic!*, he contrasted the Fenian manifesto of 1867 favourably with the better-known Easter proclamation of 1916:

> Ireland is not invoked as an abstract entity, summoning 'her children to her flag'. The 1867 references to the country are concrete: 'the soil of Ireland'; 'the Irish people'. On the other hand, the 1867 proclamation does mention certain things absent in 1916: a republican form of government (as against both 'oligarchy' and 'the curse of Monarchical government'); economic injustice ('the oppression of labour'); and economic equality ('we aim at founding a Republic based on universal suffrage, which shall secure to all

[63] Fintan O'Toole, *Enough Is Enough: How to Build a New Republic*, London 2010, p. 21.

> the intrinsic value of their labour'). Even more uncomfortably, the 1867 proclamation resists ideas of either religious or ethnic solidarity as the basis for the Irish republic. It is explicitly secular: 'We declare, also, in favour of absolute liberty of conscience, and complete separation of Church and State.' And it does not create a simple opposition of 'Irish' to 'English'. It declares war on 'aristocratic locusts, whether English or Irish, who have eaten the verdure of our fields'.[64]

Enough Is Enough made the Democratic Programme adopted by Ireland's outlaw parliament during the War of Independence into one of its touchstones, citing the document's pledges to establish a national health service and to provide for the welfare of children and the elderly, in place of the 'odious, degrading and foreign Poor Law System' that had been established under British rule.[65]

O'Toole's search for reference points in the Fenian heritage was one measure of how far the crisis had shaken up old certainties. His excursion through history still bore the heavy imprint of revisionist dogma, however. Laying the blame for partition exclusively at the door of Irish nationalism, O'Toole quoted James Connolly's warning that it would lead to a 'carnival of reaction' in both parts of a divided island, without giving readers any sense of what Connolly had actually meant.[66] He criticized opponents of partition in the southern political class, who were said to have created 'a feeling that the Irish state was a temporary arrangement, at best a mere way-station on the road to the true Republic of a United Ireland that would emerge at some time in the future'.[67] This greatly

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[64] Fintan O'Toole, ed., *Up the Republic! Towards a New Ireland*, London 2012, p. 12.
[65] *Enough Is Enough*, pp. 22–3.
[66] *Enough Is Enough*, p. 24. The founder of Irish Marxism had called for implacable resistance to a measure that was bound, in his view, to have disastrous consequences: 'Such a scheme . . . would mean a carnival of reaction both North and South, would set back the wheels of progress, would destroy the oncoming unity of the Irish Labour movement and paralyse all advanced movements whilst it endured. To it Labour should give the bitterest opposition, against it Labour in Ulster should fight even to the death, if necessary.' Peter Bereford Ellis, ed., *James Connolly: Selected Writings*, London 1997, p. 275. There was a Marxist strain of revisionist historiography, most ably represented by Paul Bew and Henry Patterson, which defined itself in opposition to Connolly's thinking on the national question. O'Toole's view of partition clearly owes far more to Bew and Patterson, whose scholarship he has praised on several occasions, than it does to Connolly (Bew has since exchanged the Althusserian precepts of his early work for a seat in the House of Lords as a Unionist nominee).
[67] *Enough Is Enough*, p. 30.

exaggerated the extent to which most southern politicians actually concerned themselves with Irish unity as a practical goal. O'Toole ignored a far more important barrier to the realization of progressive hopes raised during the struggle for national independence and codified in the form of the Democratic Programme. The civil war of 1922–23 ended in triumph for the most conservative elements in southern Irish society, who had rallied behind the pro-Treaty forces: the Free State which emerged from the conflict answered their need for a government that was determined to preserve the social order in the face of challenges from below—most notably from a trade union movement that had grown dramatically while the republican insurgency was at its height. A letter drafted by the Free State's chief of staff, Eoin O'Duffy, in August 1922 cut to the heart of the matter: 'If the Government can break the back of this revolt, any attempts at revolt by labour in the future will be futile.'[68] For O'Toole, with his intense distrust of Irish-style republicanism, such matters remained taboo.

The main thrust of O'Toole's argument in *Enough Is Enough* was to call for a new political order that would embody the spirit of republican values in a way that its predecessor had never managed. This demand for constitutional reform could point in two directions. The construction of a new political framework in countries like Bolivia or Venezuela has formed part of a broad civic insurgency against the power of traditional elites. The commentators who have made 'reform' into a buzz-word since 2008 have not been thinking of such models, however. A seemingly endless succession of op-eds in the *Irish Times* have blocked out the real question of who exercises power in Irish society, proposing instead the kind of institutional tinkering that would change everything so that everything could stay the same. Italy's transition to a Second Republic that was meant to ensure the 'normalization' of its political culture, yet which found itself in thrall to a lecherous, perma-tanned crook, offers a telling precedent for such frivolities.

O'Toole's blueprint for political reconstruction—a new electoral system, stronger parliamentary committees, devolution of power to local government—could not be dismissed so easily, linked as it was to a serious economic programme that addressed the questions of

[68] Charles Townshend, *The Republic: The Fight for Irish Independence*, London 2013, p. 432.

housing, health care, pensions and education. *Enough Is Enough* concluded with a list of fifty proposals for action, including the inauguration of universal health insurance, in place of the existing two-tier model that segregates patients on the basis of their income, and a crash programme of social housing, to be funded by the money currently diverted into rent supplements and tax relief for private landlords.[69] The unifying theme was admirable: to halt and reverse the transformation of public goods into commodities supplied through the market, establishing a system of universal provision based on need rather than ability to pay. Yet O'Toole's push for republican democracy drew back at the threshold of the boardroom. He took it for granted that private firms would remain the dominant players in economic life, merely proposing that 'no-one should be allowed to serve on the boards of more than three publicly quoted companies' and appealing to the enlightened self-interest of Irish capital: 'The opposition between successful enterprise on the one hand and probity on the other is not just wrong but fatal. Sustainable, long-term businesses are not built on having an eye for the main chance, covering up fraud and ineptitude and repeating the same crass mistakes over and over again.'[70]

At a time when the Irish banking sector was entirely dependent on public funding to survive, O'Toole's reluctance to contemplate any extension of republican principles to the workplace was telling. His own essay in *Up the Republic!* identified various 'isms' that had prevented Ireland from becoming a true republic—Catholicism, nationalism, localism, clientelism, even mercantilism—but left capitalism off the list.[71] The lengthiest discussion of economic affairs in the book, a contribution from the Irish political philosopher Philip Pettit, was mainly concerned with making the case against public ownership of the banks. 'Long tradition' was said to impose the conclusion that 'everybody's business is nobody's business and that in general, as Aristotle observes, people will look after their own property better than they will look after what belongs to all.'[72] Shorn of its philosophical allusions, Pettit's essay simply restated the most hackneyed 'private good, public bad' dogma in a more

[69] *Enough Is Enough*, pp. 240–4. One surprising omission from the list of reforms was a meaningful trade union recognition act, which might have supplied a bridge between O'Toole's programme and the social power needed to realize it.
[70] *Enough Is Enough*, pp. 235, 233.
[71] *Up the Republic!*, pp. 33–8.
[72] *Up the Republic!*, pp. 174–5.

exalted register, claiming that government regulation of finance would suffice to contain its destructive tendencies, and ignoring the systemic capture of such regulators by the banking elite—not least in Ireland.[73]

Uncharted waters

Having neglected the subject altogether in *Ship of Fools* and *Enough Is Enough*, O'Toole cautiously broached the question of Europe in *Up the Republic!*, observing that Ireland's present status was 'not unlike the kind of Home Rule that was supposed to come into force in 1914: local autonomy without fiscal or budgetary control. Except that such control does not reside in England but in Germany.'[74] His tenacious Europhilia had finally snapped after the terms of the bail-out programme imposed by the Troika were announced in November 2010: 'The sadistic pleasures of punishment have trumped the sensible calculation that an Ireland enslaved by debt is not much use to anyone . . . yesterday's abysmal deal turns Ireland's shame into Europe's disgrace.'[75] By 2012, O'Toole was urging his readers to reject the EU's fiscal treaty, describing a No vote as 'a responsible act of European citizenship, encouraging the change of direction without which the EU will destroy itself'.[76] This disillusionment has not been accompanied by any critical re-examination of his previous stance, however.

On the domestic stage, O'Toole's interventions since the Troika assumed control of Irish economic policy have been rather erratic. He considered running for office in the 2011 general election as part of an ill-defined 'non-party' alliance that never got off the ground. Fianna Fáil went on to suffer the worst defeat of its history, while support for left and centre-left parties was higher than ever before, with Labour alone winning 19 per cent of the vote. In the wake of the poll, O'Toole spoke of the need for 'a radical reassertion of Irish sovereignty, a popular revolt, not just against Fianna Fáil, but against the bank bail-out and the EU–IMF deal as well', and warned Labour that it would pay a heavy price for entering

[73] O'Toole himself supplied ample documentation of such complicity for the Irish case: *Ship of Fools*, pp. 146–8.
[74] *Up the Republic!*, p. 10.
[75] Fintan O'Toole, 'Abysmal deal ransoms us and disgraces Europe', *Irish Times*, 29 November 2010.
[76] Fintan O'Toole, 'Treaty a mere clause in contract yet unseen', *Irish Times*, 22 May 2012.

government with Fine Gael.[77] Predictably, the party's leadership ignored his advice. The enthusiasm with which Labour ministers set about vilifying the unemployed and selling off public assets was matched only by the self-righteous fury with which they responded to any criticism. Voters passed a fitting verdict on this record in the 2014 European elections: Labour's support collapsed and the party found itself overtaken on the left by Sinn Féin, standing on an anti-Troika, social-democratic programme. In his first *Irish Times* column after the results came in, O'Toole seemed to have given up hope that Labour might redeem itself: 'A broad progressive movement will thrive if it can bring together four big issues—debt resolution, radical democratic reform, social justice and sustainable economic progress—in a coherent vision . . . Labour has ceased to be a credible vehicle for that vision.'[78]

This is unfamiliar territory for O'Toole, who has always seemed more comfortable positioning himself on the left of the mainstream than standing outside the consensus altogether, and it would be surprising if his post-crisis turn was carried much further. A striking observation from his biography of Richard Brinsley Sheridan could easily be applied to the author himself: 'He was always careful to speak *within* the accepted language of contemporary politics, to take the words and thoughts that were around, and shape them into new meanings . . . instead of proposing alternative modes of understanding or feeling, he operated entirely within those that were given to him, but seized control of them and made them his own.'[79] The limitations of this rhetorical procedure should be obvious. The breadth and calibre of O'Toole's work command respect: there can be few, if any, writers in other European countries with comparable range and impact on public debate. His books and essays will repay careful study, with all their strengths and shortcomings, for many years to come. But a more radical critique of Irish and European power structures will be needed if the complacency of their elites is to be disturbed.

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[77] Fintan O'Toole, 'Radical change is what we really need', *Irish Times*, 1 March 2011.
[78] Fintan O'Toole, 'From tragedy to farce: Labour's big mistakes in 1918 and 2011', *Irish Times*, 27 May 2014.
[79] *A Traitor's Kiss*, pp. 203–4 (emphasis in original).

AMBITION VS DUTY

We publish below two succinct essays from Il Romanzo, *the five-volume survey of the novel as a form, edited by Franco Moretti and published by Einaudi between 2001 and 2003, which come from a section entitled 'The Inner Landscape', devoted to works of the nineteenth century exemplifying the new map of the passions. One of these, Rossana Rossanda on Dostoevsky's* Idiot *as a rare representation of goodness in fiction, appeared in* NLR *18. In this issue, Francesco Fiorentino and Enrica Villari address the two opposite values of ambition and duty, taking Stendhal's* Le Rouge et Le Noir *as a classic of the first and George Eliot's* Middlemarch *as one of the second. Texts of notable elegance, alone neither requires further introduction. In conjunction, however, they offer a pointed illustration of contrasts within the moral-political universe of French and English letters in the epoch after Waterloo. Stendhal's admiration—never uncritical—for the figure of Napoleon, under whom he served in Russia, and detestation of the Restoration order, is explicit in the narrative of his novel. Less well-known are his trenchant views of English society, of which he drew up a systematic survey after the last of his three visits there, in 1826: still in the grip of a selfish aristocracy, a middle class impervious to any idea not connected to profit, labourers reduced to thinking machines, a culture saturated with the compulsions of work and religion—*horrible tristesse de l'Angleterre, une vie pure de joie—*whose pervasive idiom was cant. Eliot, when she helped edit the* Westminster Review, *with which Stendhal had connections in its Benthamite days, was a translator of David Strauss, of Feuerbach and Spinoza. But religious scepticism never became any kind of political radicalism: sharing Carlyle's view of the French Revolution, fearful of mob violence in 1848, she refused even Mazzini as a dangerous conspirator. By the time of her great novels, she was a cautious conservative, warning working men not to get above themselves and declining any support for women's suffrage. For her the figure of ambition was the unscrupulous intriguer who is the villain of* Romola. *Its antithesis was the modest sense of duty, freely chosen and best practised in private life, that becomes the moral of* Middlemarch. *It was a lesson congenial to Victorian society, where the Queen was among Eliot's admirers. Enrica Villari ends her fine reflection on the novel with a passage from a French champion of Eliot's vision of the world, counterposing it to that of Zola. The first critic to advance a Darwinian theory of literary evolution, Ferdinand Brunetière is today mainly remembered as a leading supporter of the verdict on Dreyfus.*

FRANCESCO FIORENTINO

AMBITION

The Red and the Black

Ambition was long an object of disapproval, an occasion for shame.[1] 'We cannot pronounce the word "ambitious"'—wrote La Mothe Le Vayer in the mid-seventeenth century—'without leaving a stain on the person of whom we speak, so unfailing is its negative implication.'[2] As an 'unruly passion for glory and fortune' (so defined in Antoine Furetière's dictionary of 1690), ambition was conceived as a form of concupiscence, not for worldly goods (like avarice) or sensual pleasures (like lust), but for power and what would have been called success. Its goal was being rather than having. It diverted attention from the one real good, since (again according to Furetière) 'true ambition seeks only the reward of admission to heaven'. Any other kind was condemned by theologians and preachers, in keeping with express pronouncements in patristic literature and the *Summa Theologica*.

Religious reproof found an echo in a certain lay suspicion. Montaigne, himself largely unmoved by ambition, though he acknowledged its intensity as a passion, showed no concern at its effects. The disapproval of Charron, on the other hand, was explicit.[3] In the Ancien Regime, where identity was determined by rank, which in turn was determined by birth (one was born an aristocrat or a bourgeois, just as not so long before one might have been born a serf), ambition was taboo because it bred an impulse at odds with the natural order and the will of heaven. Those who deplored it, lay or clerical, agreed that its principal symptom was a kind of avid fever, a restless nervous tension, consuming life. In the early eighteenth century, the great preacher Massillon gave eloquent voice to this diagnosis:

> Ambition, that insatiable desire to rise above others and even rejoice in their downfall, that worm in the heart that gives it no peace; that passion which stirs every intrigue and commotion of the mind, which instigates revolution in states and parades new spectacles daily to the world, which dares everything and costs nothing, condemns he who is possessed by it to unhappiness.[4]

So long as the European novel depicted only heroic passions and the adventures of geographical—not social—mobility, ambition could not be a moral endowment of its protagonists. If they were young, they were in any case agitated by other feelings. Pascal, La Rochefoucauld and La Bruyère agreed that ambition was a passion of the old. The anthropology of sentiments of the seventeenth century (in this respect also quite distinct from that of the nineteenth century) expected youth to devote itself to love. Decorum and verisimilitude alike thus tended to exclude ambition from novels. Yet the society and literature of the time could not condemn ambition without appealing to a virtue that allowed a Christian and aristocratic sublimation of otherwise reprehensible actions and aspirations: heroes became 'magnanimous'.[5]

The rise of the parvenu

The eighteenth century, as we know, saw the eruption of both new protagonists and new ideas into the English and French novel: no more picaresque paupers struggling with the peripeteia of survival, nor princes laying conquests at the feet of their beloved, but youngsters of peasant extraction attractive to women, able and eager to make their way

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[1] This is a translation of 'L'ambizione: *Il rosso e il nero*', in Franco Moretti, ed., *Il romanzo*, vol. 1, Rome 2001.

[2] François de La Mothe Le Vayer, *Oeuvres: Vol. 2*, Paris 1662, p. 88.

[3] Montaigne, 'The Tale of Spurina', in *The Complete Essays*, trans. M. A. Screech, London 2003; Pierre Charron, *De la Sagesse*, Paris 1607, pp. 118–23.

[4] Jean-Baptiste Massillon, 'Sermons', in *Oeuvres Choisies: Vol. 2*, Paris 1868, p. 438.

[5] First theorized by Aristotle, magnanimity was—as René-Antonin Gauthier observed—'a specifically pagan ideal, opposed to the Christian ideal of humility', which nevertheless would be combined with it 'by St Thomas Aquinas, in a startling stroke of genius': *Magnanimité*, Paris 1951, p. 489. With exemplary Jesuit ingenuity, the illustrious father Galluzzi argued that 'humility is the reverse side of magnanimity, not its opposite'. See Marc Fumaroli, *Héros et orateurs: Rhétorique et dramaturgie cornéliennes*, Geneva 1996.

up through the social hierarchy. Marivaux's *paysan parvenu*, Jacob, would be the first in an endless line of provincials finding their way to Paris to 'better themselves and become somebody'.[6] A century later, Julien Sorel and Lucien de Rubempré will have no different aim. Yet Jacob, though a successful social climber, is not depicted as ambitious: he lacks both the fevered craving and strategic cunning of the type. The turning point in his life occurs by chance. He comes to the aid of someone in the street set upon by three assailants, unaware that this is Count d'Orsan, nephew of the prime minister. He acts on a generous impulse, and is rewarded precisely because he is innocent of any calculation. The full rehabilitation of ambition is some way off. In heroes of novels in the latter half of the century, indeed, ambition will often mutate into a quest for the moral reform of society. Such protagonists—the *Nouvelle Heloise* is an example—appear to have lost Jacob's spontaneity, his unneurotic peasant vitality. In this fiction, he who is excluded from good society does not seek a position in it: he calls into question the principles upon which it is founded.

It was the Revolution that redeemed ambition. Hérault de Séchelles, a member of the Committee of Public Safety, was the author of a collection of maxims, in the spirit of Chamfort or Laclos, published in 1802 after his death as *Theory of Ambition*.[7] By then ambition had found its emblematic hero. Not only had a provincial of minor noble origin become emperor of the French, but an entire generation of talents found rewards beyond the wildest dreams possible in the past—his brothers and generals, Bernadotte and Murat, would become kings. Napoleon's career legitimated every aspiration. When he fell, the Restoration set about repressing the regret of a generation of Julien Sorels at the disappearance of opportunities their fathers had enjoyed. Ambition became subversive. But its condemnation was as brief as the Restoration itself. Soon it was transformed into one of the principles on which liberal society would be founded. No longer the stigma of an ignoble soul, it became a gift from which the state itself could profit. Even its

[6] Pierre de Marivaux, *Le paysan parvenu* (1735–36, unfinished), part V. Historians of eighteenth century France are agreed that social ascent to the ranks of the nobility, far from increasing during the period, actually declined: at least four generations were needed to acheive it. Rather than mirroring this society, if anything literature articulated its hopes and fears.

[7] Latest edition: *Théorie de l'ambition*, Paris 2005.

degeneration could be redeemed, argued the most lucid and coherent French theorist of liberalism:

> The corruption that is born of ambitious designs is much less fatal than that of ignoble calculations. Ambition is compatible with a thousand generous qualities: probity, courage, impartiality, and independence. Avarice is compatible with none. We cannot exclude ambitious men from public positions; but let us keep the avaricious at a distance.[8]

A new novelistic mode

In parallel, the novel of the nineteenth century became the literary genre naturally adapted to the representation of ambition triumphant in a bourgeois universe. There were evident ideological reasons for this, since democratic sentiment furnished both energy for the dynamism of this post-revolutionary society, and one of the best vantage-points for registering the resistance of reality to individual desire. But an eminently technical narrative logic was also at work. Ambition is an anti-lyrical passion, requiring sudden shifts and changes: it produces stories. From this conjunction, a truly new form of fiction was born—alongside the more traditional novel of love, the novel of ambition. *The Red and the Black* can be considered its inauguration.

René Girard's famous reading of the novel first made the critical role of Napoleon in the narrative fully visible.[9] It is the example of his career that encourages Julien in his ambitions, and sustains him in the hard discipline needed to realize them. The remoteness of Napoleon from the space of the protagonist (in Girard's terms, he is an external, not an internal mediator) gives the young man a touch of quixotism—in the shadow of so disproportionate a model, he often appears incongruous, even ridiculous. Yet at the same time it relieves him of all pettiness. The grandeur of the external mediator may hinder his perception of reality. But it sets a high standard for his battle with it.

Napoleon's example looms before Julien at the decisive moments of his life. Thus he rejects his friend Fouqué's proposal that he abandon everything and retire to the hills with the thought that he would soon turn twenty-eight, an age at which 'Bonaparte had done his greatest deeds'.

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[8] Benjamin Constant, *Principes de politique*, Paris 1815, p. 52.
[9] René Girard, *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*, Paris 1961.

Such self-imposed deadlines have coercive force for Julien. Mindful of Napoleon, his ambition embraces the blackmail of time. In the garden at Vergy, prompted again by his hero—and facing no greater enemy than an enchanting, defenceless, provincial lady—Julien resolves to take Madame de Rênal's hand, with this challenge to himself: 'At the exact moment when ten o'clock strikes, I will carry out what I have the entire day been promising myself to do this evening—or I will go up to my quarters and blow my brains out.' By ten o'clock: he can wait no longer. The speed of the emperor's rise has shortened life's span. Those who are young in a post-revolutionary society—modern youth—must realize their ambitions right away, before they grow old. If not, they are failures.

Stendhal's novel foregrounds the essential role of time in narratives of ambition: not only of the future, but also of the past, with which those who succeed—the *parvenus*—are nearly always caught in an intense and perverse relationship. The past must be masked or mystified, as a threat to the present. Traces of a humbler condition can only compromise the higher positions they have won. This is an inexorable law of social climbing: the past is a burden, the weight of an inferior condition to forget and above all make others forget.

Yet as Georges Blin noted, Julien is atypical in this respect.[10] He does not repress the past. He can say to Mathilde: 'Do not think, Mlle de La Mole, that I have forgotten my position in life. I will make you understand and feel that you are betraying a Croisenois for a carpenter's son.' What some Stendhal scholars have termed his inferiority complex[11] springs from—as Mathilde puts it—his 'lively and innate sense of social distinctions', which constantly wounds his pride, making any mystification of inequality intolerable to him. For Julien, a disciple of Rousseau (whom he can even criticize for his snobbish weakness for aristocrats), the world is divided into antagonistic classes. 'She is good and sweet'—he tells himself of Madame de Rênal—'she has a lively affection for me, but she has been brought up in the enemy camp. They must fear above all men of courage, who after a decent education, lack the money

[10] Georges Blin, *Stendhal et les problèmes de la personnalité: Tome 1*, Paris 1958, pp. 191–205 and in particular p. 199. The entire chapter 'Se voir inférieur' is worth reading for an unsurpassed analysis of this Stendhalian constant.

[11] Beginning with René Schwob, 'Notes sur Stendhal', in *Revue Hebdomadaire*, 29 July 1939.

to make a career.' In his speech to the jury, he acknowledges that he belongs to the most dangerous section of the 'plebs': those who have access to culture but not to privilege. He is both an ambitious individual and a lonely hero of the class struggle. He wants to win more than to fit in. Behind a hypocritical front of faultless good manners lurks the fire of sedition.

Until he thinks he has arrived, Julien—unlike those who in various capacities feel soiled by dealings with him—makes no secret of his modest origins. The Chevalier de Beauvoisis cannot admit to fighting a duel with a servant; he must pretend that his opponent is a natural son of a friend of the Marquis. In turn, as they prepare to become his relatives, the Marquis and Mathilde must erase his past. So with a conjuring trick that only the powerful can perform, Julien Sorel is transformed into Monsieur le Chevalier Julien Sorel de La Vernaye, and then simply into Monsieur de La Vernaye. 'How I thank you, dear father', comments Mathilde, 'for having rescued me from the name of Sorel.' The son of a carpenter becomes the child of none; a birth certificate not only less compromising than the social reality of his origin, but closer to the moral reality of his new condition, as he starts to doubt whether he is really his father's son.

Julien cannot, however, escape an inexorable law of ambition: humble origins always carry the risk that an unseemly past may resurface to undo the brilliant present. His downfall will come when the space-time of his provincial beginnings in life intrudes on that of his worldly success: from the letter that Madame de Rênal sends to the Marquis de La Mole.

Calculation

In ambition, the future—understood above all as the ability to predict and calculate—plays a yet more essential role than the past. Each single move finds its rationale in contemplation of further moves ahead. One misstep can spoil forever—or at any rate, for a long time—the chances of advance, returning the mover to square one. Ambition wears its most ferocious guise in such calculations, and Julien only remains sympathetic because he appears innocent of them. The modesty of his starting-point is so disproportionate to his aspirations that these are necessarily rather nebulous ('the most heroic actions', 'do extraordinary things'), since no route capable of connecting two extremes so far apart

can be specified. Other ambitious characters in the novel—Valenod, Frilair, the seminarians—have clear-cut objectives that are near at hand. They want to become mayors, bishops, priests of wealthy parishes, and they deploy suitable tactics to achieve these ends. By contrast, it is through reverie rather than calculation that Julien catches glimpses of a better future. His actions appear to be guided either by an impossible emulation of Napoleon, or by a delicacy of mind that leads him to prefer the best of those who surround him, even if these are not most able to help him. Thus at the seminary he selects the austere abbé Pirard as his confessor, rather than the scheming Castanède, the deputy who deprives Pirard of authority. That choice will never be revoked, though it is soon shown to be a mistake exposing him to persecution. Yet if we look more closely, it proves to be anything but a mistake, for it will be thanks to Pirard—with all his austerity, himself a *parvenu*—that Julien is taken on as secretary to the Marquis de La Mole. His choice of Pirard was in fact in keeping with his aspirations, which differ utterly from those of his fellow seminarians, starvelings dreaming of a humble parish where they can settle down, who must—and know how to—ingratiate themselves with the Castanèdes and the Frilairs, to whom they are morally and pragmatically akin. Though he too strives to please them, Julien cannot. His choice of Pirard is a productive gesture, because it is consistent with the lofty aims he has set himself. *The Red and the Black* shows us how different types of ambition, requiring mutually incompatible choices, can coexist side by side; how sprinters and middle-distance runners may share the same track, but not the same race.

So even when he seems not to be, Julien is calculating. The weight of the future encumbering his present appears in all its starkness only when he must renounce all ambition. In prison, the prospect of a death sentence resolves his expectations: 'One by one, each of the hopes of his ambition had to be wrested from his heart with the fateful words: I am going to die.' The prerogative of no longer pursuing a goal—the abolition of the future—makes him light of heart: '"I have nothing more to do on earth", Julien told himself, and fell into a deep sleep.' For the first time he is restored to the fullness of the present: 'Life was not at all tedious to him, he looked at everything in a new light, and no longer felt any ambition. He rarely thought about Mlle de La Mole.' The emptying of ambition with the approach of death liberates Julien and grants him access to sincerity.

Perhaps it is just that wish for a lightness of heart, attainable only by the rejection of ambition, that in part explains his attempt to kill Madame de Rênal, whose motivation otherwise seems incoherent and inadequate in the novel. For so extreme a gesture contradicts every calculation. After her letter, Julien might still have overcome the resistance of the Marquis with pressure from a smitten, pregnant Mathilde. He could have bargained for a shotgun wedding or at least a lot of money and a discreet removal elsewhere. Of course, once his status is compromised by his former lover's denunciation of him as an adventurer, more strenuous efforts even than those of the past would be necessary—no longer to acquire but to retrieve positions, not to progress, but simply not to fall back. The gifts of the Marquis de La Mole to his future son-in-law, intended to lend him respectability, have in point of fact already transformed him: 'A fortune so unforeseen and substantial for such a poor man made him ambitious.' By the skin of his teeth, the progeny of a carpenter, of no secure social abode, has joined the camp of privilege, and his ambition has undergone an alteration. The 'All is lost', with which Mathilde's letter informs him of her father's reactions, is then both moral and material. By shooting Madame de Rênal, Julien relieves himself once and for all of responsibility for his future, and any further calculation.

Julien's end

According to Michel Crouzet:

> Julien would diminish himself if he merely wanted something and obtained it. His is the ambiguity of an ambition without a positive term, which seems to demand redress for an unbearable social inferiority, in revolt against the 'horror of contempt', yet must despise everything that bespeaks his own inferiority and the superiority of others, all the advantages they possess and he should demand. When the trial comes, he does not even want to owe his life to others.[12]

Is Julien's ambition objectless, then? Might it be no more than a drive to make good an original lack that is bound to remain forever unsatisfied? His ambition appears indeed to be a product of pride, and to exhaust itself with the conquest of a position in which he need not fear the scorn

[12] Michel Crouzet, *Le Rouge et le Noir: Essai sur le romanesque stendhalien*, Paris 1995, p. 121.

of others. Thus it is always at risk of self-contradiction: in demanding redress for an inferiority, ending by acknowledging it as such. While such a quest for respect might appear to set aside worldly things, in social reality (and in a 'realist' novel that aims at representing it) a position that attracts such respect is not a mere question of moral standing: it depends also on the possession of material goods and privileges. So long as Julien's income is limited to a generous salary and the prestige that comes from service with a noble family, there is no sufficient basis for that. But with an army commission, lands of his own, twenty thousand francs a year and the name of an aristocrat—on top of the prospect of marriage to Mathilde—it is secured. Julien has achieved what he wanted. The end of Chapter XXXIV of the second part is explicitly a finale:

> After all, he thought, my novel is finished and the credit is mine alone. I have been able to make myself loved by this monster of pride, he added glancing at Mathilde; her father cannot live without her, nor she without me.

Displayed in this cold light is the cruel complacency of the man of ambition, treating people as mere means, devoid himself of feelings and exploiting those of others. Had the novel ended there, Julien would have been a social climber of some charm and little scruple, who got what he wanted: anything but 'an *arriviste* who never arrives', in a formula dear to Stendhalians. And it would have been a happy ending in its own way.

'My novel is finished': at the conclusion of his *Bildungsroman*, Julien employs virtually the same words as Waverley. For the hero of Walter Scott's novel they mark the end of youth and irresponsibility.[13] In Julien's case, they declare the achievement of a social position. Once he thinks he has arrived, ambition becomes conformism and his story loses novelistic potential. That is one measure of the difference between the historical novel and the realist novel (and perhaps too between the 'more moral' English novel and the 'more amoral' French novel of the nineteenth century).

The actual ending of *The Red and the Black*, however, reverses the moral position of the protagonist. In jail, ambitions are abandoned for sincerity

[13] 'Our journey is finished': see Enrica Villari, 'Romance and History in Waverley', in Franco Marucci and Emma Sdegno, eds, *Athena's Shuttle: Myth, Religion, Ideology from Romanticism to Modernism*, Milan 2000, pp. 106–07.

of feelings and relations. If Julien 'arrives' at nothing, it is because he has lost the desires of an *arriviste*, which now seem inferior to him. Before us is less a vestige of the ancient incompatibility of ambition with morality than the prefiguration of a new incompatibility, that will stamp the novel to come. What will prove irreconcilable is the general enthronement of ambition as socially encouraged, a prosaically petty-bourgeois sentiment, shared by the Juliens and the Valenods and the seminarians alike, and literary legitimation of that apotheosis.

Translated by Leonardo Clausi

ENRICA VILLARI

DUTY

Middlemarch

MIDDLEMARCH IS A NOVEL set in a provincial town of England in the era of reform that began in the 1830s.[1] Its two young protagonists, Dorothea Brooke and Tertius Lydgate, aspire to play their part in 'changing the world a little'. Unlike many characters in nineteenth-century novels, impelled by a drive to possess and consume (money, success, status), they are moved by the opposite impulse: to give themselves to a cause or to fulfil a duty. But in their case, these are not traditional responsibilities, but solitary modern vocations. Kierkegaard wrote in 1843 that it was a mistake to consider duty as a collection of external rules. Were it so, the ethical life would be ugly and dull: 'If the ethical did not have some much deeper connection with personal being, it would always be very difficult to defend it against the aesthetic.'[2] The fascination of the nineteenth century with duty was not 'a love of the law for its own sake, but rather a concern with the hygiene of the self'.[3] Duty, no longer abstract, could become the legitimate subject matter of a novel.

In George Eliot's work, duty—even traditional duty—is never mere conformity to a dogma. It is rather a basic facet of a balanced personality. Already, for the humble characters of her early novels, where duty might seem no more than compliance with tradition, what matters is not the small task fulfilled, but the way it becomes a constitutive part of their being. 'To keep one's kitchen spotlessly clean'—as Proust puts it in his essay on *Adam Bede*—'is an essential, almost a religious duty, and an attractive one too.'[4] Duty becomes a value in itself. In her short story 'Brother Jacob', written ten years before *Middlemarch*, Eliot had shown that—like any other form of social change—women's emancipation from

menial labour did not necessarily lead to a higher, nobler existence, but could engender sloth and moral corruption, dissolving personality in the passive consumption of pleasure and luxury.[5] Dorothea and Lydgate do not run this very modern risk: their dignity lies in resisting the pleasure principle in the name of a higher vocation. But because they are modern, they have to forge, alone, a new sense of duty for themselves. Their duties are subjective, not enjoined by any law. Dominated by this ethical imperative, their lives are stories of mistakes and existential failures.

Dorothea is not yet twenty years old. In possession of a substantial dowry and as out of place in Middlemarch as 'a fine quotation from the Bible,—or from one of our elder poets,—in a paragraph of to-day's newspaper', she adopts a singular approach in her search for a husband. Dorothea disdains the traditional duties of a wife and mother. Her mind is 'theoretic', and 'yearned by its nature after some lofty conception of the world which might frankly include the parish of Tipton and her own rule of conduct there'. So she decides to marry Casaubon, a man of learning old enough to be her father. She sees him as a latter-day Locke or Pascal, a great man with whom to share her great project. It is a fatal mistake. Poor Casaubon cannot live up to Dorothea's expectations. He comes to realize that his pursuit of knowledge is doomed to failure, and this bitter awareness unfits him to be either teacher or husband for Dorothea. The marriage proves a painful fiasco.

Lydgate is as little conventional as Dorothea. He despises the privileges of his aristocratic birth and venerates the great physicians of the past. After studying medicine in the great capital cities of Europe, he has rejected the allure of the metropolis to withdraw to Middlemarch, where he plans to reform medical practice (establishing a hospital for the cure of fevers) and pursue daring anatomical research (hoping to discover the original human tissue). His vocation is to 'do good small work for Middlemarch,

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[1] This is a translation of 'Il dovere: *Middlemarch*', in Franco Moretti, ed., *Il romanzo*, vol. 1, Rome 2001.

[2] Søren Kierkegaard, 'Equilibrium between the Aesthetic and the Ethical in the Development of Personality', in Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, Harmondsworth 1992.

[3] Lionel Trilling, 'In Mansfield Park', *Encounter*, September 1954.

[4] Marcel Proust, *By Way of Saint-Beuve*, trans. Sylvia Townsend Warner, London 1958, p. 282.

[5] See Enrica Villari, Introduction to George Eliot, *Jacob e suo fratello*, Venice 1999, pp. 9–34, esp. 23–9.

and great work for the world'. But a disastrous marriage with a profligate, frivolous wife saddles him with conspicuous debts, and he ends up a rich and fashionable doctor in London, author of a minor treatise on gout. Universally considered a success, 'he always regarded himself a failure'.

Leslie Stephen thought all of Eliot's characters were illustrations of a common theme, of which Dorothea and Lydgate could be seen as variants. We are asked, he thought, to sympathize with the noble aspirations of generous and passionate souls, knowing that they 'cannot receive any full satisfaction within the commonplace conditions of this prosaic world'.[6] But this is not so. This nineteenth-century version of the relationship between the self and the world was for George Eliot only a half-truth, because it was a truth that was too consoling:

> Some gentlemen have made an amazing figure in literature by general discontent with the universe as a trap of dulness into which their great souls have fallen by mistake; but the sense of a stupendous self and an insignificant world may have its consolations. Lydgate's discontent was much harder to bear; it was the sense that there was a grand existence in thought and effective action lying around him, while his self was being narrowed into the miserable isolation of egoistic fears, and vulgar anxieties for events that might allay such fears.[7]

It is true that the fresco of society in *Middlemarch* is no less powerful than that of Balzac's novels in its depiction of the 'hampering threadlike pressure of small social conditions, and their frustrating complexity', and that Eliot believed there was no creature 'whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it'. Yet the failures of Dorothea and Lydgate have more to do with the character of their vocations and the problematic nature of their modern ideas of duty. Dorothea pictures duty as something out of a novel:

> I should learn everything then . . . It would be my duty to study that I might help him the better in his great works. There would be nothing trivial about our lives. Everyday-things with us would mean the greatest things. It would be like marrying Pascal. I should learn to see the truth by the same light as great men have seen it by. And then I should know what to do, when I got older: I should see how it was possible to lead a grand life here—now—in England.

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[6] Leslie Stephen, unsigned obituary article on George Eliot, *Cornhill Magazine*, February 1881, in David Carroll, ed., *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage*, New York 1971, p. 482.

[7] All references are to the Penguin edition of *Middlemarch*.

Through duty she imagines herself rising above the banality of the world in the same confused way that Emma Bovary fantasizes about doing so through pleasure, in her first adulterous experience:

> She was entering something marvellous where everything would be passion, ecstasy, delirium; blue immensity was all about her; the great summits of sentiment glittered in her mind's eye, ordinary existence appeared far below in the distance, in shadow, in the gaps between these peaks.[8]

In their uncanny similarity of feeling and quixotic imagination, the heroine of duty and the heroine of pleasure are cousins. Dorothea indulges in romantic fantasies about the one no less than Emma does about the other. Casaubon proves as much of a disappointment for Dorothea as Rodolphe for Emma. At a crux in her life, Emma experiences a mystical crisis, evidence that the absolute pursuit of pleasure and its absolute negation may answer to the same need. A sense of *ennui* and rejection of ordinary life are at the root of both. It is this rejection that distinguishes the modern calling from traditional conceptions of duty. 'To keep one's kitchen spotlessly clean' holds no attractions for Dorothea, and not simply for reasons of class.

From the outset, in the 'Prelude' to the novel, the motif of late-born Saint Theresas indicates that the fate of a lofty vocation in an unheroic world will be the theme of *Middlemarch*. Bearing on it is the cult of the hero in Thomas Carlyle. It might be said of Dorothea and Lydgate that they react to what for him was the greatest enemy of heroism: the 'Doctrine of Motives' as the ultimate driving force in the universe, which—as he put it—taught that there can be 'nothing but a wretched love of Pleasure, fear of Pain; that Hunger, of applause, of cash, of whatsoever victual it may be, is the ultimate fact of man's life'.[9] Yet the initial lament for the destiny of belated Saint Theresas, denied the chance of an epic life, has

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[8] Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, trans. Geoffrey Wall, Harmondsworth 1992, p. 131.

[9] Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship & The Heroic in History*, Oakland 1993, p. 149. The influence of Carlyle on Eliot has been neglected, but was fundamental. Her entire body of work, with its celebration of realism and the attractions of everyday life, can be read as an antidote to his cult of the heroic, yet would be unthinkable without Carlyle and what Eliot described as the vitality of his 'dangerous paradoxes': see 'Thomas Carlyle', *Leader*, 27 October 1855, in George Eliot, *Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings*, Harmondsworth 1990, pp. 343–8, esp. 344.

too often drawn attention away from the fact that the novel is constructed against, if not the idea of heroism itself, then certainly the sublimely abstract notions of duty cherished by its leading protagonists.

At the beginning of the novel we cannot but be impressed by Dorothea's nobility of character. But no less by the negative traits that accompany it. Dorothea's sense of duty takes the form of hero-worship—'heroes as men of letters' in Carlyle's vision—which she directs at Locke, Pascal, Milton, Hooker and every other great sage of the past. The consequence is a bookish, abstract conception of duty, tainted with the fanaticism of its Puritan forebears. The asceticism of Dorothea's rejection of even the simplest pleasures (her refusal to inherit her mother's jewellery; her abandonment of riding; her marriage to a withered old man) is not free from a strong sense of superiority to her sister Celia, whose desires are more earthly. In choosing Casaubon she is as insensitive to his real needs as he is to hers, as the famous aside in Chapter XXIX makes clear: 'One morning, some weeks after her arrival at Lowick, Dorothea—but why always Dorothea? Was her point of view the only possible one with regard to this marriage?' The elevated asceticism of her notion of duty at the start of the novel has not immunized her from what Eliot calls our 'moral stupidity':

> We are all of us born in moral stupidity, taking the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves: Dorothea had early begun to emerge from that stupidity, but yet it had been easier to her to imagine how she would devote herself to Mr Casaubon, and become wise and strong in his strength and wisdom, than to conceive with that distinctness which is no longer reflection but feeling—an idea wrought back to the directness of sense, like the solidity of objects—that he had an equivalent centre of self, whence the lights and shadows must always fall with a certain difference.

This is the novel's most significant recurring idea, to which Eliot returns almost obsessively; she finds traces of moral stupidity in the most surprising places and characters, starting with Dorothea. Moral stupidity is the stumbling-block of all the false notions of duty in the novel. Nowhere more starkly than in the piety of a master of self-deceit, the puritanical banker Bulstrode. He is the archetypal modern man, bending religion's higher law to his own will:

> He was simply a man whose desires had been stronger than his theoretic beliefs, and who had gradually explained the gratification of his desires

> into satisfactory agreement with those beliefs. If this be hypocrisy, it is a process which shows itself occasionally in us all, to whatever confession we belong.

This egotistical myopia, with which the romantic imaginings of Dorothea (and Emma Bovary too) are imbued, is a common trait of almost all the characters. Reflecting on Dorothea's choice of husband, Will Ladislaw concludes that 'she must have made some original romance for herself in this marriage', and he is not mistaken. Then there is Rosamond, completely engrossed not in Tertius Lydgate as he really was, but rather in her projection of him, and the romance of his 'good birth'. So too there is the romance of Casaubon and Lydgate about women, every bit as unrealistic as that of Dorothea and Rosamond.

Dorothea starts to free herself from her 'moral stupidity' when her notion of duty shifts, in the unhappy experience of her marriage. Things begin to unravel during her honeymoon in Rome. Dorothea becomes aware of the chasm between her fantasy of marriage to a great scholar and the reality of a man desiccated and embittered by his intellectual failure. But this is not the whole story. To Dorothea, the architectural and artistic beauty of Rome forms a painful contrast with the wretched condition of its inhabitants. With an engrained puritanical distrust of the visual arts, she asks herself: what is the relationship between art and life? Upon the naive realization that they do not coincide, Dorothea unhesitatingly makes her choice. The magnificence of Catholic Rome teaches her that 'there [are] so many things which are more wanted in the world than pictures'. This aesthetic parenthesis in the novel, in which there is much talk of art, artists and German Romanticism, marks an essential step in the shaping of Dorothea's destiny. Back in England, Dorothea tells her uncle Mr Brooke that her dislike of Tipton Grange's paintings comes from their contrast with the poverty and suffering of the farm labourers around them. Enjoyment of their formal beauty seems to her 'a wicked attempt to find delight in what is false, while we don't mind how hard the truth is for the neighbours outside our walls'. There is the same disconnection between her initial abstract sense of duty and the reality of her disagreeable, unhappy husband:

> She was no longer struggling against the perception of facts, but adjusting herself to their clearest perception; and now when she looked steadily at her

> husband's failure, still more at his possible consciousness of failure, she seemed to be looking along the one track where duty became tenderness.

In a memorable scene, overcome by resentment at Casaubon's harsh treatment of her, Dorothea forces herself to consider 'a litany of pictured sorrows and of silent cries', those of the man now diagnosed with a heart disease who 'for the first time found himself looking into the eyes of death'. Ultimately, sympathy triumphs over resentment. It is late at night. Dorothea waits for her husband to come out of the library, and elicits the miracle of the only kind words he utters in the entire novel. A concrete duty replaces an abstract one, as her inward-looking, high-minded self-absorption is transformed into tenderness and compassion. This is the secret truth at the centre of Dorothea's story.

In 'The Fate of Pleasure', Lionel Trilling argues that the kind of modern spirituality displayed by the protagonist of Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*—lonely, full of bile, utterly scornful of comfort—was the logical outcome of a reaction against the early nineteenth century belief, expressed by Wordsworth, that 'the grand elementary principle of pleasure' constituted 'the naked and native dignity of man'. Trilling adds that it is precisely 'because it came into being at a particular time', that this spirituality 'may be regarded as a contingent and not a necessary mode of thought'.[10] Dorothea's story is an early contemporary critique of this modern form of spirituality. When, at the end of the novel, Celia asks her why she submitted to Casaubon, Dorothea replies: 'Of course I submitted to him, because it was my duty; it was my feeling for him.' Dorothea marries Ladislaw in the end, a man twenty years younger than Casaubon and with whom she will have two children, proving that duty does not require the mortification of the flesh and renunciation of life that inspired her former marriage. By the end, Dorothea comes to resemble the estate manager Caleb Garth and his daughter Mary, the most traditional characters in the novel, who are often compared to the figures in Jane Austen. For them, protective loyalty to their apprentice Fred Vincy and the work ethic have been attractive duties all along. But for the Saint Theresa of *Middlemarch*, such knowledge is the outcome of a painful process of learning, from a starting point in the dangerous

[10] Lionel Trilling, 'The Fate of Pleasure', in Trilling, *Beyond Culture: Essays on Literature and Learning*, London 1965, pp. 57–88, esp. 58 and 79.

modern disconnection between duty and that pleasure which constitutes the only true connection we have with life.

Lydgate's vocation does not lack a connection with life or experience. The medical profession—'the finest in the world' since it offers 'the most direct alliance between intellectual conquest and the social good'—protects Lydgate from the dangers of exaltation in solitary modern vocations. His concern for every one of his patients guarantees that sense of real life which is missing from the fruitless pursuit of a 'Key to all Mythologies' by Casaubon, whose want of it is betrayed by his reaction to the refutation of his old acquaintance Carp, which 'was kept locked in a small drawer of Mr Casaubon's desk, and also in a dark closet of his verbal memory'. Yet Lydgate's failures, too, have deep roots in a heroic conception of duty.

For this makes no allowance for lesser obligations. Lydgate's first mistake, at the beginning of the attachment to Bulstrode that will be his undoing, is to acquiesce in the banker's blackmail and vote for Tyke rather than Farebrother, as his conscience would dictate. He regards the choice between Tyke and Farebrother in the election for the new hospital chaplain as too trivial to concern him, busy as he is with the grand project of the New Fever Hospital in Middlemarch and with his scientific discoveries, which he believes will save the lives of millions of people. 'In his student's chambers, he had prearranged his social action quite differently'; that is, in an altogether loftier fashion. Lydgate considers the issue of the chaplain beneath him, deciding to make no choice at all and let matters take their course. He arrives late at the committee meeting, and fate takes its revenge: his is the casting vote. Without further reflection he opts for the unjust cause. But the 'affair of the chaplaincy remained a sore point in his memory as a case in which this petty medium of Middlemarch had been too strong for him'. In Lydgate's grandiose conception of duty, there is no room for money or women either. Yet debts and his marriage to Rosamond will be the reasons for the failure of his aspirations.

Others have noted how money—the inheritance denied Will and then refused by him when offered by Bulstrode; clergyman Farebrother's economic hardship; Fred and Lydgate's debts; the infamous codicil in Casaubon's will—plays a crucial role in the novel. In no other novelist does the commercial Protestant ethic find so clear an expression: it is a

duty, a form of moral responsibility, to acknowledge the importance of money. To take money for granted—as Fred, Lydgate and Rosamond do—is a form of selfishness and as corrupting as the compulsive avarice that transforms the relatives of the landowner Featherstone into 'Christian Carnivora' at his funeral. Eliot is 'interestingly original in seeing a refusal to understand the economic realities that underlie class distinctions as a sort of vulgarity',[11] and in dismissing exalted visions of existence in which a noble self confronts an abject world as banal. Against these, her novel offers an unsparing examination of Lydgate's 'spots of commonness', those prejudices he shares with 'ordinary men of the world' which his high conceptions prevent him from recognizing.

In a letter to John Blackwood, written while she was working on *Middlemarch*, Eliot explained that her aim was to show 'the gradual action of ordinary causes, rather than exceptional'.[12] In the summer of 1870, work on *Middlemarch* under way, she and her partner Lewes read Balzac's *Lost Illusions* to each other. Explicit or implicit references to Balzac, 'perhaps the most wonderful writer of fiction',[13] appear constantly in her writing, as if he were its exemplary antipode. There is no evil yet irresistible Carlos Herrera in *Middlemarch*, but rather the resistible force of that 'hampering threadlike pressure of small social conditions, and their frustrating complexity'. An epistemology of extraordinary causes gives way to an epistemology of ordinary ones. Lydgate's story of lost illusions shows how, for all his genuine aspirations to improve the world and himself, he will end by admitting that he must 'do as other men do, and think what will please the world and bring in money'. It is a tale of the small, recurrent, subtle pressures to which he submits inadvertently, because they wear not the lurid mask of Herrera, but the innocuous appearance of a pretty face:

> For in the multitude of middle-aged men who go about their vocations in a daily course determined for them much in the same way as the tie of their cravats, there is always a good number who once meant to shape their own deeds and alter the world a little. The story of their coming to be shapen after the average and fit to be packed by the gross, is hardly ever told even

[11] David Daiches, *George Eliot: Middlemarch*, London 1963, p. 47.
[12] Letter of 24 July 1871, in Gordon S. Haight, ed., *The George Eliot Letters: Vol. V, 1869–73*, New Haven 1955, p. 168.
[13] George Eliot, 'The Morality of "Wilhelm Meister"', *Leader*, 21 July 1855, in Eliot, *Selected Essays*, pp. 307–10, especially p. 309.

> in their consciousness; for perhaps their ardour in generous unpaid toil cooled as imperceptibly as the ardour of other youthful loves, till one day their earlier self walked like a ghost in its old home and made the new furniture ghastly. Nothing in the world more subtle than the process of their gradual change! In the beginning they inhaled it unknowingly; you and I may have sent some of our breath towards infecting them, when we uttered our conforming falsities or drew our silly conclusions: or perhaps it came with the vibrations from a woman's glance.

It is the foreshadowing of Rosamond, well before Lydgate makes her acquaintance. He will end by calling her his 'basil plant' which 'flourished wonderfully on a murdered man's brains'.

The epistemology of ordinary causes explored in *Middlemarch* was of fundamental importance in the cultural history of the nineteenth century. It involved a restitution of responsibility to individuals for their actions, reopening a space in which the ancient notion of duty regained value. At the time, it also meant going against another unnecessary dogma which was taking hold in the best French literary culture, as was immediately understood by French literary critics of the 1880s, who counterposed Eliot's example to Zola's fiction:

> We believe that every man determines his own destiny, that he is the creator of his own happiness or the inept and criminal author of his own misfortune. That is one way of conceiving life. Zola believes, on the contrary, that 'vice and virtue are products, like vitriol and sugar' and that we form a malleable substance, shaped by a random combination of circumstances. That is another way of conceiving life.[14]

Translated by Allesandra Asteriti

[14] This is Ferdinand Brunetière's reply to Zola in *Revue des deux Mondes*, 15 February 1880, cit. John P. Couch, *George Eliot in France: A French Appraisal of George Eliot's Writings, 1858–1960*, Chapel Hill, NC 1967, p. 88.

GOPAL BALAKRISHNAN

THE ABOLITIONIST—I

The opposition of an early and a late Marx may seem to be a topic of little contemporary moment. Notably, the current round of interest in Marx, in contrast to previous ones, is focused on his later economics to the exclusion of the earlier work. The association of his early writings with philosophy always attenuated its appeal for the more empirically oriented, while these days its reputation for humanism, teleology, and Eurocentrism can diminish it for the more theoretical. In any event, contentions over the intellectual continuity of purpose across various differently demarcated phases of his work took place in a political context in which this was still a matter of some doctrinal significance. The perceived stakes of the philosophical, alternatively methodological, periodization of Marx's career largely faded away with the end of Western Marxism as a distinct, heterodox historical formation of the workers' movement.

However, it may be that the sense of familiarity attending this older ideological context may now give way to breakthroughs in reconstruction, raising the problem of the distinction of an early from a late period in a wholly new way. There is, in fact, a previously unidentified unity in the two main periods of Marx's intellectual career, as well as a break between them that has remained concealed under a haze of long-familiar words and names. The emphasis of the present article, which is a two-part installment of a longer work, falls on the unity of the 'Early Marx'. What follows here, specifically, is an account of the socio-juridical and economic assumptions underlying Marx's first articulation of historical materialism.[1] These underpin a conception of the state, the nature of classes and the trajectory of their struggle that differs fundamentally from that in his later theorization. The intellectual-historical challenge is to explain and not just describe the unifying pattern of the development of Marx's thought across a decade from 1842 to 1852. I treat his

texts from those years as a single conceptual bloc. Although this involves registering shifts of position in alignment to a succession of primary influences—from Bruno Bauer to Ludwig Feuerbach, from Adam Smith and Jean-Baptiste Say to Ricardo and beyond—the emphasis is on the continuity of a single problematic, requiring departure from a conventional chronological sequence. Although the content of Marx's theorizations cannot be reduced to the formal conceptual pattern of his inversions, the latter structured Marx's critique of the imaginary self-determination of society through the form of the state, his first critique of the purported laws of political economy as a mystification of the brutal anarchy of competition, and the ingenious synthesis of these two critiques articulated in his conception of a pattern of historical development leading to communism. The pattern of the trajectory over this decade brings to light the significance of the rupture of 1848–52, when his first unified account of the origins, pattern of development and revolutionary abolition of state and civil society broke down in the aftermath of defeat. 1848 is often understood as a caesura in European history, but its significance as a turning point in Marx's development has not been grasped. I hope to demonstrate that new perspectives on both an early and a later Marx begin to emerge from a periodization based not so much on an epistemic break as on the experience of an epochal political defeat, which cleared the way for the conceptualization of a subsequent structural transformation.

What was Marxism?

The subject matter of all of Marx's writings from 1842 to 1852 is the socio-juridical figure of modern 'civil' or 'bourgeois' society conceived as a transitional phase in the passage from the old regime to the condition of human emancipation, while the later economic writings set forth the previously unarticulated concept of a capitalist mode of production, whose logic of development would unfold over an epoch of indeterminate duration. Marx, up until his later theorization of the capitalist mode of production, tended to conceive of bourgeois society as the dissolution phase of the old regime, and not as a self-standing form of society with a long history of development before it. The difference between 'bourgeois society' and 'the capitalist mode of production'

[1] My understanding of these is critically indebted to Robert Brenner's 'Marx's First Theory of the Transition to Capitalism', in *Marx en perspective*, Paris 1985, and his account of the origins of capitalism more generally.

does not just concern the adequate periodization and comprehension of Marx's corpus, but lies at the heart of a number of enigmas surrounding the origins, pattern of development, and ultimate limits of the forms of society that emerged from the breakdown of the European old regime, of modernity and its aftermaths. A standard translation from the German has contributed to obscuring this distinction for the English reader. The term *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* is translated as both 'civil society' and 'bourgeois society' in English editions of Marx. The translators of the *Collected Works* explain the principle of variation:

> The term '*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*' ('civil society') is used in two distinct ways by Marx and Engels: 1) to denote the economic system of society irrespective of the historical stage of development, the sum total of material relations which determine the political institutions and ideological forms, and 2) to denote the material relations of bourgeois society (or that society as a whole), of capitalism. The term has therefore been translated according to its concrete content and the given context either as 'civil society' (in the first case) or as 'bourgeois society' (in the second).[2]

The problem with this decision is that it obscures the entanglement of the socio-economic with the juridical character of a civil society founded on the institution of private property. In English, the opposition of state to 'civil society' clearly evokes the opposition of public and private, an essentially legal distinction, in a way that the opposition of state to 'bourgeois society' does not. While it is clear that the term 'civil society' is probably referring to something different from the subject of Marx's later economics, this is not true of 'bourgeois society'. The translation obscures the identity of civil society and bourgeois society, and establishes an illusory identity between the latter and 'the capitalist mode of production'.[3] This is no mere oversight, for it expresses the nearly universally accepted assumption that the conception of capital and its law of accumulation as understood in the *Communist Manifesto* was not fundamentally different from the one identified in his later economics. The differences are assumed to involve shifts of terminology amidst a mass of small conceptual changes, but with no fundamental change of socio-historical register.

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[2] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works* (hereafter MECW), vol. 5, New York 1976, p. 593 (fn. 35 on p. 89). Some MECW translations have been modified.

[3] In a classic passage, Althusser insisted on the theoretical non-identity of 'civil society' and 'forces and relations of production' but then dismissed the usage 'bourgeois society' as no more than a 'mistranslation' (*For Marx*, London 1969, pp. 109–10).

Marx's use of the term '*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*' across the entirety of his writings until *Capital* speaks to the persistence of the socio-juridical category problems posed by the novel dualism of state and civil society set forth in Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*. His critique of the latter began by setting aright Hegel's mistaken conception of the order of determination between these two spheres so as to make apparent the historical meaning and future course of contemporary constitutional and class struggles. As is widely known, he soon came to the conclusion that the fate of bourgeois society could only be identified through the comprehension and critique of political economy. The problems that define the different periods of Marx's work have less to do with the opposition of idealism and materialism than with sharply distinct conceptions of what was entailed by that critique.

In the period under consideration, Marx conceived of this critique as bringing out and thinking through what was already implicit in the dismal science, not as offering any positive alternative account of his own. In this endeavour, he could rely on a view then prevailing that modern European society was undergoing a process of commercialization, unfolding according to a quasi-Malthusian zero-sum logic and culminating in an eventual stationary state.[4] Although he rejected *this* scenario of the end of accumulation, it was no leap of faith for him to conclude that continuing accumulation must inexorably lead to an ever greater inequality of wealth between capital and labour, mass immiseration and civil wars.[5] Continental European civil society was a juridical order of private property as well as a commercial proto-manufacturing economy, but one that had not yet entered onto the path of capitalist development

[4] 'For reasons cogently argued by Smith and his successors, the momentum of growth was expected to peter out after a time, arrested by changes endogenous to the growth process itself, and giving rise in due course to the supervention of the stationary state. Moreover, the classical economists were unambiguous in doubting whether even the then prevailing level of real wages could be sustained indefinitely. Future falls were more probable than future rises. A steady and substantial improvement in real wages for the mass of the population was a utopian pipe-dream, not a possibility that a rational and well-informed man could plausibly entertain, however much he might wish to see it occur.' Edward Anthony Wrigley, *Continuity, Chance and Change*, Cambridge 1990, p. 3.

[5] See Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, Cambridge, MA 2014. Piketty's 'Smithian' definition of capital as accumulated savings is not so far from the one held by the early Marx, although he mistakenly characterizes the later Marx as subscribing to an extreme Malthusian version of this conception.

that had opened up in England. The early Marx, like Hegel before him, understood English economic development in terms of Adam Smith's conception of commercialization, but modified by Ricardo's more pessimistic quasi-Malthusian premises, which ruled out any rise in real wages. He therefore tended, as Hegel had, to conflate the conditions of the emergence of French civil society out of absolute monarchy with the parallel development of English capitalism.

The critique of Hegel

Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* should be read as the culmination of early modern political thought divided between the problematic of sovereignty on the one hand and the wealth of nations on the other. France was the *locus classicus* of the sovereign state and the dialectic of constituent power, of royal vs. popular sovereignty, contained within its very concept. By contrast, England was understood to be the *locus classicus* of civil society and the dialectic internal to it of economic progress through the anarchy of competition, the polarization of wealth and poverty, overproduction and outward expansion. Hegel had presented these two processes, these parallel histories of the sovereign state and civil society as two sides of a unified order that required a mediating synthesis in the shape of the institutions of post-Napoleonic Prussia. The experience of the breakdown of this synthesis in the early 1840s set in motion a dialectic between the terms of this opposition, a pattern within which Marx's subsequent political experiences and intellectual breakthroughs were articulated. Implicit in this conceptual opposition of state and civil or bourgeois society was an historical process resulting in the inversion of the order of determination between them, the unchaining of its remorseless economic laws leading to the abolition of its constitutive class relations. For Marx, as for the others in his milieu, Hegel's was not simply another system in the history of philosophy, but the culmination of that history—of '*hitherto existing*' thought. Moving beyond Hegel was thus coincident with breaking out of the hitherto existing world order. The critique of political economy completed and superseded the critique of Hegel and both converged on a conception of the history of the rise and impending dissolution of civil or bourgeois society.

Marx's rejection of the substance of Hegel's conception of state–civil society relations was informed by a critique of its conceptual form as a circular system all of whose moments presupposed one another—a

design precluding more precise determinations of the separate moments of this whole, the concepts proper to these levels. It was in this context that Marx seized on Ludwig Feuerbach's method of inverting the theological subject–predicate relations of Hegel's speculative philosophy. He argued that Hegel's conception of the constitution was riddled with contradictions because he proceeded from the premise that it was the state as a form that imparted to history its boundaries and continuity, while civil society was a derivative sphere that had emerged within it as a necessary 'predicate' or self-determination of this underlying subject. On the contrary, Marx now asserted, it was civil society that was the unifying subject or substratum of history. However, whereas Hegel had recognized the modernity of civil society as a distinct sphere derived from the primary category of the state, the 'materialist' inversion of this subject–predicate relation presupposed the trans-historical continuity of civil society as the determining instance. *Bürgerliche Gesellschaft* was the subject of history from the earliest ages of the division of labour to its coming abolition.

Before he arrived at this conception of the history of civil society—his first version of historical materialism—Marx articulated its basic pattern in radical-democratic constitutional forms without the specifications of political economy. Astonishingly, he ignored Hegel's own acute treatment of commercial crisis and pauperization. He did this in order to focus on Hegel's conception of the division of powers within a so-called constitutional monarchy, but then came to realize that the radical consequences of a constitutional conflict unleashed by the separation of state from civil society could not be thought through to its conclusion without understanding the inner divisions in civil society that this separation had given rise to. These could be explained only by the laws of competition by which wealth is divided into the revenue forms of rent, profit and wages, designating the protagonists of an ever-intensifying class struggle. The critique of political economy led to the identification of a law of accumulation that culminated in an absolute class polarization, inexorably leading to its own abolition, and with it the abolition of the state, private property and the family.

In common with other Young Hegelians, Marx held that all particular relations and forms not directly based on human universality must be abolished. Marx's specific variant of this conviction might be best described as 'abolitionism'. The Young Hegelians held that religion,

state and property deserved to perish—with different understandings of what that might entail—because criticism had demonstrated that they were artifacts of man's servitude and ignorance. In the previous century Enlightenment criticism had hollowed out the old regime, making the Revolution both possible and necessary. The abolition of feudal dues by an act of the French revolutionary constituent assembly formed the paradigmatic case of the dissolution of particularistic status divisions by an association acting in the name of humanity. For Marx, the universal in the human condition was what was constitutively excluded from the particular forms that, 'in the existing world order', qualify individuals for full membership in the human race: family, property and proof of citizenship. These particular forms were not mediations of the individual to the universal but rather existed in a state of extreme opposition to the universal, to the 'formless' multitude of individuals who must pass from being Nothing to being Everything, in the formula of the Abbé Sieyès.

The realization of philosophy

The development of Hegel's later philosophy of law and the place it assumed in the thinking of the Young Hegelians, Marx above all, must be understood in its relation to the historical moment: Prussia in the early decades of the nineteenth century.[6] After a crushing defeat at Jena in 1806, a group of loyalist officers and bureaucrats initiated a project of sweeping administrative reforms, which established the new university system, a new military order, an opening for modernist currents in Protestant theology, and the beginning of the transformation of *Junker* squires into capitalist landlords. Hegel was inducted into a like-minded coterie of officials that included Alexander von Humboldt and Carl von Clausewitz. Prussia now acquired an enigmatic, dual nature as a self-modernizing old regime. The impetus of the Reform era continued after victory over Napoleon, although confronting ever more determined opposition from two quarters: those who had expected that a new national community would be formed from below by the common people who had risen up against Napoleon, and traditionalists who

[6] For this background, see Jonathan Toews, *The Path Towards Dialectical Humanism 1805–1841,* Cambridge 1980; Warren Breckman, *Marx, The Young Hegelians, and the Origins of Radical Social Theory*, Cambridge 2001; Stathis Kouvelakis, *Philosophy and Revolution: From Kant to Marx*, London 2003. I would like to thank Michael Heinrich and Charles Post for helpful criticisms and suggestions on early drafts of this essay.

sought to preserve the old order. Hegel's philosophy was directed at this two-sided opposition to the policies of Reform-era Prussia: Romantic populism and evangelical authoritarianism. After Hegel's death in 1831, the fifteen-year heyday of his philosophical school started to wane, as its opponents began to prevail in the struggle for academic placement and official patronage. Hegel's followers still had a powerful sponsor in the Minister for Culture, Karl vom Stein zum Altenstein, but with his death a decade later, their fortunes sank rapidly.

What was the appeal of Hegel's philosophy to its official patrons in the post-Napoleonic decade of the Reform era? Speaking of the era of censorship from 1819 to 1830, the heyday of the Hegelians, Marx explained the context of the explosive impact of this strange new language:

> The sole literary field in which at that time the pulse of a living spirit could still be felt, the philosophical field, ceased to speak German, for German had ceased to be the language of thought. The spirit spoke in incomprehensible mysterious words because comprehensible words were no longer allowed to be comprehended.[7]

Except in the inner circles of academic initiates, his philosophy was as unintelligible then as it remains to most educated people today, but its message was clear: what was real—the prosaic, individualistic modern age around us—was not a fall from some other condition—the beautiful Greek *polis*, the organic Middle Ages—but was rational, having a *raison d'être* that it was the business of philosophy to identify and expound.

Conservative Hegelians tended to portray the gap between rational norms and the more sordid facts of the status quo as itself rational, if in a higher, more mysterious sense. The so-called Young Hegelians not only rejected these apologias but went on to conclude that philosophy, as an interpretation of the reason behind an apparently irrational world, presupposed the perpetuation of the latter. This esoteric rationality that depended on its opposite was itself defective. Philosophy was intrinsically complicit in the perpetuation of a half-secularized old regime that simply could

[7] Karl Marx, 'Debates on Freedom of the Press and Publication of the Proceedings of the Assembly of the Estates', *Rheinische Zeitung*, no. 128, 8 May 1842, Supplement, in MECW, vol. 1, New York 1975, p. 140.

not recognize its subjects as rational and free beings. For them, the template of all criticism was the critique of the Christian religion—the Augustinian duality of a vale of tears and a promised, otherworldly salvation. The critique of theology was intended to awaken the nation from its voluntary servitude and set in motion the dissolution of the old order in Germany. In a later formulation, Marx captured the central premise of this ephemeral current:

> The criticism of religion ends with the teaching that man is the highest being for man, hence with the categorical imperative to overthrow all relations in which man is a debased, enslaved, forsaken, despicable being.[8]

Thus, these disciples of the recently deceased Hegel suddenly came to regard his system as the convoluted logic of this divided and declining world. Arguably, Marx's reading of Hegel was one-sided.[9] But it was precisely the all-sidedness of the Hegelian system, its lack of straightforward definitions upon which a positive knowledge of the contemporary historical situation could be developed, that suddenly made it seem useless in the face of impending either/or situations.

Ancients and moderns

For the Left Hegelians, the mid-nineteenth century was the last phase of the Christian era during which man was subject to alien powers of his own making. A long middle ages of temporal-religious dualism was coming to an end with the dawning of the human age. In this respect, it could be said that they fell behind Hegel's own account of how the subordination of church to state set in motion the separation of and conflict between state and civil society—the contest of 'power' and 'wealth' he dramatized in the *Phenomenology*. The Young Hegelians were the product of a still-provincial milieu that could not appreciate the significance

[8] Karl Marx, 'Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law. Introduction' [1843, published 1844], in MECW vol. 3, New York 1975, p. 182.

[9] Marx had not read any of Hegel's work before the *Phenomenology*. He had an in-depth understanding of the latter, as well as of the *Logic*, *Encyclopedia Logic*, and *Philosophy of Right*, and the lectures on the Philosophy of History, on the History of Philosophy and on Aesthetics. See Norman Levine's *Marx's Discourse with Hegel*, New York 2012. Of course, Hegel was a still partly living figure and so Marx's mode of criticism was different from that of later academic Hegel studies.

of the master's reflections on the wealth of nations. The claim that *le doux commerce* ruled out any return to the austere commonwealths of the ancients had a pedigree going back to Benjamin Constant and was regarded with suspicion by radicals. The early Marx did not at first recognize any unbridgeable discontinuity between ancient and modern times:

> Only this feeling which vanished from the world with the Greeks, and under Christianity disappeared into the blue mist of the heavens, can again transform society into a community of human beings united for their highest aims, into a democratic state.[10]

This relation to antiquity did not foreclose an avid embrace of modernity, but at this time there was perhaps a subtle difference of attitude between Marx and Engels on this score. The latter would quote Heinrich Heine: 'We are not Romans, we smoke tobacco'[11]—a dictum to which both could subscribe, but the former with a certain qualification. The subdued retention of this enigmatic link to antiquity persisted until 1852 when it was vehemently disavowed in the memorable opening passages of *The Eighteenth Brumaire*. Before he encountered the problems of political economy—the law-like forms of exchange-dependent civil society—Marx tended to think of the atomistic world of bourgeois society in terms of the form of legal personhood developed by Roman jurists in the context of the dissolution of all substantial bonds of citizenship and kinship.[12]

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[10] Karl Marx, Letter to Ruge, September 1843, in MECW vol. 3, p. 137.

[11] Friedrich Engels, 'The Festival of Nations in London', in MECW vol. 6, p. 4.

[12] Controversies between proponents of Roman and German law went back several centuries and assumed a new significance in the ideological context of Restoration-era conflicts over the principles behind legal codification. In the *Philosophy of Right* Hegel had denied that Roman law possessed even the minimal criterion of rationality, as its one-sided development of absolute property rights made it unable to distinguish persons from things. While Hegel came to understand modern times as in some sense a German age, in contrast to Montesquieu he advocated the removal of all vestiges of feudal law, including the dissolution of the various forms of common property that had always existed in the interstices of the old order. For Marx, it was precisely the harsh, one-sided development of legal relations characteristic of Roman jurisprudence, capable of accommodating both slavery and despotism, that was 'rational', while the characteristically 'Germanic' dualism of public and private upheld by Hegel was held to be 'mystical'. This way of conceiving the opposition between the two arguably lacked historical justification since Roman jurisprudence was the first to make a clear distinction between public and private law, and had a clearly developed conception of the first—*'publicum jus est quod statum rei Romanae spectat'*—that was obscured in the feudal order of the Middle Ages.

Rome then appeared as the world that arose out of the dissolution of the classical *polis*, a world of unbridled subjective atoms regulated by the laws of war and private property, which eventually exhausted itself, and then sank under the despotism of the Caesars. This levelling-down and subjection of the ancient world to universal despotism was for Hegel and the Young Hegelians the crucible of Christianity, the religion of an imaginary transcendence of an uprooted and enslaved world. The end of the post-classical Christian age was thus understood to be a sort of return to its atomized origins but with the prospect, arising out of the intervening spiritual upheavals and transformations, of the abolition of all alienated powers. The alternative to the forward advance of emancipation was a new age of Caesarism, ending in barbarism.[13]

The Young Hegelians foresaw that the coming age of emancipation would involve both a repetition and a transcendence of the Enlightenment. The rejection of Hegel's own conception of this transcendence had opened the way to a reconsideration of the English and French materialism of the previous century, which Hegel had sought to subsume into his system. Marx was introduced to this pre-Hegelian philosophical world through Feuerbach's intellectual histories, and became cognizant of the need for deeper studies of Enlightenment materialism and empiricism. 'Seventeenth-century metaphysics', he wrote, 'driven from the field by the French Enlightenment, notably, by French materialism of the eighteenth century, experienced a victorious and substantial restoration in German philosophy, particularly in the speculative German philosophy of the nineteenth century.'[14] He would soon come to conclude that German radicals now found themselves in the same position in relation to Hegel as the French of the eighteenth century had in relation to Descartes—a situation calling for the rediscovery of their experimental, empirically oriented form of criticism. But why had this earlier great age of free-thinking failed to break the hold of religion?

This question specifies the intellectual context in which the political orientation of Marx's dissertation on the two variants of ancient atomism can be understood. Epicureanism, especially as presented in Lucretius's

[13] The link between Caesarism and proletarianization was the subject of Bruno Bauer's later study *Christus und die Caesaren*, Berlin 1877. See also Theodor Adorno, 'Spengler after the Decline', in *Prisms*, Cambridge, MA 1981, for a later articulation of the same themes.

[14] Karl Marx, *The Holy Family* [1844], in MECW vol. 4, New York 1975, p. 125.

philosophical poem *De rerum natura*, was a pervasive influence on early modern conceptions of nature and politics from Machiavelli through Spinoza to Diderot and his contemporaries. Marx's study of Epicurus should be seen as exhuming an element of Enlightenment thought that had gone unrecognized by the Hegelian school. Bruno Bauer may have indicated to Marx that the swerving atom of Epicurus could be seen as a figure of a negative, resisting self-consciousness whose significance needed to be further explored in the present predicament of Hegelianism. Atomism, according to Hegel, was a philosophical expression of a deep current of modern existence unconstrained by all fast-frozen relations and perspectives. He had claimed that the spirit of the radical Enlightenment was atomistic, linking an empiricist conception of nature to the unbridled passions and interests of emerging civil society: 'In modern times the importance of atomic theory is even more evident in political than in physical science.'[15]

For Hegel, the political corollary of Epicurean atomism had been the Rousseauian conception of law as the General Will arising out of a quasi-impossible unison of a multitude of individual wills. His later political writing was preoccupied with the problem of conceptually orchestrating this atomistic chaos and normless inner division into a law-like spontaneous order, without recourse to Terror. It is noteworthy then that the Hegelian corpus is peppered with denigrating commentary on Epicurus, while Lucretius is never even mentioned. Despite Marx's overall allegiance to the Master, his comments on the Roman poet strike a dissenting note: 'Lucretius is the genuine Roman epic poet, for he sings the substance of the Roman spirit . . . the war *omnium contra omnes*, the rigid shape of the being-for-self, a nature without god and a god aloof from the world.'[16] The identification of atomism with the war of all against all makes apparent the relation of the dissertation to his later critique of civil society. Marx's tentative 'atomism' was a metaphysical anticipation of his critique of both Hegel's and political economy's conception of the laws to which these masterless atomized individuals come to be subject. The dissertation is the beginning of a critique of a conception of necessity as an order of laws, to which Enlightenment materialists, Hegel and the representatives of political economy all subscribed, one

[15] G. F. W. Hegel, *Hegel's Logic: Being Part One of the Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, tr. William Wallace, Oxford 1975, p. 80.
[16] Karl Marx, 'The Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature' [dissertation, March 1841], in MECW vol. 1, p. 475.

that concealed incoherent dualisms that in turn obscured a raging dialectic of laws and exceptions.

The dualism of state and civil society

Marx had not been on the far left of the Young Hegelians, having a deeper sense of the importance of political struggles that, initially at least, would have to take a liberal form. As late as 1840, his close friend in this milieu Karl Friedrich Koeppen dedicated a book on Friedrich the Great to him, and until 1842 he still thought that Prussian 'constitutional monarchy' was a framework within which historical progress was possible. The Young Hegelian current could be said to have presupposed the prospect of the transformation of Prussia into a 'rational state'. Its brief heyday passed within the outer limits of the Hegelian concept of the state, which seemed to contain the prospect of its secular fulfilment.

With the suppression of the *Rheinische Zeitung* by the Prussian authorities in 1843, Marx resolved to escalate his journalistic struggle against them from Paris, out of their reach so he thought. Before his departure he threw himself into detailed study of the historical character of his adversaries. The guiding problem of the reading documented in his *Kreuznach Notebooks* from the summer of that year was the nature and origins of modern constitutional monarchy—in reality the semi-parliamentary, and indeed only semi-constitutional, Western and Central European status quos.[17] Exhibiting no interest whatsoever in political economy, these notebooks aim at a comparative historical analysis of the emergence of representative institutions out of feudal and post-feudal estates-monarchy in England, France, Germany, and Sweden.[18] Where did Prussia belong in this wider story? Marx upheld the prevailing radical view that it was only a belated, peripheral and thus caricatural case of the persistence of the old regime across this great transition from feudal to modern 'constitutional monarchy'. Ultimately, Marx sought

[17] Karl Marx, 'Historisch-politische Notizen (Kreuznacher Hefte 1–5)' [1843], in MEGA Vierte Abteilung, Band 2, Berlin 1981.

[18] What would now be called political theory looms large in his Kreuznach reading list: Machiavelli's *The Prince*, Rousseau's *The Social Contract*, and Xenophon's *On the Constitution of the Spartans*. As Althusser pointed out in his brilliant essay 'On the Young Marx', this course of reading was an attempt to go back to Hegel's sources, the real history of the law and society as well as those modes of writing closer to it, before they had been subsumed by him into a speculative semblance of real history.

to identify the common form of the political transformations that had emerged from the aftermath of the French Revolution, and the partial restoration of the old regime that followed it. He very astutely observed that the persistence of the old regime was expressed in a *political theology* that neutralized the question of who is ultimately the sovereign power of the state—the people or the king?—by asserting that the state itself, or its constitution, was what was sovereign. He rejected this latter claim as incoherent and sought to restore the sharp antithesis of royal vs. popular sovereignty that it evaded. He framed this constitutional problem of the relation between constituent and constituted power in Feuerbachian terms:

> In general we can note that the conversion of the subject into the predicate, and of the predicate into the subject, the exchange of that which determines or that which is determined, is always the most immediate revolution.[19]

The problem of this historical research was to identify the conditions of the inversion of subject and predicate, of the relation between state and civil society as expressed in the constitutional division of powers between the executive and legislature. This historical moment of inversion was the passage from traditional estate-kingship to the executive–legislative duality of constitutional monarchy, from which Marx thought the next step was to legislative supremacy, opening up the path to the self-determination of society. It could be said that at first he adopted, by default, a Rousseauian understanding of popular sovereignty. But in the same summer he read the conservative Karl Wilhelm Lancivolle, whose history of France sought to expose the fictional nature of this conception of the people as a constituent power. Even before his research into political economy and contemporary socialist literature, Marx was cognizant of the limits of the older pre-revolutionary tradition of 'political philosophy', and his critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* took place on the border of its concepts.

Beyond constitutional monarchy

Hegel often retold history as if it were a process of the differentiation of separate and opposing spheres out of an original unity culminating in their reconciliation as expressed in the form of a system of rationally

[19] Marx, 'A Passage from the Kreuznach Notebooks of 1843', in MECW vol. 3, p. 130.

inter-related categories. This way of putting things seems mystical but is meant to convey that it is only possible to say what the state, property and family are by establishing the order in which they presuppose or 'determine' one another. But only where legal privileges and status distinctions have been abolished and formal legal equality and contractual freedom recognized could state, private property and the family be defined adequately. The history of the coming into being of this latter condition could in this way be presented as a history of the differentiation, struggle and reconciliation of these categories. Aristotle had sought to distinguish political rule over fellow citizens, paternal authority over wives and children and the dominion of master over slave, but was unable to articulate these distinctions very sharply, because he accepted the premises of slavery. Hegel's discovery and elaboration of the concept of 'civil society' was meant to resolve the category problems that had eluded Aristotle, and previous legal-political thought more generally.

For Hegel, the concept of the state began to come into its own once it was explicitly defined as separate and opposed to a multitude of atomized individuals assuming the form of abstract legal persons with the right to ownership and its contractual alienation. This order of persons and property—the *nomos* of bourgeois society—did not come into existence through enactments, but was recognized as a concrete presupposition in the wider community of post-feudal European states. Natural law conceptions of sovereignty as expounded by Hobbes, Locke and Pufendorf articulated the premises of this emerging new order. Hegel's philosophy of constitutional law was both a continuation of this early modern break with the Aristotelian conception of the political community and a rejoinder to it: 'The city is prior in the order of nature to the family and the individual. The reason is that the whole is necessarily prior to its parts.'[20] Hegel had sought to overcome the self-undermining dynamic at the heart of the modern state–society opposition by imparting to the modern state the holistic pretensions of the *polis*. He sought to freeze the separation of state and civil society in place, preventing the irreconcilable antagonisms to which it gave rise from playing themselves out. The bureaucratic paternalism of the Prussian status quo fettered the spontaneous dynamics and resulting class divisions of civil society. Hegel argued that this superintendence was necessary because the intercourse of civil society generated a polarization of wealth and poverty, which in

[20] Aristotle, *Politics*, Oxford 1995, p. 11.

turn gave rise to civil disturbances that periodically had to be neutralized. It followed that the superintendents of the whole had to be accorded wide latitude in the enforcement of laws. 'This ideality has its proper actuality only when the state is in a condition of war or emergency . . . while its "peaceful" situation is precisely the war and misery of selfishness.'[21]

Thus, not only was Hegel's concept of law split between private and public, but public law itself was in turn split between legislative statutes and improvised executive measures. Semi-parliamentary constitutional monarchy, far from being the organic resolution of the state–society dualism, was in a permanent state of emergency and constitutional crisis. Hegel's circular conception of state–civil society relations led to an incoherent conception of the division of powers. The duality of state and civil society was perpetuated by the compromise formation of constitutional monarchy and would be swept away in a republic open to the social question. For Hegel, the French Revolution had demonstrated that the only act of the people as a whole, or rather a convention acting in its name, was the abolition of privileges; an undifferentiated multitude could never be a constituent power in the constructive sense. As a result, historical change did not manifest itself as the conscious legislative act of a constituent power, but always unfolded inconspicuously through passive revolutions that preserved the constitutional forms of the old regime while negating and sublating them. In the radical-democratic scenario outlined by Marx, the legislative body within a constitutional division of powers would become the locus of constituent power when it subordinated the executive to its will in the name of society, ensuring that no obligations could be imposed upon it except the ones that it imposed upon itself through its elected representatives. 'The representative constitution is a great advance, for it is the open, genuine, consistent expression of the condition of the modern state. It is the unconcealed contradiction.'[22]

For classical liberals a property-based franchise appeared to be an unavoidable expression of modern social realities. Only property owners could uphold the principle of no taxation without representation—the nexus upon which the division of state and civil society was based. Yet it was difficult to see how this could be reconciled with the claim that such bodies could legislate in accordance with the general will of the nation—

[21] Marx, 'Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law', in MECW vol. 3, p. 22.
[22] Marx, 'Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law', p. 75.

truly an 'unconcealed contradiction'. The separation of state from civil society entailed the abolition of particularistic forms of corporate representation, but then seemed to reconstitute a status division between first- and second-class citizens.

Hegel had sought to neutralize the contradictions of civil society that had come into sharper relief within the framework of the nakedly proprietary franchise of contemporary English and French parliamentarianism. His alternative to this early liberal order of atomistic individualism, competition and open class division both within and outside the legislative assembly was a makeshift council in which representatives of the tenured civil service, professional associations and guilds consulted with the executive in framing laws and negotiating aspects of taxation. Buttressing this ramshackle corporatist edifice was the old-regime institution of legally privileged landed property. The inalienability of landed property was the linchpin of the state bureaucracy's apparent, if illusory, superiority over civil society. The bridling of civil society within the state form was secured through the subordination of an impotent semi-representative legislature to the executive that in turn rested upon the hedging of the alienable, mobile property of the cities with the inalienable, landed property of the old-regime countryside. Even before working out the political economy behind this scenario of the phases of class struggle, Marx had identified in his critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* its constitutional logic. The first step in the sequence culminating in social emancipation would have to be the abolition of taxation without representation. The next step would be the abolition of legally privileged landed property, forming the basis of rent as a separate form of revenue. The dissolution of landed property would unleash the uprooting tendencies of competition-dependent mobile property, with a train of revolutionary consequences:

> It is necessary that this appearance be abolished—that landed property, the root of private property, be dragged completely into the movement of private property and that it become a commodity; that the rule of the proprietor appear as the undisguised rule of private property, of capital, freed of all political tincture.[23]

The truth of Hegel's theory, Marx perceived, was that the new world of modern bourgeois society did in fact rest upon the transcended and preserved old regime, and that without this vestigial protection the

[23] Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, in MECW vol. 3, p. 267.

internal contradictions of its development would propel it towards self-dissolution. But this advance could only be attained through a widening of the franchise bringing all classes into the political arena, eventually transforming the state into a mere form of social self-determination: 'Electoral reform within the abstract political state', he concluded, 'is therefore the demand for its dissolution, but therefore also the dissolution of civil society.'[24] Or as he put it in a letter to Arnold Ruge:

> By raising the representative system from its political form to the universal form and by bringing out the true significance underlying this system, the critic at the same time compels this party to go beyond its own confines, for its victory is at the same time its defeat.[25]

Constitutional monarchy upheld the duality of the state over and above a civil society of warring egoistic individuals, and so its abolition would open the door to forms of self-determination in which this opposition would wither away. From its beginnings in his draft critique of Hegel, the conception of revolution that Marx developed before 1848 presupposed the specific nexus of economic class and political representation characteristic of semi-parliamentary settlements of Restoration-era Europe, the period in which the modern political spectrum took shape. In this context, it was hoped and feared that electoral reform would lead to the unleashing of class antagonisms within civil society. Marx had initially been unclear about the forms these would assume but even before he began to work this out, he saw this process as somehow pushing inexorably towards a historically decisive settling of accounts.

Remarkably, Marx simply ignored Hegel's discussion of how civil society necessarily generated immense wealth at one pole and a rabble at the other, and was thus driven onto the path of relentless expansion outward. The reason was that he rejected the conservative conclusion to which this grim theorization seemed to lead. After all, Hegel had sought to demonstrate that the atomization and division of civil society voided popular sovereignty of its revolutionary meaning. But the claim that the opposition of royal and popular sovereignty had been neutralized by the cross-cutting opposition of state and civil society was no mere reactionary ideology, as Marx himself would soon come to realize. Here he sought to articulate an alternative account in which an atomistic

[24] Marx, 'Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law', p. 121.
[25] Marx, Letter to Ruge, in MECW vol. 3, p. 144.

civil society could be transformed into a constituent power through the widening of suffrage.

The Jewish Question

The Marx of this period came to see communism as the solution to the 'riddle of history'. Why had the breaking of old bonds always led to the forging of new ones, instead of the hoped-for emancipation? More specifically, why had the French Revolution failed to redeem its promises? While, in their own idiosyncratic way, some Young Hegelians briefly came to see themselves as Jacobins, they nonetheless refused to believe that Germany was just a belated nation condemned to go through a derivative revolution. Repeating the French Revolution meant transcending it as well, overcoming the intertwined obstacles of religion and atomistic egoism on which it had stumbled. Young Hegelian Germany was the standard bearer of an atheistic revelation, adorned with Saint-Simonian notions of social reconstruction.[26]

The leading lights of the Young Hegelian scene all sought to occupy the vantage point of the absolute critique of all existing reality, resulting in some memorable sectarian polemics. This eagerness to draw the most radical conclusions, to break with views only recently upheld, led Marx to call into question the scenario of political emancipation as a gateway to social emancipation, which he had just been working through in the context of his unfinished work on Hegel. After the failure of the Young Hegelians to galvanize the public with their manifestoes and editorials, Marx's earlier mentor, the theologian Bruno Bauer, abandoned the cause of liberal political opposition to the Prussian state, and his essays rejecting the symbolically highly charged demand for Jewish civic equality, later published as a book, provoked a number of determined rejoinders from his former allies.[27] Marx's break with liberalism radically diverged from Bauer's and came into polar opposition to it. 'Real extremes cannot be mediated with each other precisely because they are real extremes'[28]—Marx's dictum applied not only to conflicts between the status quo

[26] Warren Breckman, *Marx, The Young Hegelians, and the Origins of Radical Social Theory*, Cambridge 2001.

[27] See Bruno Bauer, '1842' [1844] and 'Was ist jetzt der Gegenstand der Kritik?' [1844], in *Streit der Kritik mit den modernen Gegensätzen: mit Beiträgen von Bruno Bauer, Edgar Bauer, Ernst Jungnitz, Zelige U.a.*, Charlottenburg 1847.

[28] Marx, 'Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law', p. 88.

regime and its opponents but also often to divisions emerging within the latter camp. His polemics within the disintegrating provincial Young Hegelian milieu cast the mould of later relations with friends, allies, and enemies in the wider world of European politics.

Bruno Bauer held that an unenlightened Christian-German monarchy simply could not grant emancipation, and denied that unenlightened, religiously observant Jews could ever be emancipated. The latter would not only have to give up their antiquated religion; they would also have to go through the experience of the dissolution of Christianity to get to a position where they could emancipate themselves. Marx retorted that Bauer remained within the horizon of the liberalism he professed to reject by conflating political emancipation—the attainment of legal and political equality—with total emancipation from all the alienated powers to which mankind had been subjected. Political emancipation abolished distinctions based on legal privileges and disadvantages of birth but generated new ones arising from impersonal social compulsions that govern the intercourse of the multitude of now legally free and equal individuals. Bauer's limited theological form of criticism naively equated human emancipation with the establishment of a state free from clerical-theological tutelage. The liberation of an educated public sphere was the furthest point to which Bauer's philosophy of self-consciousness could go. Only a humanism attuned to bodily need and suffering could reveal the secular roots of alienation, and specify the adequate form of disalienation. Marx's brief enthusiasm for Feuerbach arose from this context.

For Bauer, the United States of America was the long-foretold republican Atlantis. Marx referred the reader back to Tocqueville's characterizations of the God-fearing Americans. Life in America conclusively proved that religion and property actually flourish when they lose their legally privileged status and are relegated to the sphere of civil society and the war of all against all. Even in the most democratic republic, the civic order that exists over and above this sphere of impersonal social power could only be an imaginary sovereign power. In this divided world, real life unfolded in the miserable trenches of civil society. The social relations of the old regime were inseparable from the legal forms of privilege, and so their abolition had to be an act of constitutional legislation: a Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen. But the separation of the state from civil society had opened up exchange-mediated class

divisions that were no longer based on privileges in this older sense, complicating the problem of the conditions and forms of their abolition. In the period of Marx's writing under consideration here, this complication manifested itself in the form of an opposition of political to human or social emancipation.

The opposition, which distinguishes 'On the Jewish Question' from the critique of Hegel's philosophy of right, raised a new problem, that of the nature of the transitional period. Did bourgeois democracy represent an incomplete stage in the long transition from the utter bondage of Christian feudalism to full human emancipation, or was it rather a new and higher stage of the alienation and self-mystification of man, an impasse and not a passage to emancipation? The so-called Jewish question was not merely a matter of civil liberties and the attainment of a neutral state separate from the private world of civil society, but also posed the question of the stages through which the process of human emancipation had to pass.

Bauer had claimed that human emancipation was available only to those who had passed through the spiritual uprooting of Christianity, who were experiencing the radical pain of its dissolution. The religious community that had arisen from the annihilation of Canaanite cults had itself been annihilated, spiritually speaking, by Christianity, which was, in turn, now ready for destruction in an atheist apocalypse. Marx pointed out that Bauer's theological *supersessionism* failed to explain the persistence of a supposedly superseded Judaism. Christianity and Judaism were no longer even relevant objects of criticism: their relationship could only be considered as an allegory of the secular opposition of state and civil society, in which the relation between the two was one of mutual presupposition, not supersession. 'Judaism reaches its highest point with the perfection of civil society', he maintained, 'but it is only in the *Christian* world that civil society attains perfection.'[29] The Christian heaven was a figure of the imaginary sovereignty offered by civic community while Judaism stood in for the secular world of unbridled interests and passions—'huckstering'. In this sense, far from being a historic fossil, Judaism here was identified with the revolutionary course of modern bourgeois society, although it was only later that Marx would brazenly celebrate the latter's career of creative destruction.

[29] Marx, 'On the Jewish Question' [first published 1844], in MECW vol. 3, p. 173.

It is this claim that can seem the most offensive to later readers. 'We recognize in Judaism, therefore, a general *anti-social* element of the *present time*, an element which through historical development—to which in this harmful respect the Jews have zealously contributed—has been brought to its present high level, at which it must necessarily begin to disintegrate.'[30]

But was it not the highest ideal of Young Hegelian criticism to unleash 'the general anti-social element of the present time', to make all that is solid melt into air? Bauer had seen his own atheist theological criticism as the solvent of the existing world order, and by his own criteria, surely, the Jews deserved praise not contempt. Marx responded to Bauer on his own terms, ones laden with an older, Christian anti-Judaism, with undercurrents of a more modern form of anti-Semitism in which a no longer religious Jewry was identified with the arcane world of financial power. For the sake of argument, Marx coolly accepted Bauer's premises and insinuations, and then gave them a wholly new significance: 'The contradiction that exists between the practical political power of the Jew and his political rights is the contradiction between politics and the power of money in general. Although theoretically the former is superior to the latter, in actual fact politics has become the serf of financial power.'[31] Relevant here is the attitude of both Marx and Engels to the new anti-Semitism and its obsession with the Rothschilds, summed up by the latter's retort to the 'True Socialist' Grün: 'Rothschild is criticized for bleeding the bourgeoisie white, as though it were not desirable that the bourgeoisie should be bled white . . . he is said to have led the princes astray. Ought they not to be led astray?'[32]

Bauer's later anti-Semitism provides a disturbing epilogue to this exchange. After the defeats of the revolutions of 1848, he abandoned his radical humanism and came to see it as the ideology of a Jewish-led slave revolt against an old European order of races, which if dissolved would open the flood-gates of absolute lawlessness. Only Russian Tsarism had the inner strength to withstand this onslaught and to bring the subaltern revolt to heel. Marx's later obsessive Russophobia, which is often ascribed to the unbalancing effects of defeat and exile, has its roots in his opposition to Bauer, and to the menacing threat of Tsarism seen

[30] Marx, 'On the Jewish Question', p. 170.
[31] Marx, 'On the Jewish Question', p. 171.
[32] Engels, 'German Socialism in Verse and Prose' [1847], in MECW vol. 6, p. 239.

through Bauer's disturbing and vengeful depiction.[33] This puts Marx's later passionate attachment to the cause of Polish national liberation into a new light, as the Russian Pale of Settlement contained Europe's largest population of Jews, a rightless and impoverished subject population. Engels would repeatedly make clear that the condition of their support for Polish national freedom was not just land reform, but the emancipation of its Jews.[34] In his speeches from the same time Marx remained silent on this particular point, but it is unlikely to have had no effect on his sense of the menace posed by the Eastern citadel of the counter-revolution.

Germany and the proletariat

For most of the period up until 1852 Marx held that human emancipation could only be attained by passing through a stage of political emancipation. But the break with Bruno Bauer, followed by one with Arnold Ruge, led Marx to abandon for two years the scenario of a dialectical passage from political to human emancipation, and instead emphasize their stark opposition. The aftermath of the collapse of the Young Hegelian movement in 1842 provided the context for a critique of the political, and of Jacobinism as its most extreme manifestation: 'At times of special self-confidence, political life seeks to suppress its prerequisite, civil society and the elements composing this society, and to constitute itself as the real species-life of man devoid of contradictions. But it can achieve this only by coming into violent contradiction with its own conditions of life, only by declaring the revolution to be permanent, and therefore the

[33] Bruno Bauer, 'Das Judentum in der Fremde' [1863]. See also Marx's letter to Engels from 18 January 1856 (in MECW vol. 40, p. 4), the year before the publication of his *Revelations of the Diplomatic History of the Eighteenth Century*. After thirteen years, Bauer, the former prophet of dissolution, had appeared on his doorstep in London, while visiting his brother in exile. 'Have seen Bauer again on various occasions . . . As to Russia, he says that the old state of affairs in the West must be swept away and that this could only come from the East, since the Easterner alone feels hatred—for the Westerner, that is—and Russia is the only close-knit power in the East, *besides* being the only country in Europe where there is "cohesion". As to our illusions about class struggles, he maintained that 1. The workers feel no "hatred"; 2. If they did feel hatred, they would never have achieved anything by it; 3. They are a rabble (who have no interest in the Synoptics) and ought to be curbed and directed solely by force and cunning; 4. With them one silver *groschen* rise in pay is enough to settle "the whole caboodle". In any case, no one who was not a "descendant of the conquerors" could play an historical role, except in the field of theory.'

[34] Engels, 'On the Polish Question' [1848], in MECW vol. 6, p. 550.

political drama necessarily ends with the re-establishment of religion, private property, and all elements of civil society, just as war ends with peace.'[35] This conception of the ultimately sterile course of political revolutions briefly brought Marx closer to the position of Moses Hess and the later-reviled True Socialists who had arrived at similar conclusions. He soon abandoned it and broke with the latter at the onset of a new round of liberal constitutional struggles in the years before 1848. But as we shall see, he would later return to another articulation of this 'anti-Jacobin' conception of state and revolution in the aftermath of the defeats of the revolutions that broke out in that year, forming a suggestive pattern.

Marx's whole framework for situating Germany within the sphere of modern European historical development was drawn from the schema of Hess's *The European Triarchy*, in which the respective roles of England, France and Germany in the contemporary history of emancipations were assessed. What was the wider significance of the struggle going on in Germany for a constitution, for the freedom of the press, given that modern nations already had these things, and were now in the midst of confronting the new social question? 'The struggle against the German political present is the struggle against the past of the modern nations', he wrote, 'and they are still burdened with reminders of that past.'[36] The liquidation of the old regime in Germany would hasten the abolition of its remnants in France and expedite the historical process towards the radical resolution of the social question in the most advanced societies. But the problem was that Germany seemed unable to make the first step to political emancipation, unable to even repeat the French Revolution. The troubling implication was that German conditions did not contain an inner dialectic of emancipation (later conceived as 'permanent revolution', or the passage from bourgeois to proletarian revolution.) But this apparently hopeless German situation contained within it the prospect, indeed the existential necessity, of an even more radical revolution. The historical significance of the contemporary German impasse was that it pointed to the limits of political emancipation, and to the general form of its supersession.

In the early Marx's understanding of European history, England, France and Germany were arriving into the age of emancipation along different paths. It is important to note then that Marx did not think that the

[35] 'On the Jewish Question', p. 156.
[36] 'Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law. Introduction', p. 178.

history of English industrialization was being repeated in Germany, even as competition from England was undermining its antiquated economic foundations. Although Germany had not undergone political revolutions or industrialization, it was experiencing the irreversible dissolution of the old regime that these had brought about. This dissolution manifested itself in the formation of an anti-estate of pauperized proletarians: 'The proletariat is beginning to appear in Germany as a result of the rising *industrial* movement. It is . . . the masses resulting from the *drastic dissolution* of society, mainly of the middle estate, that form the proletariat, although, as is easily understood, the naturally arising poor and the Christian-Germanic serfs gradually join its ranks.'[37] The proletariat was the embodiment of human essence as need for social-species community in the negative form of absolute deprivation. Here was the Nothing that must become Everything. But whereas the revolution of the Third Estate was an idealistic struggle for legal and political recognition, the proletarian revolution was a materialist struggle for existence. The appeal of Feuerbach's naturalism to Marx at the time, even as he noted its apolitical and indeed ahistorical limitations, was its identification of the human essence with suffering. Marx's earliest quasi-Feuerbachian notion of materialism is best captured in Brecht's dictum: *'Erst kommt das Fressen, dann die Moral.'*

Because Marx did not expect that this process of dissolution would give rise to actual economic development and the expansion of an industrial workforce, he did not fully distinguish between the proletariat and the pauper. His primary distinction was political and subjective: 'Pauperism is the position of the lowest level to which the proletarian sinks who has become incapable of resisting the pressure of the bourgeoisie, and it is only the proletarian whose whole energy has been sapped who becomes a pauper.'[38] The proletariat was the ground zero formed out of the separation of state and civil society, the subjection of atomized individuals to alien economic laws and the class divisions they form. It is thus the vantage point of the critique of these separations and alienations. A later formulation from this period conveys this original meaning: 'They have nothing of their own to secure and to fortify; their mission is to destroy all previous securities for, and insurances of, individual property.'[39]

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[37] 'Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law. Introduction', pp. 186–7.
[38] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, in MECW vol. 5, p. 202.
[39] Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* [1847], in MECW vol. 6, p. 495.

What was the significance of this recourse to the ancient Roman figure of the 'proletarian', formed out of the massive dispossessions that gave rise to the latifundia of the late Republic? After all, this figure could hardly be described as a revolutionary class. Clearly Marx took up a term that had not long before entered into circulation in the expectation that modern conditions would lead to different outcomes. What was the fundamental difference that would support this expectation? Modern workers were, in an economic sense, more like the slaves of the ancient world—whose labour supported its ruling classes—than its proletarians, an unproductive multitude living off the dole. Marx's appropriation of the term 'proletariat' for the modern class of wage-labourers brought together the dispossession that formed the one with the productive function of the other, although he also divided this broader conception of modern slavery into its European waged form and the open, chattel variant of the New World plantations. The Ricardian conception of the wage as covering the bare reproduction cost of the labourer tended to obscure the distinction between wage and slave labour, in either case kept alive on the fringe of subsistence by their employers.

When thinking about the fate of the labouring poor of his time, Marx did not accord any special significance to factory workers. The 'proletariat' was arising from the mere dissolution of the old society, even in far-off lands: 'The economists were thinking of the millions of workers who had to perish in the East Indies so as to provide for the million and a half workers employed in England in the same industry, three years' prosperity out of ten.'[40] Absolute immiseration had many faces in Marx's time, from racked and ruined Bengali and Irish peasants to the enslaved blacks of the New World. The European proletariat was the stratum of this underworld of labour that was best positioned to lead the struggle for human emancipation. The coming revolution was not an option for a better over a worse condition, but simply a life-and-death matter for the workers of the world:

> And here it becomes evident, that the bourgeoisie is unfit any longer to be the ruling class in society, and to impose its conditions of existence upon society as an over-riding law. It is unfit to rule because it is incompetent to assure an existence to its slave within his slavery, because it cannot help letting him sink into such a state, that it has to feed him, instead of being fed

[40] Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* [1847], in MECW vol. 6, p. 160.

> by him. Society can no longer live under this bourgeoisie, in other words, its existence is no longer compatible with society.[41]

But how would the revolution come about? In order to fill out the dynamics of this specific political process, Marx would turn to the study of political economy.

The first critique of political economy

Marx planned his critique of the *Philosophy of Right* as a work combining treatment of political idealism, political economy and the speculative philosophy itself, but came to think better of the scheme: 'The intermingling of criticism directed only against speculation with criticism of the various subjects themselves proved utterly unsuitable, hampering the development of the argument and rendering comprehension difficult.'[42] What were these lines of criticism? The critique of speculative philosophy was directed at the illusory self-determination it offered through knowledge of the existing world's reified laws and categories. The critique of political idealism was directed at an illusory constitutional self-determination within the necessity of state–society dualism. Finally, the critique of political economy exposed the illusions of individual self-determination under the laws of exchange dependency and its value categories. In each case (philosophical idealism, constitutional law, political economy) there was an attempt to systematize categories (logical, politico-legal or economic) that arose from reflection on immediate experience. But Marx showed that the apparent unity of these systems was undone by conceptual contradictions that made it impossible to establish an order of determination within them. Formulaically put, in each case the failure called for a critique in the form of an explanatory inversion of subject and predicate, revealing a real historical process pushing toward its own dissolution.

However, Marx came to the conclusion that, of the three, political economy got closest to the social core of 'human essence' by identifying its laws of intercourse and reproduction. His first critique of political economy moved between treating its economic categories and laws as placid mystifications of the underlying process of formation of property out of

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[41] Marx, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, pp. 495–6.
[42] Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, in MECW vol. 3, p. 231.

propertylessness, and crediting it with having brought aspects of this real social process to light.

Not intended as a prelude to an alternative systematic account of the economic process of bourgeois society, this was a negative critique of 'political economy' as a whole, across its rival schools, all of which presupposed private property in the exchange-value form and therefore the distribution of revenues into wages, profit and rent, just as they presupposed competition. From its beginnings, political economy had been confronted with the problem of explaining the underlying determination of the pattern of relative prices across the division of labour, and on that basis the distribution of revenues as well as the source of the surplus or net income over costs that accrued to owners of the conditions of production. Following Engels, Marx had sought to demonstrate that its various schools contradicted one another on all these points. These contradictions testified to its general failure to provide a coherent account of the inter-relationship between the economic categories that it assumed as given but which had an historical logic of development that its equilibrium assumptions ruled out: 'It does not *comprehend* these laws—i.e., it does not demonstrate how they arise from the very nature of private property.'[43]

Marx's dissertation had offered an internal critique of Hegel's conception of necessity in the form of laws by way of reconstructing Epicurus's critique of determinism. The basic conceptual pattern of an inversion in which a system of laws is shown to be the alienated form of appearance of an underlying chaos subject to the compulsions of atomistic strife was extended into his critique of political economy:

> Mill commits the mistake—like the school of Ricardo in general—of stating the *abstract law* without the change or continual supersession of this law through which alone it comes into being. If it is a *constant* law that, for example, the cost of production in the last instance—or rather when demand and supply are in equilibrium which occurs sporadically, fortuitously—determines the price (value), it is just as much a *constant law* that they are not in equilibrium, and that therefore value and cost of production stand in no necessary relationship.[44]

Abstract laws equating supply and demand, production costs and market prices asserted themselves in the accidents of the exchange-dependent

[43] Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, pp. 270–1.
[44] Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, p. 211.

relations of individuals and expressed their subjection to the alienated results of their own intercourse operating as blind market compulsions. Political economy presupposed continual deviations from its own laws. But these deviations were themselves systemic in nature, although political economy could not explain this dialectic of law and exception. The competition of exchange-dependent individuals presupposed and reproduced their class division, and yet political economy proved itself incapable of thinking through its cumulative consequences for the labouring classes. Marx followed classical political economy in recognizing competition as the ultimate law of civil society, but imparted to it a brutal, cumulative logic of development:

> This is the law that grants it no respite, and constantly shouts in its ear: March! March! This is no other law than that which, within the periodical fluctuations of commerce, necessarily adjusts the price of a commodity to its cost of production.[45]

This understanding of competition underlay the concept of capital that Marx developed in the period under consideration and must be distinguished from his later one. In both, competition ground down prices to their costs of production but nonetheless generated the surplus over cost that made accumulation possible. But in the political economy of the early Marx, the general problem of what was included in capitalists' costs of production and the source of the 'surplus value' over them was never very rigorously posed. Instead this surplus was understood to arise from a variety of sources: savings out of revenue, temporary super-profit, premiums from the concentration of capital, the greater productivity of cooperative over isolated labour, and the downward pressure on wages stemming from the permanent surplus of labourers over available employment. Following Ricardo, Marx conceived profits to be differentials above the cost margin, and so too was rent. In his first critique of political economy there is no integral conception of surplus value as a presupposed condition of any capitalist production process. In Marx's later economics, surplus value was understood to result from the co-determination of the social property relations of exploitation that constitute a labour force compelled to subsist on a constitutively scarce quantity of waged employment, with a pattern of development of the productive forces that, in reducing costs and raising real incomes,

[45] Marx, 'Wage Labour and Capital' [1849], in MECW vol. 9, p. 224.

delivers the lion's share of productivity gains to the owners of the conditions of production. On the absolute basis of these property relations and the relative basis of productivity growth, 'endless' capital accumulation could become the *telos* of an extremely elastic, if crisis-laden, process of social reproduction. The early Marx grasped the nature of exploitation gains but did not incorporate productivity gains into his conception of capital. Eventually he would have to abandon his adherence to a quasi-Malthusian law of wages—which, it must be noted, reflected a strong general conviction of the workers' movement itself, then and for a long time after—to arrive at this later conception of capital.

Although the early Marx came to adopt a version of Ricardo's labour theory of value, his conception of the accumulation of capital and the problem of the rate of return was derived from Adam Smith. For the latter, capital was the productive stock formed out of savings from personal revenue under the assumption that the entire wealth of society could hypothetically be consumed. This conception led him to reason that accumulation would lead to an ever-lower rate of interest, yielding a low return on top. With contemporary Holland in mind, Smith considered the resulting decline in the real rate of interest to be desirable, even though a more pessimistically conceived stationary state shadowed the prospect. Marx argued that Smith's scenario of accumulation overlooked how the competition pushing down the rate of return on capital was counteracted by the concentration of ownership of capital, which increased its share of income. Marx's alternative to Smith provided a mechanism by which this stationary state would be warded off, but only by intensifying exploitation and an explosive outward expansion made necessary by a growing insufficiency of demand.

As the capital-to-income ratio—the ratio of 'past', or accumulated, to 'present' labour—went up, the rate of profit would be maintained by the seizure of small capitals, expansion into new markets and proletarianization. The concentration resulting from competition establishes monopoly profit. The source of capital's profit over cost was a moving synthesis of competition and monopoly.[46] Marx inferred that it was the continuous destruction of competitors and the cost reduction won by

[46] 'In practical life we find not only competition, monopoly, and their antagonism, but also their synthesis, which is not a formula but a movement': *Poverty of Philosophy*, p. 195.

displacing labourers with machines that was the source of the surplus that made the accumulation of capital possible: 'These relations produce bourgeois wealth only by continually annihilating the wealth of individual members of this class, and by producing an ever growing proletariat.'[47]

The legions of the dispossessed

The accumulation of capital presupposed the dispossession of the growing legion of those unable to compete and their reduction to an expanding multitude of pauperized proletarians. The equilibrium assumptions of political economy concealed a constitutive excess of labourers over the available level of employment, which formed the self-undermining basis of the capital–wage labour relation. Marx modified Smith's conception of the longer-term logic of capital accumulation with considerations from Ricardo, Sismondi and Lauderdale that vitiated its benevolent, invisible-hand mechanism. 'When political economy claims that demand and supply always balance each other, it immediately forgets that according to its own claim (theory of population) the supply of *people* always exceeds the demand, and that, therefore, in the essential result of the whole production process—the existence of man—the disparity between demand and supply gets its most striking expression.'[48]

This excess of the demand for employment over its supply was the most direct expression of the relation of alienated labour underlying competition and the capital–wage labour relation. Just as the separation of coercive power from the sphere of exchange-based economic relations was what constituted the division of state from civil society, so too the competitive laws of motion of civil society arose out of the separation of producers from any direct access to means of subsistence. This is what Marx meant when he maintained that underlying private property and competition is the social relation of alienated labour. For alienated labour arose out of three separations: (a) that of labourers from their product; (b) of the worker from the means of labour; and (c) of labourers from each other.[49] Political economy could not conclusively resolve its own problems because it did not understand the historical logic of development, the law of accumulation arising from these

[47] *Poverty of Philosophy*, p. 176.
[48] *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, p. 314.
[49] *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, p. 275.

separations by which labour as self-activity gives rise to its opposite—capital, and capital comes to immiserate and displace labour. 'Labour, the subjective essence of private property as exclusion of property, and capital, objective labour as exclusion of labour, constitute *private property* as its developed state of contradiction—hence a dynamic relationship driving towards resolution.'[50]

Starting from Smith, Marx held that the variety of schools in political economy had more recently been reduced to two, whose defining figures were David Ricardo and Jean-Baptiste Say. Say had argued that the price of a product was determined by its cost of production, which was nothing more than the revenues paid out to workers, capitalist and landlord for their role in its production. The supply of commodities constituted the demand for them in the form of the incomes generated by that supply. This conception of cost is the basis of the so-called Say's Law whereby demand must always equal supply. Despite his opposition to Say on nearly all other fundamental points, Ricardo accepted Say's Law as the best expression of how capital accumulation could only be limited by external, 'natural' barriers.

For Ricardo, the labour-quantity determination of value applied only to commodities that could be produced without limit. In effect he assumed fully-developed industrial production, in which the limits of 'scarcity' were relativized and continuously surmounted by the growth of productivity. The labour-quantity determination of costs, prices and the distribution of revenues presupposed this level and continuity of the development of the productive forces. Ricardo thought this dynamic of rising productivity compatible with the restriction on the growth of demand entailed by his subsistence conception of wages, and Marx followed him in this error. So closely did Ricardo identify labour with its industrial employment by capital that he ended by failing to differentiate between labour and capital, and when speaking of the quantities required for production referred indifferently to 'capital or labour'. The meaning of the term 'labour' in Ricardo is very close to that of another term that he, and Marx for a time, employed interchangeably with it—'industry'. The classical conception of labour—going back to Locke—did not distinguish fully between the enterprising man and the labourers he

[50] *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, p. 294.

paid. But Ricardo was stumped by the contradiction this created between his conception of labour as capital and the ordinary notion of labour as a wage-remunerated service. He did not grasp the specific form of this opposition as an active and unfolding relation in which labour only exists as subsumed under the alienated form of capital. Ricardo's labour theory of value was a one-sided determination of economic relations from the supply side—the cost of production.

But in contrast to the circularity of Say's theory, the one-sidedness of the labour theory of value made it possible to conceive the order in which the categories presupposed one another in the form of a determinate trajectory of accumulation. Ricardo posited a development of the accumulation of capital based on productive forces pushing to their furthest conceivable limits, and tracked its consequences in terms of the distribution and level of incomes. Freed from the idealization of Say's law of markets, Ricardo's labour theory of value established an order of determination within a maelstrom of 'creative destruction': cost determines price, supply determines demand (or rather overshoots without regard to it), the expansion of productive forces determines the rate of return, profit from new accumulation determines rent and interest. In this vision, unfolding proletarianization is the condition of capital accumulation as well as its socio-political limit.

Marx's reconstruction of Ricardo's theory came to underpin a conception of history in which the antithesis of capital and labour led to either a revolutionary resolution or a regression into barbarism. But since that theory conceived of wages and profits as shares of income, it was also able to provide the basis for demands for higher wages. If wages were a share of total income, workers could demand more, although Marx also seemed to hold that there were inexorable pressures pushing down real wages to a subsistence minimum. Workers were constantly threatened with pauperization, a tendency that wage demands could neutralize. But these must ultimately fail, unless the working class came to power and broke the iron chains of wage slavery. A specific dialectic of reform and revolution arises from or is supported by Marx's conception of political economy:

> If in the associations it really were a matter only of what it appears to be, namely the fixing of wages, if the relationship between labour and capital were eternal, these combinations would be wrecked on the necessity of

> things. But they are the means of uniting the working class, of preparing for the overthrow of the entire old society with its class contradictions. And from this standpoint the workers are right to laugh at the clever bourgeois schoolmasters who reckon up to them what this civil war is costing them in fallen, injured, and financial sacrifices. He who wants to beat his adversary will not discuss with him the costs of the war.[51]

Malthus and real wages

The postulate that a rise in real wages was impossible can only be explained on Malthusian assumptions. Marx attacked Ricardo's Malthusianism, although he accepted its conclusions that wages could never rise above a subsistence minimum, and that rent is merely an extra profit above the return to the marginal producer. His objection was that it naturalized conditions specific to bourgeois society which could be abolished by the proletariat. Ricardo had failed to realize how the labour theory of value led to revolution and had fallen back instead on Malthus.

Marx too presupposed a relation between the law of accumulation and that of population. But, reluctant to accept Ricardo's Malthusian conception of it, he failed to specify it in any way. The early Marx argued both that there was always an excess of capital over outlets for its profitable employment, and that there was always an excess of labourers over the available opportunities for work, but he did not successfully integrate these two claims. As a result he did not clarify to what degree accumulation dug its own grave by employing an ever-larger workforce maintained at a subsistence minimum, or whether the tendency of accumulation was to expand the ranks of the pauperized unemployed. It is true that he seized on the dynamic of the growth of the productive forces after initially rejecting List's critique of Ricardian political economy for focusing only on the value distribution of income, while ignoring the forces raising the level of social wealth.[52] He then incorporated this conception of the advance of the productive forces into his historical theory of the development of civil society as new forces of production broke through older relations of production. But what Marx failed to consider was how this growth of productivity would affect the real wage level. In 1851, near the end of the period considered here, he noted that, logically, Ricardo's

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[51] Marx, 'Wages' [December 1847], in MECW vol. 6, p. 435.

[52] Marx, 'Draft of an Article on Friedrich List's Book: *Das Nationale System der Politischen Oekonomie*' [1845], in MECW vol. 4, p. 265.

theory of differential rent did not require the Malthusian assumption of rising costs of production on marginal land of deteriorating fertility. But it would not be until later that he explicitly worked through the consequences of this clarification in his own account of the nature of agricultural and mining rents, and the rejection of the so-called iron law of wages that ultimately depended on a Malthusian conception of the link between population growth and rising food prices.[53] It would fall to Engels to lay down the lines on which Marx's later transcendence of these Malthusian premises would take place: 'With the fusion of the interests now opposed to each other, there disappears the contradiction between excess population here and excess wealth there; there disappears the miraculous fact (more miraculous than all the miracles of all the religions put together) that a nation has to starve from sheer wealth and plenty; and there disappears the crazy assertion that the earth lacks the power to feed men.'[54] The later Marx held that the growth of productivity under capitalism made it possible to bring about a significant reduction of the working day, but at this stage he simply assumed that the implementation of any such reduction would spell the end of bourgeois society.

Despite its Malthusian assumptions of an absolute immiseration of the mass of society, Marx's first conception of the economic process was nonetheless far more dynamic than those of Smith or Ricardo in its focus on the power of competition to drive bourgeois society continuously beyond its own limits of market demand. The ongoing accumulation of capital was constantly threatened, on the one hand by diminishing returns from savings, and on the other by drastic limits to the growth of markets consequent on permanent underconsumption. This drove the logic of accumulation outward into previously unexploited regions, only to reproduce this self-undermining process at a higher level.

The early Marx sought to push through the consequences of the separation of the state and civil society, first articulated by Hegel, to their ultimate revolutionary conclusion: the unfettering of a law of accumulation that inexorably expanded the ranks of immiserated proletarians to the breaking point of civil war. His first critique of political economy appeared to underwrite this prospectus. Fluctuations in business and employment

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[53] Marx, Letter to Engels, 7 January 1851, in MECW vol. 38, p. 258.
[54] Engels, 'Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy' [1843], in MECW vol. 3, p. 439.

were merely epicycles within this momentous flight forward, and did not warrant special theoretical consideration. It was only later, in his first years of exile in London, that Marx began to investigate the patterns of a world commercial cycle that had just started to assume a mysterious periodic form. In retrospect, it was clear to him that the upheavals of 1848 had been the result of the world trade crisis of 1847: 'Just as the period of crisis began later on the Continent than in England, so also did prosperity. The process originated in England, which is the demiurge of the bourgeois cosmos. On the Continent the various phases of the cycle repeatedly experienced by bourgeois society assume a secondary and tertiary form.'[55] In his first decade in exile Marx sought to work out a theory of business cycles of mounting severity, manifestations of the ultimate incompatibility between the relations and forces of production in bourgeois society. Throughout the 1850s, he hopefully assumed that the next crisis would set the whole revolutionary process back in motion. His abandonment of this assumption was one of the conditions of the breakthrough to the economics of *Capital*.

[55] Karl Marx, *The Class Struggles in France* [1850], in MECW vol. 10, p. 509.

Jean Drèze & Amartya Sen, *An Uncertain Glory: India and Its Contradictions*
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Vivek Chibber

AUDIT BLEAK: COMFORT WEAK

Compared to the dismal record of British rule, the political economy of post-independence India has been an improvement. The last half-century of colonialism generated a near zero-growth economy, abysmal levels of poverty, backward and stagnant agriculture and a highly uneven industrial structure. Once the British were gone, growth rates hovered for three decades at around 3.5 per cent annually, rising to around 5 per cent in the 1980s and 90s, and then to 7–8 per cent after 2000; literacy more than quadrupled between 1950 and 2010; life expectancy doubled, from around 32 in 1947 to 65. Viewed against the performance of the Raj, this is not a negligible balance sheet. But if we measure it against a population that has nearly quadrupled, and change the frame of reference, growth rates become much less impressive: disappointing if we compare them to South Korea or Japan, or even some of the faster-growing Latin American countries like Brazil and Mexico, and an embarrassing contrast with China over the past quarter-century. So too when we consider outcomes in literacy and health, per capita income, poverty rates, or just about any measure of income and wealth distribution. Indian democracy continues to be institutionally stable, a significant achievement. But it is one disfigured by extraordinary disparities in political influence and access, the dismal state of the courts, naked displays of caste prejudice in the judicial system, and the increasing criminality of the political class.

It is thus with reason that a tone of measured sobriety pervades Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen's latest book. It is their third study of the Indian political economy, though they have also collaborated on other ventures. Sen is one of those rare economists who have won further fame as a social philosopher. Drèze—of Belgian origin but trained at the Delhi School of Economics and a naturalized citizen of India—has gained enormous respect as a public intellectual and activist in his adopted country. Both authors come equipped with a deep knowledge of their subject, as scholars as well as practitioners. Their new book is clearly intended to be a check to neoliberal celebrations of Indian accomplishments in recent years: in the public arena, 'issues that affect the lives, and even survival, of those who have been comprehensively left behind tend to receive remarkably little attention'. There are few countries, in fact, where the class bias of the media—this is especially true of the English-language sector—has become so striking: rife with adulation of domestic millionaires and American economic models, contempt for any questioning of market fundamentalism, and dismissal of even the mildest forms of left politics.

Against all this, Drèze and Sen generate a quietly devastating indictment of the contemporary political economy of India by applying Sen's 'capabilities approach' to its development. This is a focus that calibrates growth not just by macroeconomic indices like gross domestic product, rate of investment or volume of trade, but also by the degree to which they increase the individual capacities of human life, which will depend essentially on two factors: firstly, the distributive consequences of the prevailing economic model itself—whether it increases the ability of the poor or the disabled to lead meaningful lives by channelling income their way, or fails to do so; and secondly, in the event that the model is good for growth but not for distribution, whether there are—or are not—institutions that compensate for its distributive failures. The concern for income distribution and redistribution that is built into the capabilities approach makes it more hospitable to egalitarian agendas than conventional economic doctrine tends to be.

Proponents of the neoliberal turn in India have pointed to the recent drop in poverty measures as evidence for its success, even with regard to distribution. Early on, Drèze and Sen point to both the conceptual and empirical weakness of this argument. Empirically, claims for poverty reduction are hard to square with the data on per capita expenditure, which has been exceedingly low—one per cent per annum in rural areas, and around two per cent in cities from 1993 to 2010; while over the past two decades, real wages have risen either very slowly or not at all, in both rural and urban employment. Measured as a share of value-added, wages in manufacturing have actually declined since 1992. Even if dubious empirical claims for poverty reduction are to be accepted, they are open to obvious conceptual

criticism. The Indian Planning Commission has famously declared that the cut-off for the poverty line is Rs. 32 per head per day in cities and Rs. 26 in rural areas (at 2011 prices)—an amount that it deems sufficient to provide adequate 'food, education, and health'. Drèze and Sen correctly observe that this notion is laughable. The family budgets that Rs. 32 per capita (around fifty cents of a dollar) generate in urban areas do not cover even the barest necessities. A fall in poverty, if measured on these feeble criteria, amounts to very little. Indeed, if the official story is true, and small wage increases have generated a noticeable improvement in poverty rates, it means that there is an enormous clustering of the population around the miserable poverty line, such that small improvements in income show up as a 'decline in poverty'. But this supposed decline does not amount to anything approaching a decent livelihood for those who have moved above the official benchmark.

If any major reduction in poverty is questionable, performance in education, health and general social services is even worse. By any standard, India is an outlier on these issues, spending less than countries at comparable levels of development; while those services that are available to the poor are of such deplorable quality that they often provide little in the way of substantive relief. To drive this point home, Drèze and Sen offer a two-tier comparison of India's record in delivering public goods. It is well known that compared with two other large developing countries, Brazil and China, India comes off badly. The PT government has made remarkable gains in education, health and poverty reduction, precisely those areas in which India continues to flounder, and it has done so in the context of enormous inequalities and corruption—factors often blamed for India's inability to move forward. But Drèze and Sen show that Indian failure is not only plain in contrast to an example like this, but—more strikingly—is also pointed even within South Asia, if compared to the record in Bangladesh or Sri Lanka. Bangladesh, which has a per capita income little more than half that of India, does better in infant mortality, schooling, immunization, access to sanitation, and several other domains. Indeed, since 1990 India has *slid* in its regional ranking based on social indicators.

This bleak audit of Indian development naturally raises the question: what explains the duality of respectable growth rates on the one hand, and such lopsided results in welfare outcomes on the other? For Drèze and Sen, it appears to be corruption within the state and lack of accountability among holders of public office. Services crucial for any improvement in social indicators, like health care, education or food support, are provided by state or quasi-state agencies, which for adequate delivery must hew to minimal standards of bureaucratic efficiency, and their functionaries must be accountable and above-board in their handling of these resources. Notoriously, the Indian state fails to meet these tests. Officials divert funds,

sometimes into their own pockets, at other times to powerful patrons; transfer public assets to private interests; bend rules as favours or as paid services to interested parties. The upshot is that agencies supposed to compensate for market failures end up reinforcing them. To check this outcome, Drèze and Sen call for greater participation by ordinary citizens in both the machinery of distribution and the making of policies at the apex of the state, and for a wider ambit of 'public reasoning'.

India would, of course, be better off with cleaner public institutions and a more inclusive public discourse. But how far is a primary focus on these issues likely to serve the end to which Drèze and Sen are committed—a significant improvement in India's distributive outcomes? Take the issue of corruption. Manifestly, if public officials—both elected and appointed—pocket monies intended for the poor, if they skew prices in arbitrary directions, if they demand illicit payments as a precondition for service, this will undermine efforts at redistribution. But effective counteraction of inequality does not just depend on the internal culture of the state or the integrity of its officials. Even if all the shortcomings of these could be resolved with the wave of a wand, there would remain the question of the level of funds made available for redistribution in the first place. The problem in India has not just been the disappearance of monies into private hands, but—as Drèze and Sen point out themselves—the fact that the sums allocated to health, education and other services have been among the lowest for countries at comparable levels of development. To make the state more relevant to the betterment of its citizens' life-chances, a massive redirection of priorities is needed. This is not a matter that can be addressed merely by institutional reform; it requires a shift in political culture and the balance of power in society.

The problem with Drèze and Sen's diagnosis is not just that a focus on institutional reform is too narrow. It is also that the quality of state institutions cannot be analysed in isolation from the political and economic context in which they function. The authors are of course aware of this, observing time and again that the deviation of government agencies from the tasks assigned them is not random—rules are broken, prices skewed, favours dispensed, in a specific direction: to the benefit of the rich, and to the detriment of the poor. In practice, then, all too often state institutions entrench background inequalities, rather than reversing them. This is a fact of enormous analytical significance. But though registered, it does not acquire the necessary weight in their picture of Indian development.

The limitation of their optic can be seen in their remedies for corruption, long a feature of the Indian scene and given new salience by the emergence of the Aam Aadmi Party in 2012. Drèze and Sen call for greater transparency, moral suasion and a more vigorous prosecution of the guilty. But it is

clear from their own description that in India, corruption is often an expression of class power, and the form it takes is not just pilfering of monies: it extends across land grabs in forest areas, usurpation of public funds by local elites, collusion between officials and industrialists in mining areas, use of the state by politicians to acquire resources for themselves. On any definition of the term, these are all forms of corruption. But it is hard to see how they can be curbed through calls for greater transparency or moral rectitude. Of course, greater openness in state affairs will have some effect, as shown by the popular Freedom of Information Act of 2002, pushed through by a highly mobilized social movement. But many of the worst examples of corruption are not illicit, under-the-table deals. They occur in full view of the public, because those who benefit from them possess the political and economic power to act with impunity. In India the most egregious abuses of office, the biggest thefts of public resources, are often not concealed—they are open secrets. For the structure of the political system builds a culture of cosy deals and brazen criminality into public policy: elections are overwhelmingly financed by private money, all political parties depend on wealthy donors and patrons for their campaigns, monies are bestowed in exchange for favours to come. There is small chance that state institutions can be reformed so long as this broader nexus between politicians and economic elites remains unchanged.

If measures taken to improve bureaucratic culture or encourage greater probity are always likely to be undermined by counter-measures launched by elites to protect their control of the levers of policy, what might genuinely render officials more accountable? The answer is plain: only a prior shift in power relations on the ground—that is, a greater capacity of ordinary citizens to exercise real power over the state, as a countervailing force against the power that flows from money or public office. This is the lesson not only from what little has been done in India by way of administrative reform, but also from other parts of the world. But it doesn't sit easily with bland calls for 'decentralization' that often just mean devolution of power from national to local elites. What it entails is a redistribution of power from the wealthy to the poor. Demands for greater accountability in public institutions are facile unless they are accompanied by support for the organizational strength of working people. The current model of development in India militates against anything like this. The mantra in the era of liberalization has been the need for flexible labour markets—code for managerial despotism and attacks on the trade unions, legislatively and on the ground. So too in recent years the Indian state has opened a front against NGOs guilty of 'political activities'—that is, any kind of social mobilization. If the success of such pressures remains uncertain, their direction does not, which offers little comfort to the argument of *An Uncertain Glory*.

The title of the book hints at one of its weaknesses. Taken from a line in one of Shakespeare's most lightweight comedies—the reference is to no more than the weather of an April day—it strikes a curiously frivolous note for the subject matter it treats. But it isn't irrelevant to the project. For while *An Uncertain Glory* is a powerful indictment of the current economic outlook of Indian *neo*liberalism, how far does it move beyond the political outlook of a conventional Indian *liberalism*? The socio-economic record the book lays out, any reader is bound to conclude, is far from glorious. So where is the glory? The answer can only be: in the stability of Indian democracy. But for this to have proportionate weight, the book would have to deal with it in far greater depth than it does. As advisors to successive Indian governments, however, the authors are visibly inhibited in what they feel they can say about anything that is directly political. The Congress Party, BJP, armed forces, big business, Communist movements, Caste parties, courts and voters—the entire political system as such—is sidestepped. Four cautious pages tiptoe through 'breaches in democratic practice', as if these were merely scattered flaws in Indian democracy, rather than structural features of it. The vagueness and abstraction of the book's recipes for reform follow from its evasions of any hard look at the Indian political order.

Even at the serious core of the book, where it is at its best, without ideological trimmings, there is a paradox. Drèze and Sen show in how many respects the past couple of decades have witnessed either stagnation or outright retreat in the welfare of the poorest sections of the population. But in their analysis, the causes of these ills tend to be located either within state institutions, or in aspects of the broader culture—not, however, within the dynamics of the market itself. It is curious to find a vivid description of the stagnation in urban wages, but no links made to the massively increased power of employers over their labour force; or chapter-long descriptions of how the media has become a mouthpiece for the wealthy, but only the most fleeting mention of the wholesale privatization of television; an account of the indifferent record of rural welfare schemes, without reference to the veto exercised by agrarian elites over them. In these respects, *An Uncertain Glory* marks a shift away from the sort of political economy that was once common in India, and its replacement by various kinds of institutional or welfare economics. Whatever the virtues of these, they tend to evacuate from the market systematic inequalities of power, of which economists of an earlier vintage rarely lost sight.

That move away from an older political economy leads not just to analytical failure, but to a strategy for reform too anaemic to be effectual. Perhaps the greatest virtue of the older tradition was its insistence that production and distribution are linked systematically, and that the key mechanism binding them together are struggles over the pattern of distribution.

So changes in the latter were traced to shifts in the balance of power in the employment relation, and these in turn were connected backwards to structural alterations of economy and demography, and forward to their effects on social institutions. In this perspective, reforms could not realistically be envisaged without consideration being given to the political and structural conditions needed to make them possible. Drèze and Sen's studious avoidance of such an approach, and the questions it generates, occludes much hope for the distributive outcomes they endorse. Readers of their book will benefit immensely from its description of the Indian social and economic landscape. Those seeking an explanation of it, and a path towards a more equitable future, will have to look elsewhere.

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Nikil Saval, *Cubed: A Secret History of the Workplace*
Doubleday: New York and London 2014, $26.95, hardback
352 pp, 78 0 3855 3657 8

Michael Denning

DESIGN AND DISCONTENT

In 1977, I found myself—thanks to an accidental meeting in a bar—working in an office of the defence contractor Raytheon. I needed the job, having failed to find a way to pay the rent while living in the 'movement', the flood of radical storefronts that was subsiding as quickly as it had risen. Compared to the romance of encountering the American proletariat in factories and mines that fired our imaginations—Barbara Kopple's great documentary on a Kentucky miners' strike, *Harlan County USA*, had just been released—the monotonous rhythm of subway commutes to the pacified dullness of the Charles River office building, where Raytheon paid us to blue-pencil government reports on subways, seemed as far from the vanguard of social change as could be imagined.

My guide to this office landscape—an endless seesaw between the warren of offices with young men, cutting and pasting with X-Acto knives on light tables, and the 'typing pool' of somewhat older women, fingers flying on the massive IBM Selectrics with their interchangeable 'golfballs'—was not C. Wright Mills's *White Collar*, which already seemed dated, but Thomas Pynchon's cartoonish depictions of Yoyodyne (the fictionalization of his days as a technical writer at Boeing) and Joseph Heller's endless office epic, *Something Happened* (in which, as far as I recall, nothing happened). But history happens where we least expect it: my Boston of the 1970s, I learn from Nikil Saval's marvellous 'secret history of the workplace', had the highest proportion of office space to population of any US city, and the office I encountered would become, as Saval argues, 'not just another workplace . . . but the signature of an advanced industrial society . . . the dominant workplace culture of the country'.

If I had been paying attention to the government reports I was editing, I might have noticed that a Nixon administration commission had already concluded in 1972 that 'the office today, where work is segmented and authoritarian, is often a factory. For a growing number of jobs, there is little to distinguish them but the colour of the worker's collar: computer keypunch operations and typing pools share much in common with the automobile assembly-line.' This now seems a commonplace, and Nikil Saval's accomplishment is to restore the strangeness of the common cube.

Saval, a young writer associated with the journal *n+1*, briefly mentions his own experience working in a cubicle, but *Cubed* seems to grow as much out of the cubicle narratives that he grew up with—the comic strip *Dilbert*, the cult film *Office Space*, the television programme *The Office*, not to mention the serialized costume drama *Mad Men*. Thus, though Saval claims that the book is a homage to Mills's sociology of 'The American Middle Classes' (the subtitle of *White Collar*), it is more in the vein of Barbara Ehrenreich's brilliant renderings of the 'Inner Life of the Middle Class' (the subtitle of her 1989 *Fear of Falling*). Saval's work is less a work of a Millsian 'sociological imagination', than of what Ehrenreich once called the 'history of bad ideas', paddling through the waves of managerial, therapeutic and design nostrums that inform popular thought and shape work and daily life. *Cubed* is a compendium of all the 'bad ideas' that have gone into offices: from the '"motion-studied" mail opening table' of 1920s Taylorism to the 'cave and commons' of 1990s Apple, from the dreams of 'ergonomics' and 'Theory Y' to those of the 'team workroom' and the 'serendipitous encounter'. *Cubed* is, he writes, 'a history from the perspective of the people who felt these changes from their desks'.

As Saval moves from Herman Melville's Bartleby to Scott Adams's Dilbert, he vividly depicts a number of familiar stories: the shift from male clerks with their detachable white collars in the mid-nineteenth century countinghouse to the female typists, stenographers, file clerks and switchboard operators of the twentieth-century office; the Copernican revolution in which the office moved from its former position as a satellite revolving around the factory and the mine to the centre of a solar system of information and service; and the migration of office space from the skyscrapers of modernism's urban 'downtowns'—separated from the city's factory districts and figured by Frank Lloyd Wright's Larkin Building and Skidmore, Owings and Merrill's Lever House—to the suburban 'office parks' whose emblems included SOM's Connecticut General.

Underneath these histories Saval weaves a dialectic of discontent and design. The vexations of 'deskism'—a term Saval finds in Edgar Allan

Poe—recur throughout this history, in the diary of an 1850s New York merchant's clerk, in the 'speak out' of 1970s feminist office workers, and in office furniture manufacturer Steelcase Inc's own survey of cubicle dwellers in the 1990s. In almost every case, the response to office discontent was new design. The office—and each generation of office reform—offered a promise of class harmony, of fulfilling and creative work, of natural light and well-conditioned air. This was a promise shared not only by office designers—'anyone who works in an office spends an extraordinary amount of time thinking about the arrangement of offices', Saval observes—but by office workers themselves: 'The office chose women, but women also chose the office.'

Unfortunately, the promise was rarely kept, sometimes because of the failures of the designers—'office planners and architects tend to imagine that the set-up of their own offices should be the way that everyone should work'—but usually because of the imperatives of profit: 'Companies had no interest in creating autonomous environments for their "human performers".' Instead, they wanted to stuff as many people in as small as possible a space for as little as possible, as quickly as possible. Saval's protagonists—a host of figures like architect Mies van der Rohe, workstation inventor Robert Propst, designer Florence Schust Knoll, secretarial school founder Katharine Gibbs, and advice writer Helen Gurley Brown—tend to be those who made powerful and persuasive promises, only to find them diluted and compromised. A brief and illuminating account of Mies van der Rohe's Seagram Building ends with Mies wondering 'What the hell went wrong?'; Propst admits that his Action Offices have been knocked off as 'hellholes . . . little bitty cubicles'; and despite the 'prestige appearance' of Katie Gibbs girls, Gibbs herself wrote that 'a woman's career is blocked by lack of openings, by unjust male competition, by prejudice and, not least, by inadequate salary and recognition.' Design, however, springs eternal, and Saval can't avoid a twinge of excitement as he visits the 're-enchanted' offices of the future, TBWA/Chiat/Day, Google's Mountain View, and Eric Veldhoen's Interpolis.

Like other stories of enclosure, Saval's *Cubed* ends with dispossession, as the dream of a corner office recedes not only to ever-smaller cubicles and 'virtual offices' but, in the wake of the white-collar layoffs of the 1980s and the 2008 crisis, to office-less office workers, the freelancers or precariat. Here too Saval's dialectic yields, in some places, another turn: the phenomenon of 'co-working', where freelancers pay a fee for a shared office facility. 'Flexibility doesn't have to be one more trick in the managerial guidebook,' Saval argues. 'Flexibility . . . is a tool, an opportunity . . . it remains for

office workers to make this freedom meaningful: to make the "autonomy" promised by the fraying of the labour contract a real one, to make workplaces truly their own.'

It is perhaps a sign of our wageless life that the only promise of workers' control lies in the 'flexibility' created by the fraying of the labour contract. However, it might also be a product of Saval's own 'deskism'. Though he says his history 'speaks through faceless, nameless workers', it often seems to speak through 'the typewriters and file cabinets they used and the chairs they sat in'. This has two powerful consequences that are not to be underestimated. He takes us deep into the interiors of office buildings usually celebrated for their architectural exteriors, as in his account of Florence Schust Knoll's plan for Connecticut General; and he thoroughly disrupts any common sense that the office is a virtual or immaterial workplace by attending to the resistant materiality of the back and bum in desk and chair: from the high-backed wooden Wooton desk of the countinghouse to Steelcase's flat metal Modern Efficiency Desk to the Aeron chair of 1994, 'the most powerful symbol of the dot-com bubble'. But there are occupational hazards to this sort of design history. First, like other forms of art history, it tends to highlight the new and the innovative, and *Cubed* is a wonderful account of the avant-garde office: the 'offices of the future'. But the offices of the mundane present are usually a mismatched jumble of once cutting-edge file systems and workstations with little memory of how they were supposed to increase creativity or efficiency. Second, the design history in *Cubed* is a tale of the homogenization of the 'workstation', the abstraction of a hierarchy of desks and chairs into flexible and interchangeable cubes. This design history is no doubt accurate, but it tends to underplay the divides among office workers and office labour practices in the name of revealing the 'dominant workplace culture of the country'.

As the book develops, the story of office design crowds out the story of the office's labour processes. It is as if one told the story of the factory from the viewpoint of Albert Kahn (the designer of Ford's Highland Park and River Rouge factories) rather than that of Ford, his workers, or the United Automobile Workers. The strengths of this are considerable: the space of work matters—its bad lighting, noise, overheating, poor ventilation—and these forms of workplace injustice have often been trivialized simply as 'working conditions'. But the office workers in *Cubed* tend to be eclipsed by their desks. In part, this is due to the scholarship: the rich labour history of early clerical workers that he draws on in the first half of the book is not matched for what might be called the '9-to-5' working class. But it is also because Saval sees the revolt of the 'secretarial typing pool'—figured by the Boston organization 9to5, led by Karen Nussbaum, as well as the 1980

popular feminist film *9 to 5* (bringing together the unlikely trio of Jane Fonda, Dolly Parton and Lily Tomlin)—as a brief and passing event which 'thanks to tremendous media coverage . . . began to seem like a groundswell'. Here I must differ: though I was only vaguely aware of sympathies for Boston's 9to5 among the women of Raytheon's typing pool back in 1977, within a few years, there was a groundswell among women working in offices that not even a young male office worker like myself could miss, not least in the university offices I entered after leaving Raytheon. Boston's 9to5—which had become Local 925 of SEIU in 1975—did mark a major social transformation: the wave of strikes and organizing campaigns that made the Service Employees International Union (and similar unions like UNITE HERE) the largest and only-growing section of the US labour movement, the contemporary equivalent of Walter Reuther's United Automobile Workers in the era of Fordism. Of course, not all of SEIU's members were office workers (at one point they created a specific 'Office Workers Division'). Or rather, not all of SEIU's 'office workers' worked at a desk: think only of the janitors and security guards who cleaned, maintained and guarded the buildings filled with cubicles that Saval writes about.

Like the rhetoric of the 'service sector'—the idea that the vast majority of wage-earners are service workers—the notion that the office is the dominant workshop, that we are all office workers, may hide as much as it reveals, obscuring key differences and hierarchies inside the office. Service work is marked by at least two distinctive divides: the divide in labour processes between what is called in the hotel industry the 'front of the house' and the 'back of the house', the workers who deal with customers and the workers who cook, clean, and process data; and the divide between household services—the outsourcing and commodification of the unpaid women's labour taking care of children and elders, cooking meals, cleaning the living quarters—and business services—the outsourcing of elements of the accumulation process to banks, insurance companies and retailers. Do these or similar divides mark the office landscape? Does the client-processing front office at all resemble the data-processing back office? Are the labour processes of offices conducting financial services at all akin to those that offer cheap everyday services to working-class households? And what of the international division of cubicles?

If the outsourcing of household service has taken the form of a massive international migration of domestic workers, the offshoring of business services has created a global office space parallel to the global assembly line, as digital communication lines allow the easy transfer of data services of all kinds, from financial accounting and payroll preparation, to medical records and customer 'call centres'. Despite a few glances at other shores—

the fascinating Weimar debate over white collar workers, the European revolt against the *Bürolandschaft* in the 1970s, the Electronic City of India's Bengaluru, and the recognition that *The Office,* made originally for UK television, has been remade not only in the US but in Chile, Germany, Israel, and France—the fun and frustration of *Cubed* is that it manifests the strengths and weaknesses of a classic kind of American cultural critique; it unites novels with comic books, chairs with half-forgotten management bestsellers, revealing the secret history behind our taken-for-granted tales, even if those very tales leave us curiously fixed on the American office.

Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life*
Belknap Press: Cambridge, MA 2014, £25, hardback
755 pp, 978 0 674 05186 7

Blair Ogden

A REVOLUTIONARY MOBILE

Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life is not only the first full-length English-language biography, but far the most comprehensive survey of its subject in any language, superseding all predecessors. Its authors have devoted much of their careers to Benjamin. Jennings, the general editor of the four-volume Harvard selection of Benjamin's writings, specializes in Weimar culture, particularly the avant-garde, at Princeton; Eiland, who teaches literature at MIT, is co-editor of three of the volumes, and currently working on a book about Benjamin's Jewishness. The strategy of the authoritative biography at which they aim takes the form of a combination of detailed narrative of Benjamin's personal life with intellectual exposition of his major writings. Interpretation of Benjamin's work has been famously controversial since Theodor and Gretel Adorno co-edited the first two-volume German collection of his writings in 1955, followed by Adorno and Scholem's selection of a single volume of his letters in 1966—each anthology coming under attack from the student movement for misrepresenting, in different ways, Benjamin's thought—and Hannah Arendt's first English-language selection, *Illuminations,* in 1968, presenting a view of Benjamin at variance with that of both Adorno and Scholem. Sharp disagreements over his legacy have persisted to the present.

In their introduction, Eiland and Jennings set out the governing principle of their enterprise: 'Previous studies of this writer, whether biographical or critical, have tended to proceed in a relatively selective manner, imposing a thematic order that usually eliminates whole regions of his work. The result has all too often been a partial, or worse, mythologized and distorted portrait. This biography aims for a more comprehensive

treatment by proceeding in a rigorously chronological manner, focusing on the everyday reality out of which Benjamin's writings emerged, and providing an intellectual-historical context for his major works.' The result will therefore not be partisan: here the many conflicting aspects of Benjamin's personality—the 'fire-breathing Communist', 'Frankfurt School neo-Hegelian', 'messianic Jewish mystic', 'cosmopolitan assimilated Jew' and 'literary deconstructionist *avant la lettre*'—can hopefully coexist. The motto of their study is taken from one of Benjamin's own descriptions of his thought. It formed, he said, a 'contradictory and mobile whole'—a phrasing that becomes the leitmotif of their interpretation of his corpus: 'Coming generations of readers will undoubtedly find their own Benjamins in the encounter with the "mobile and contradictory whole" that is his lifework.'

With this credo in place, the biography is open to assessment, corresponding to its structure, in two registers. Firstly, what does it tell us about Benjamin's life that is not by now already well known: his early involvement in the romantic *Schwärmerei* of the Youth Movement of pre-First World War Germany; his early marriage, friendship with Scholem, and refuge from the draft in Switzerland; the rejection of his doctorate on the *Trauerspiel*; encounter with Asja Lacis in Capri, turn to Marxism, trip to Moscow; belles-lettres, journalism, divorce; relations with Adorno and Brecht; poverty and exile in Paris; Arcades Project; flight across Pyrenees, suicide—a *via crucis* rehearsed many times? Secondly, what fresh light does it cast on the trajectory of Benjamin's thinking, and its complexities? These are not exhaustive of the questions posed by this biography. But they are obviously the most immediate ones.

On the first score, the sheer empirical density of the reconstruction by Eiland and Jennings of Benjamin's career is such that we learn a great deal from it. If few of their findings are entirely new, the picture that emerges from them should lay to rest a still popular image of Benjamin as a 'marginal, disregarded genius whose radical insights only posterity has been able to appreciate', impractical and poverty-stricken, unlucky in love and letters, a 'wanderer who buried himself in books', an 'outsider for all times'. In reality, after his early failure to secure a habilitation for his work on the *Trauerspiel*—scarcely surprising, given its difficulty—Benjamin was a far from inconspicuous figure in late Weimar culture, never short of admirers and not often of commissions: a prolific contributor to a wide range of publications, whose *One-Way Street* had enthusiastic reviews, and even whose *Trauerspiel*—once it appeared as a book—was discussed at length in scholarly journals, not to mention one of the leading literary periodicals of the time. Nor was he in any sense socially or intellectually isolated. In fact, across the pages of Eiland and Jennings, little is more striking than the number of notabilities of one kind or another who were friends, contacts,

acquaintances or well-wishers. In his years in Germany, they included Scholem, Bloch, Kracauer, Hofmannsthal, Auerbach, Adorno, Horkheimer, Anders, Arendt, Brecht, Korsch, Döblin, Moholy-Nagy, Curtius and Leo Strauss, not to speak of the companions of his youth. An exile in France, in much more difficult circumstances, he consorted or was on terms with Bataille, Klossowski, Monnier, Aron, Wahl, Gide, Paulhan, Malraux, Kojève, Leiris and Caillois. There too, his writing was not simply ignored, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*—translation corrected by Aron—attracting the attention of Malraux, among others.

Materially, too, Benjamin came from a wealthier background than Adorno and was not short of means for most of his life, travelling, collecting and gambling in some style till the end of the twenties. What precipitated him into ultimate penury was his mistreatment of his wife Dora, whom he exploited financially and then divorced in such ugly fashion that the court awarded her his inheritance as a lump sum in compensation. The particulars of this hinge in his life were first brought to light with the publication in 1991 by Hans Puttnies and Gary Smith of Dora's two anguished, outraged letters to Scholem about her husband's conduct, together with the court's verdict, in their *Benjaminiana*. Dora, whose nobility of character shines across the story of his later years, never ceased to admire Benjamin as a writer and thinker, not only soon forgiving him, but continuing to help him wherever she could. Eiland and Jennings do not follow Scholem or Puttnies and Smith in blaming Asja Lacis for allegedly manipulating Benjamin into the divorce to gain German citizenship by marrying him. They handle the sexual side of Benjamin's life with sensitivity and discretion, recounting his relations with women without notably speculating about them. Of Lacis herself, or his love for her, they say rather little. Their principal revelation is the likelihood of a passage with Gretel Karplus during her intimacy with Adorno, prior to their marriage. Confining themselves to the observation that the pattern of Benjamin's erotic involvements was typically triangular, they offer no psychological—or even physical—portrait of him comparable to the remarkable description in the memoirs of a lesbian friend and later sexologist, Charlotte Wolff. The tenor of their biography precludes this. Calm, meticulous and judicious, it rarely dips below the surface. In so far as the effect of such abstention is demystifying, it can be accounted a merit. But it is also a limitation, as a comparison of *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life* with Stephen Parker's virtually simultaneous *Bertolt Brecht: A Literary Life* brings home. Parker's work is much more powerful as a psychological study, not simply because it contains a greater amount of startling new material about its subject, but because of a greater ambition: Brecht emerges transformed from his biography in ways that Benjamin does not.

The connexion between the two men has always posed the most contentious issue in studies of Benjamin: the nature of his politics. The two dominant interpretations of his thought, advanced respectively by Scholem and Adorno, are coloured by a common dislike of Brecht and hostility to Communism, imbued in Scholem's case by his Zionism and in Adorno's by the Cold War atmospherics of the Federal Republic after 1945. Eiland and Jennings share the bias of neither, though Benjamin's canonical interlocutors don't stand on quite the same footing in this account of his life. Tacitly, their sympathy with Scholem is greater, on occasion leading them astray. In the longstanding debate about what Benjamin's political commitments were prior to his conversion to Marxism in 1924, they argue that the young Benjamin's thought cannot be easily appropriated by either right or left: 'So while Benjamin could read approvingly Bakunin and Rosa Luxemburg—he was "deeply moved by [the] unbelievable beauty and significance" of Luxemburg's letters from prison—he could also establish a deep intellectual relationship with the conservative Florens Christian Rang and subscribe intermittently to the royalist, reactionary, and anti-Semitic newspaper *Action Française*.' This, they suggest, is a prime example of the contradictory and mobile whole that is Benjamin's thought.

It is, however, significant that they give the last word here to Scholem, who in his *Story of a Friendship* maintained that around this time the two shared the same political outlook, which he labels 'theocratic anarchism'—an individualistic, anti-socialist *Weltanschauung*. This is somewhat misleading. The young Benjamin's convictions are certainly moot; but it is clear that the anti-statist, insurrectionary strain in them—expressed in texts like the *Critique of Violence*—was alien to Scholem's Zionist nationalism. Later, in the penultimate chapter of *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life*, they remark that 'Scholem remained, despite their difficulties, the most trustworthy reader of Benjamin's work'. This judgement is far off the mark. Scholem may have been Benjamin's most trustworthy friend. But he was certainly not his most trustworthy reader. In fact, as he told Benjamin, he could scarcely bring himself to read through the Marxist texts he was sent from Paris in the thirties. Famous for maintaining that there was a deeply unproductive tension at the heart of Benjamin's thought between his theological and materialist convictions, he projected—as the Israeli scholar Barukh Kurzweil would point out—his own idiosyncratic version of Zionist ideology into this notion, by way of analogy with the relationship between the Kabbalah and rabbinical Judaism.

Adorno, by contrast, is treated by Eiland and Jennings much more critically. At a personal level, they have grounds for that. Adorno's vicious attack on Kracauer, his one-time mentor and possible lover, when the latter was an exile in Paris, is a shameful episode by any standards; their dislike

of the coercive tone of Adorno's 'astonishingly intrusive' instructions to Benjamin in 1939 on his work about Baudelaire is likewise understandable. In the early stages of their correspondence, Adorno had positioned himself as Benjamin's disciple. But by then, Adorno had become part of the inner circle of the Institute of Social Research, and 'aware that Benjamin was wholly dependent on the institute for his livelihood, he felt he could dictate not just the choice of subject matter but the intellectual tenor of Benjamin's work'. Shadowing this master–pupil reversal, they suggest, may also have been a wish to keep Benjamin at a safe distance from Gretel—he had conspicuously not invited Benjamin to their wedding in Oxford—which led him to an 'unconscious betrayal' of his friend in failing to exert himself to secure his passage to New York. But however questionable Adorno's human treatment of Benjamin may or may not have been, his intellectual relationship with him was another matter. In 1935, during a period of intense discussions with Adorno and Horkheimer, Benjamin was commissioned to write an exposé of his burgeoning Arcades Project. Coverage of the ensuing debates between Adorno and Benjamin is the weakest part of this biography. These formed a highly productive set of exchanges about the nature of historical progress, the efficacy of politicized art and the relationship between the foundations of society and its superstructures. Here, unfortunately, conjectures—however persuasive—about the personal rivalry between the two men come at the cost of any nuanced analysis of the theoretical yield of these debates. Indeed, in the case of *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Eiland and Jennings ignore the famous arguments Adorno and Benjamin conducted over the essay altogether.

More generally, their own disciplinary leanings hamper consistent representation of many of Benjamin's key works. Eiland and Jennings are entirely at home in discussions of German literature and Weimar culture, and their critical introductions to the essays that constitute Benjamin's apprenticeship in German letters are often excellent. They are more at sea, however, with texts that have an expressly political character. For example, along with the *Critique of Violence* of 1921, the famous theses of 1940's *On the Concept of History* form the text in Benjamin's corpus that explicitly theorizes the nature of class struggle. Eiland and Jennings devote just two and a half pages to it; Benjamin's much slighter essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities* receives seven. If his political *cursus* is understated by them, this is not an expression of any particular hostility. His revolutionary commitments are treated with equanimity throughout. But also with indifference—an absence of interest determined in large part, no doubt, by a post-Cold War context that makes them easier to treat as a posture, now so much part of a superseded past as to be harmless. It is lack of curiosity about Benjamin's political ideas and their development, rather than any actual distortion of these, that is a limitation

of this *Life*. It is true that the evidence here is often elusive, but not to the point of precluding some more coherent or engaged report. What comes over clearly is Benjamin's unusual combination of both independence and intransigence of mind. His time in Moscow left him level-headed about the USSR, his view of it informed by the admiration for Trotsky's writing he shared with Brecht (who might be 'the greatest living European writer'), and unmoved by the gambits of the Comintern—in France, he was withering about the Popular Front. A careful reconstruction of his trajectory once he turned towards historical materialism in Capri is much needed.

The greatest merit of this biography, undoubtedly, is that it makes the 'everyday life' of Benjamin visible for the first time to an Anglophone readership. Over the course of it we learn about his peculiar writing habits, the extent of his gambling addiction, his sentimental entanglements. But this raises a question of a more philosophical kind about the nature of 'everyday experience'. On the very first page of his miniature autobiography *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, Benjamin makes an important distinction between 'contingent' personal experiences and the collective experience of a generation. He then goes on to relate what he took to be the archetypal experiences of youth at the turn of the century. Likewise, Benjamin always described his own communist convictions as the product of an entire generation's experience of economic failure and fascism. Such collective memories are absent from the pages of *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life*. In opting for a 'rigorously chronological' narration of the story of this individual, Eiland and Jennings have attempted to let the facts speak by and large for themselves. In doing so, they have put aside the examples he himself set, when writing of the lives and works of those that influenced him—Baudelaire, Kafka, Kraus, Proust. A more productive way of engaging with his intellectual development would have been to utilize the strategy that Benjamin himself employed in taking a particular figure to 'crack open' a historical constellation around him. Rather than privileging the personality of these authors as the key to unlocking their texts, he consistently attempted to excavate them as traces of the social totalities from which they sprang. What this biography lacks is a real sense not only of how the social and political order of his time shaped Benjamin's thought, but also of the breaks within it. Eiland and Jennings often remind the reader that 'Benjamin was convinced that traditional historiography, with its reliance on the kind of storytelling that presupposes a homogeneous continuity and inevitable process in historical change, is meant to cover up the revolutionary moments in the occurrence of history.' But they never themselves reflect that their own treatment of Benjamin's life-history risks doing just that. In the case of a thinker who devoted so much energy in seeking to undermine traditional

kinds of historiography, the result is inevitably a sharp dissonance between form and subject in this biography.

How, then, is a balance sheet of it to be drawn up? The figure of Baudelaire provides a clue. *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life* ventures the thesis that there was a parallelism in their lives: 'The most prominent features of Baudelaire's biography—the penniless poet condemned, through lack of recognition, to an inner exile, and then, at the end of his life, to self-imposed exile in Belgium—conform closely to the situation of Benjamin himself.' Yet they take the deepest correspondence between Benjamin and Baudelaire to be philosophical: both would profoundly shape the ways in which we understand modernity—its sense of time, its veiled barbarity. The comparison could be provocative for other reasons. When Benjamin began to write on Baudelaire in the late 1930s, he recognized that he was rescuing the poet from the domain of myth. At that time, the hegemonic view of Baudelaire—propounded by poets like Stefan Georg—took its bearings from his mystical writings or his reactionary politics. Hence when Benjamin began to engage with Baudelaire he wrote that if the poet was to be rescued, it would be necessary to break through the 'limits of bourgeois thought'. Today, his reinvention of Baudelaire as the quintessentially modern individual—alienated, displaced, saturnine—has become so successful it is now conventional. A deradicalized Benjamin has come to dominate the academy since he became an object of scholarly attention in the 1980s. Perhaps a strange dialectical reversal has taken place, and the common understanding of Benjamin is now lapsing into myth.