## What's Left of the Dialectic? A Polemic

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What's left of English studies? We want to address this question in an oblique way—not by thinking about the state of the discipline, but by thinking about the conditions of and for thinking today. We present here a set of theses that we hope might help to re-imagine the role and scope of philosophy or theory in the age of finance capitalism; the links between these theses and (the politics of) literary studies will be left open. The sources of these theses are as eclectic as a music collection: they bear with them the traces of broken relationships, misdirected enthusiasms, the inevitable, short-lived fascination with the new, the enduring influence of old favourites that one cannot get past. These theses should not be taken as prescriptive. They might be read in the light of Friedrich Schlegel's conception of his philosophical fragments—as scraps or remnants of a total system that could never really exist.

Fredric Jameson has recently described his own critical practice as a "translation mechanism," a theoretical machine that makes it possible to convert other discourses into the central political problematic that animates Marxism (Zhang 365–66). We conceive these theses in much the same spirit: as grasping towards a mediating code rather than as a set of truth-claims. The utility of these theses will thus be determined by their ability to help produce a philosophy *politically* rather than *conceptually* adequate to finance capitalism—a philosophy or theory that takes up the political challenge of

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the present without thereby failing to become anything more than an expression of (an adequation of) the dynamism of finance capitalism itself.

1 More haste, less speed Though it belongs to a different era, Minima Moralia is a handbook for conducting philosophy in the age of finance capitalism. One cannot avoid reflecting on the temptations and limitations of bourgeois intellectual thought, and indeed, of the temptations of reflecting on these temptations. The concept of "reflexive modernity" lately championed in the social sciences by Ulrich Beck and by the architect of the "Third Way," Anthony Giddens, seems to represent an advance over a modernity that has no prefacing adjective. But just as being against capitalism doesn't imply that one is a socialist, so being reflexive doesn't mean the problems of modernity are magically solved. Adorno reminds us again and again of the institutional settings out of which thought grows, and the constraints and expectations these settings produce. "Since there are no longer, for the intellectual, any given categories, even cultural, and bustle endangers concentration with a thousand claims, the effort of producing something in some measure worthwhile is now so great as to be beyond almost everybody" (Minima 29). Is it possible that Totality has been rejected not because it is specious or Eurocentric but because to think it takes too much time? It might as well be admitted: far from having been slowly coopted by a shift from a university of culture to a university of excellence (as Bill Readings suggests), intellectual labor is the very model for production in the age of finance capital. Long before high-tech firms plopped pool tables down in the middle of their high-ceiling, reconverted factory-buildings, the professoriate was working twelve-hour flex-time days on gothic campuses and hanging out at the faculty club.

As for us: guilty as charged. The lesson here is to leave behind even the lingering idea of intellectual purity vis-à-vis the contaminated state of the rest of the world. And to think with less speed, but more urgency.

2 THE ECLIPSE OF SO-CALLED TRADITION For Gramsci, "traditional" intellectuals are connected to one another across time. Since "traditional intellectuals experience through an 'esprit de corps' their uninterrupted historical continuity and their special qualification, they put themselves forward as autonomous and independent of the dominant social group" (7). It is this simultaneous autonomy vis-à-vis the present and filiation to the past that still fires the imagination of critical theorists, even though we are now suspicious of both this separation and this connection. But what if we imagined ourselves first and foremost as "organic" intellectuals? Shouldn't we more properly see ourselves as part of that strata of intellectuals that, especially in the age of finance capitalism, give contemporary capital "homogeneity and an awareness of its function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields" (5)? The exemplary organic intellectual in the age of factories and production is the engineer. Like it or not, the exemplary organic intellectuals in the age of finance capitalism are intellectuals and cultural workers—otherwise known as "content providers."

**3 Ex Nihilo** You can't start from scratch. If the wild spirit of Adorno must energize one part of theory in the age of finance capitalism, the caution of Raymond Williams should animate the other. The technological euphoria that pervades the official discourses of finance capitalism all too often finds its equivalent in the enthusiasm of theory for all manner of techno-theories (from Debord's spectacle to Haraway's cyborgs) that contemplate a present that has made an absolute break with the past. Williams reminds us that things are far messier than that. Every social formation is the product of more than a single class, and the product of more than a single age. Academics live in nineteenth-century houses and theorize the present in the manner of those science-fiction films that imagine the future as so absolutely future that not even the practice of eating real food remains.

It is an open question whether futurity can be positively conceived at all. The future is no more than a lack in the present—as the Mozambiquan writer Mia Couto puts it in his story "Os mastros do Paralém," ("The Flags of Beyondward"), "o destino de um sol é nunca ser olhado" (185): the destiny of a sun is never to be beheld. Positive visions of the future like the cyber-Utopias of our own very recent past or the popular futurisms of the 1950s—or for that matter Plato's Republic—cannot think the future; they can only re-articulate the actual in futuristic form.

4 Nobody knows, everyone is in the know Simultaneously, two contradictory theses about that most alien of creatures, the mass, have been emerging. On the one hand, there is a sense that the contemporary moment constitutes an era in which (belatedly) mass culture critiques hit their mark. Now that global media monopolies have anxiously consolidated their hold on every aspect of leisure, we can safely skip over the more optimistic pronouncements of some theorists of mass culture and go straight to Horkheimer and Adorno: "Fun is a medicinal bath" (140). On the other hand, globalization is also the era of the end of ideology and of the universality of cynical reason (in Žižek's famous formulation, "they know what they are doing but they are doing it anyway"). What philosophy and theory in the age of finance capitalism need to explain is how both of these phenomena can not only occur together, but are in fact produced out of the same historical conditions of possibility (and contradiction). Elsewhere Žižek writes that "a direct reference to extra-ideological coercion (of the market, for example)

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is an ideological gesture *par excellence*: the market and (mass) media are dialectically interconnected" ("Introduction" 15). In other words, whatever explanation one produces must come from the inside rather than the outside. It is not only, as Hardt and Negri suggest, that the outside has disappeared: for philosophy, it was *always* a mistake to conceive of an outside.

- **5 Worstward**, **Ho!** "We" and "Ours." Such words embolden polemics such as these. Fear not: we imagine neither a universal subject nor a unitary community. But we also refuse to imagine a "West" that has long founded not only the unreflective "we"s and "our"s of the Eurocentric academy, but also their critique. Indeed, we assert that there is no West, there is no Westernization; for that matter, there is no modernity or modernization. There is Capital, and there is its limit, as expressed both in its internal contradictions and in active resistance to it (which is also, in a different way, internal). There is therefore no such thing as multiculturalism. The instant something becomes a culture—the moment that it ceases to be the world—it belongs to Capital or, what is more rare, resistance to Capital. What we call the "West" names this culturalizing machine, an aspect of Capital. Perhaps especially, of capitalism now.
- 6 CAPITALISM ALWAYS COMES FROM ELSEWHERE It is well known that the disequilibrium intrinsic to the function of capital can be kept under control only by the expansion of capital itself: as Marx put it in the Grundrisse, "the tendency to create the world market is directly given in the concept of capital itself. Every limit appears as a barrier to be overcome" (408). This is from the perspective of Capital. But it should not be thought that any place is originally capitalist and therefore free from the encroachment of capital. From any human perspective, Capital is always encroaching. The privatization of government, the "corporatization" of the arts, of higher education, of sports, of heretofore un-rationalized industries like cattle ranching, continues in the dominant countries today a process that, with reference to the dominated regions of the globe, was called colonization.
- 7 CAPITALISM IS INDIGENOUS EVERYWHERE Marx's pages in the Grundrisse on "pre-capitalist" modes of production, problematic though they are in many respects, are important for suggesting that every social formation tends to produce inequalities that can easily give rise to a pool of free labour—a suggestion, it should be noted, which is corroborated by any number of fictional narratives of the colonial encounter. Capitalism is not simply another, particularly voracious, social formation, but rather, as Deleuze and Guattari claimed in Anti-Oedipus, the specific nightmare of every social formation, the secret possibility, always repressed, of recoding existing social inequalities as the capital-labor relation.

To confuse "Capitalism" with the "West" is to elevate the latter, a merely heuristic category, to a causal level where it has no place.

- 8 THREE CLASSES OR TWO? The existence of classes in our age is not a factual question, but a political one. Nobody will deny that wealth is distributed unevenly. Those who want to do something about this live in a world that consists of two strata, the poorer and larger of which must struggle against the domination of the richer and smaller. Those who benefit, or think they benefit, from the status quo live in a world with three classes or, what is the same thing, with none, since the notion of the "middle class" can encompass everyone who does not belong purely to Labour or Capital in the classical sense—which is to say virtually everyone. Here, the distinction between the descriptive and the political—perhaps always a spurious distinction—disappears.
- **9** A BAD PENNY FOR YOUR THOUGHTS What is the dialectic? Nobody seems to know for sure, and yet everyone seems to agree that we can leave it behind. We do not mean to insist that everyone should become a dialectician, that the dialectic is synonymous with thought, or that the dialectic is free of coercive teleological power. But to reject the dialectic too soon poses a grave danger. At any rate, the most consequent critics of the dialectic have been dialecticians. As for the rest of us, we must beware lest we find ourselves, in our relation to thought, in the position of Milton's Abdiel, rushing to God with his discovery, only to find "Already known what he for news had thought / to have reported."
- 10 AND THE TRUTH SHALL SET YOU FREE "In any case, the death of metaphysics or the overcoming of philosophy has never been a problem for us: it is just tiresome, idle chatter. Today it is said that systems are bankrupt, but it is only the concept of system that has changed. So long as there is a time and a place for creating concepts, the operation that undertakes this will always be called philosophy, or will be indistinguishable from philosophy, even if it is called something else" (Deleuze and Guattari "Philosophy" 9). This is true, and yet, Deleuze and Guattari's description of this ceaseless activity of invention called philosophy can't help but send the wrong message in an age that has grown accustomed to language of invention—inventing communities, inventing identities, inventing ideas... hey, no problem! But the generation of concepts does not occur willy-nilly. If philosophy's truth originates outside itself (as Lenin taught us), so does it finally reside there. The real truth of all thinking, its effective truth, is of a fundamentally different order than the truth it claims for itself. In Christian allegory, the anagogic Truth that it seeks is only an alibi for its real truth, which is the production of faith and a community of believers. So too with thought. If

Waiting for a Messiah will only waste time. the intellectual wants to change the world, so much the better. But here there are no shortcuts; St. Augustine could not just order his congregation to believe. There are other, perhaps better, ways to change the world. But for the intellectual, however naïve it may seem, the only path is responsibility to Truth.

11 WHAT IS TO BE DONE? This is the question that is not being asked today. Let us call one possible position the politics of immanence. Better yet, let us call it Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. There is to be no revolution, certainly no Party; the world to come will arrive through a plurality of struggles which, taken as a whole, express the desire of the multitude. What desire? The desire that was so effortlessly co-opted during the Cold War by high wages in the first world and (relatively) generous development aid in the third? Or the desire which, after the disintegration of actually existing socialism, exists only to be brutally crushed in the name of the Market? For the secret of the story of the immanent desire of the multitude is that it quietly relied on a prior transcendent revolution. Once the revolution (or at least its vestige) disappears as Capital's threat and horizon, the desire of the multitude has no recourse. And surely we do not need to be reminded that in the wrong circumstances the Utopian desire of the multitude can be channelled towards the most obscene ends. The other position might be called the politics of transcendence; or better yet Slavoj Žižek (Revolution, Welcome) and Alain Badiou. There is to be a revolution, even a revolutionary party, but revolution is fundamentally a decision, a risky experiment never guaranteed to succeed, and therefore an untheorizable particularity. Yes, yes, yes—and a resounding no. Lenin had a theory of revolution, a very precise understanding of the historical conjuncture in which revolution was a possible decision. But our situation, in which no merely national revolution will have much significance (the dilemmas faced by the few national governments genuinely on the Left are evidence enough of this), is immeasurably more complex than Lenin's. We remember Lenin because his revolution succeeded. How many failed? The potential cost of not asking "What is to be done?" is a period of bloody and ineffective rebellions, some of them deeply reactionary. Neither is invoking "Seattle" much help; the protests against our current mode of globalization are a sign and a slogan, but not an organizing principle. And waiting for a Messiah will only waste time. What we face instead is the hard work, the collective work, of theorizing the possibilities that inhere in our current conjuncture and possible ways to proceed. The only thing worse than picking the wrong moment would be missing the right one, and it may come sooner than we think.

12 THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY; OR, THE BABY AND THE **BATHWATER** It has been said that the essence of liberalism is a facile separation of the good from the bad, as though systems-economic, philosophical, whatever—could be simply carved up and the undesirable elements discarded: Competition is good but poverty is bad, so let's just get rid of poverty (while retaining the dynamic that sustains it); Marx is good but revolution is bad, so let's forget about revolution (while educating undergraduates in the poetry of Capital). Totality, incidentally, is the name for the rejection of this tendency, which is as common as ever—it is virtually the editorial policy of the Globe and Mail and New York Times-but a seemingly contrary tendency is equally insidious. This is to conflate a philosophical concept not with its dialectically necessary other but with an ideological cognate. Utopia is a case in point: the construction of Utopias is a transparently ideological operation, but the notion of Utopia—that is, the reservation within thought of an horizon that is not merely the present—is essential to any genuine politics. Indeed, the failure to think Utopia in the strong sense leads directly to Utopia in the first sense—in particular, to the Utopia (never called that) of a market without poverty. This corresponds to Hegel's "bad infinity" of infinite approximation as opposed to the properly infinite judgment. The same goes for Totality—the denigration of which in current thought serves to discredit the dialectic by associating it with the thematics of the eradication of difference, with which it has nothing in common.

13 SAME DIFFERENCE It is becoming clear that the hegemonic concept of Difference is at one and the same time the most universal and (therefore) the most empty concept, virtually synonymous with Being since both name the very medium of experience. In fact it is Difference (as slogan and as concept), not Totality, that reduces the complexity of the world to the monotonous Same, since the truly different (i.e. what refuses to be seen as merely different—what goes, for example, by the ideological names of "totalitarianism," "fundamentalism," "communism," and "tribalism," to name just a few examples) is excluded from the field of difference. The primacy of "difference" in fact outlines an identity—the unacknowledged frame of the monoculture, global capitalism

14 PROJECT(IONS) Writing philosophy or theory in the age of finance capitalism is neither the most self-indulgent (and thus useless) practice possible, nor is it the sole space in which it is possible to fan the flames of aesthetico-utopian imaginings. As Fredric Jameson reminds us, "Capitalism itself has no social goals" (62). It is through theory that such goals can be imagined, both within and outside of literary studies.

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