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## FOR A LEFT WITH NO FUTURE

How deceiving are the contradictions of language! In this land without time the dialect was richer in words with which to measure time than any other language; beyond the motionless and everlasting *crai* [meaning 'tomorrow' but also 'never'] every day in the future had a name of its own . . . The day after tomorrow was *prescrai* and the day after that *pescrille*; then came *pescruflo*, *maruflo*, *marufione*; the seventh day was *maruflicchio*. But these precise terms had an undertone of irony. They were used less often to indicate this or that day than they were said all together in a string, one after another; their very sound was grotesque and they were like a reflection of the futility of trying to make anything clear out of the cloudiness of *crai*.

Carlo Levi, *Christ Stopped at Eboli*<sup>1</sup>

I hope sincerely it will be all the age does not want . . . I have omitted nothing I could think of to obstruct the onward march of the world . . . I have done all I can to impede progress . . . having put my hand to the plough I invariably look back.

Edward Burne-Jones on the Kelmscott *Chaucer*<sup>2</sup>

LEFT INTELLECTUALS, LIKE most intellectuals, are not good at politics; especially if we mean by the latter, as I shall be arguing we should, the everyday detail, drudgery and charm of performance. Intellectuals get the fingering wrong. Up on stage they play too many wrong notes. But one thing they may be good for: sticking to the concert-hall analogy, they are sometimes the bass-ists in the back row whose groaning establishes the key of politics for a moment, and even points to a possible new one. And it can happen, though occasionally, that the survival of a tradition of thought and action

depends on this—on politics being transposed to a new key. This seems to me true of the left in our time.

These notes are addressed essentially (regrettably) to the left in the old capitalist heartland—the left in Europe.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps they will resonate elsewhere. They have nothing to say about capitalism's long-term invulnerability, and pass no judgement—what fool would try to in present circumstances?—on the sureness of its management of its global dependencies, or the effectiveness of its military humanism. The only verdict presupposed in what follows is a negative one on the capacity of the left—the actually existing left, as we used to say—to offer a perspective in which capitalism's failures, and its own, might make sense. By 'perspective' I mean a rhetoric, a tonality, an imagery, an argument, and a temporality.

By 'left' I mean a root-and-branch opposition to capitalism. But such an opposition has nothing to gain, I shall argue, from a series of overweening and fantastical predictions about capitalism's coming to an end. Roots and branches are things in the present. The deeper a political movement's spadework, the more complete its focus on the here and now. No doubt there is an alternative to the present order of things. Yet nothing follows from this—nothing deserving the name political. Left politics is immobilized, it seems to me, at the level of theory and therefore of practice, by the idea that it should spend its time turning over the entrails of the present for signs of catastrophe and salvation. Better an infinite irony at *prescrai* and *maruflicchio*—a peasant irony, with an earned contempt for futurity—than a politics premised, yet again, on some terracotta multitude waiting to march out of the emperor's tomb.



Is this pessimism? Well, yes. But what other tonality seems possible in the face of the past ten years? How are we meant to understand the

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<sup>1</sup> Carlo Levi, *Christ Stopped at Eboli* [1945], London 1982, pp. 200, 178.

<sup>2</sup> Letter from December 1895, quoted in William Peterson, *The Kelmescott Press: A History of William Morris's Typographical Adventure*, Oxford 1991, p. 252.

<sup>3</sup> My thanks to Iain Boal, who asked me for a first version of this essay for his conference, 'The Luddites, without Condescension' at Birkbeck, May 2011; and to audiences there and at subsequent readings of this paper. I draw occasionally on material used previously, and apologize to readers who come across things they already know.

arrival of real ruination in the order of global finance ('This sucker could go down', as George Bush told his cabinet in September 2008) and the almost complete failure of left responses to it to resonate beyond the ranks of the faithful? Or to put the question another way: if the past decade is not proof that there are *no* circumstances capable of reviving the left in its nineteenth and twentieth-century form, then what would proof be like?

It is a bitter moment. Politics, in much of the old previously immovable centre, seems to be taking on a more and more 'total' form—an all-or-nothing character for those living through it—with each successive month. And in reality (as opposed to the fantasy world of Marxist conferences) this is as unnerving for left politics as for any other kind. The left is just as unprepared for it. The silence of the left in Greece, for example—its inability to present a programme outlining an actual, persuasive default economic policy, a year-by-year vision of what would be involved in taking 'the Argentine road'—is indicative. And in no way is this meant as a sneer. When and if a national economy enters into crisis in the present interlocking global order, what has *anyone* to say—in any non-laughable detail—about 'socialism in one country' or even 'partly detached pseudo-nation-state non-finance-capital-driven capitalism'? (Is the left going to join the Eurosceptics on their long march? Or put its faith in the proletariat of Guangdong?)

The question of capitalism—precisely because the system itself is once again posing (agonizing over) the question, and therefore its true enormity emerges from behind the shadow play of parties—has to be bracketed. It cannot be made political. The left should turn its attention to what can.



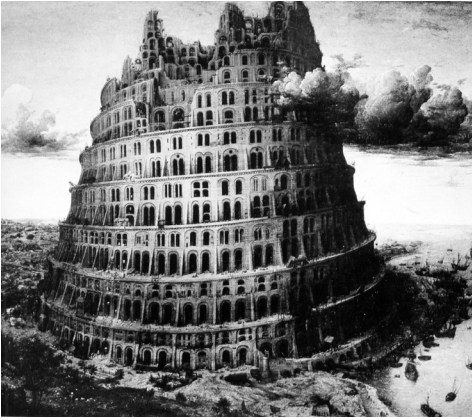
It is difficult to think historically about the present crisis, even in general terms—comparisons with 1929 seem not to help—and therefore to get the measure of its mixture of chaos and *rappel à l'ordre*. Tear gas refreshes the army of bondholders; the Greek for General Strike is on everyone's lips; Goldman Sachs rules the world. Maybe the years since 1989 could be likened to the moment after Waterloo in Europe—the moment of Restoration and Holy Alliance, of apparent world-historical immobility (though vigorous reconstellation of the productive forces) in

the interim between 1815 and 1848. In terms of a thinking of the project of Enlightenment—my subject remains the response of political thought to wholesale change in circumstances—this was a moment between paradigms. The long arc of rational and philosophical critique—the arc from Hobbes to Descartes to Diderot to Jefferson to Kant—had ended. Looking with hindsight, we can see that beneath the polished surface of Restoration the elements of a new vision of history were assembling: peculiar mutations of utilitarianism and political economy, the speculations of Saint-Simon, Fourier's counterfactuals, the intellectual energies of the Young Hegelians. But it was, at the time (in the shadow of Metternich, Ingres, the later Coleridge), extremely difficult to see these elements for what they were, let alone as capable of coalescing into a form of opposition—a fresh conception of what it was that had to be opposed, and an intuition of a new standpoint from which opposition might go forward. This is the way Castlereagh's Europe resembles our own: in its sense that a previous language and set of presuppositions for emancipation have run into the sand, and its realistic uncertainty as to whether the elements of a different language are to be found at all in the general spectacle of frozen politics, ruthless economy and enthusiasm (as always) for the latest dim gadget.



The question for the left at present, in other words, is how *deep* does its reconstruction of the project of Enlightenment have to go? 'How far down?' Some of us think, 'Seven levels of the world'. The book we need to be reading—in preference to *The Coming Insurrection*, I feel—is Christopher Hill's *The Experience of Defeat*. That is: the various unlikely and no doubt dangerous voices I find myself drawing on in these notes—Nietzsche in spite of everything, Bradley on tragedy, Burkert's terrifying *Homo Necans*, Hazlitt and Bruegel at their most implacable, Moses Wall in the darkness of 1659, Benjamin in 1940—come up as resources for the left only at a moment of true historical failure. We read them only when events oblige us to ask ourselves what it was, in our previous stagings of transfiguration, that led to the present debacle.

The word 'left' in my usage refers, of course, to a tradition of politics hardly represented any longer in the governments and oppositions we have. (It seems quaint now to dwell on the kinds of difference within that tradition once pointed to by the prefix 'ultra'. After sundown all cats



Pieter Bruegel the Elder, 'The "Little" Tower of Babel', c. 1565. Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam; Model of Tatlin's Monument to the Third International, c. 1919–20.

look grey.) Left, then, is a term denoting an absence; and this near non-existence ought to be explicit in a new thinking of politics. But it does not follow that the left should go on *exalting* its marginality, in the way it is constantly tempted to—exulting in the glamour of the great refusal, and consigning to outer darkness the rest of an unregenerate world. That way literariness lies. The only left politics worth the name is, as always, the one that looks its insignificance in the face, but whose whole interest is in what it might be that could turn the vestige, slowly or suddenly, into the beginning of a 'movement'. Many and bitter will be the things sacrificed—the big ideas, the revolutionary stylistics—in the process.



This leads me to two kinds of question, which structure the rest of these notes. First, what would it be like for left politics not to look forward—to be truly present-centred, non-prophetic, disenchanted, continually 'mocking its own presage'? Leaving behind, that is, in the whole grain and frame of its self-conception, the last afterthoughts and images of the avant-garde. And a second, connected question: could left politics be transposed into a tragic key? Is a tragic sense of life possible for the left—for a politics that remains recognizably in touch with the tradition of Marx, Raspail, Morris, Luxemburg, Gramsci, Platonov, Sorel,

Pasolini? Isn't that tradition rightly—indelibly—unwilling to dwell on the experience of defeat?



What do I mean, then, by tragedy, or the tragic conception of life? The idea applied to politics is strange, maybe unwelcome, and therefore my treatment of it will be plain; which need not, in this instance, mean banal. Bradley is a tremendous late-Victorian guide; better, I think, because more political, than all the great theorists and classicists who followed; and I choose him partly because he is such a good example of the kind of middle wisdom—the rejected high style—that the left will have to rediscover in its bourgeois past. He addresses his students (colonial servants in the making) mainly about Shakespeare, but almost everything in his general presentation of the subject resonates with politics more widely.

Tragedy, we know, is pessimistic about the human condition. Its subject is suffering and calamity, the constant presence of violence in human affairs, the extraordinary difficulty of reconciling that violence with a rule of law or a pattern of agreed social sanction. It turns on failure and self-misunderstanding, and above all on a fall from a great height—a fall that frightens and awes those who witness it because it seems to speak to a powerlessness in man, and a general subjection to a Force or Totality derived from the very character of things. Tragedy is about greatness come to nothing. But that is why it is not depressing. '[Man] may be wretched and he may be awful', says Bradley, 'but he is not small. His lot may be heart-rending and mysterious, but it is not contemptible'. 'It is necessary that [the tragic project] should have so much of greatness that in its error and fall we may be vividly conscious of the possibilities of human nature'.<sup>4</sup> Those last two words have traditionally made the left wince, and I understand why. But they may be reclaimable: notice that for Bradley nature and possibility go together.



Bradley has a great passage on 'what [he] ventures to describe as the centre of the tragic impression'. I quote it in full:

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<sup>4</sup> A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* [1904], New York 1968, pp. 28–9.

This central feeling is the impression of waste. With Shakespeare, at any rate, the pity and fear which are stirred by the tragic story seem to unite with, and even merge in, a profound sense of sadness and mystery, which is due to this impression of waste . . . We seem to have before us a type of the mystery of the whole world, the tragic fact which extends far beyond the limits of tragedy. Everywhere, from the crushed rocks beneath our feet to the soul of man, we see power, intelligence, life and glory, which astound us and seem to call for our worship. And everywhere we see them perishing, devouring one another and destroying themselves, often with dreadful pain, as though they came into being for no other end. Tragedy is the typical form of this mystery, because that greatness of soul which it exhibits oppressed, conflicting and destroyed, is the highest existence in our view. It forces the mystery upon us, and it makes us realize so vividly the worth of that which is wasted that we cannot possibly seek comfort in the reflection that all is vanity.<sup>5</sup>

One thing to be said in passing about this paragraph—but I mean it as more than an aside—is that it can serve as a model of the *tone* of politics in a tragic key. The tone is grown up. And maybe that is why it inevitably will register as remote, even a trifle outlandish, in a political culture as devoted as ours to a ventriloquism of ‘youth’. The present language of politics, left and right, participates fully in the general infantilization of human needs and purposes that has proved integral to consumer capitalism. (There is a wonderful counter-factual desperation to the phenomenon. For consumer society is, by nature—by reason of its real improvement in ‘living standards’—grey-haired. The older the average age of its population, we might say, the more slavishly is its cultural apparatus geared to the wishes of sixteen-year-olds.) And this too the left must escape from. Gone are the days when ‘infantile disorder’ was a slur—an insult from Lenin, no less—that one part of the left could hope to reclaim and transfigure. A tragic voice is obliged to put adolescence behind it. No more Rimbaud, in other words—no more apodictic inside-out, no more elated denunciation.



Here again is Bradley. ‘The tragic world is a world of action’, he tells us,

and action is the translation of thought into reality. We see men and women confidently attempting it. They strike into the existing order of things in pursuance of their ideas. But what they achieve is not what they intended;

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<sup>5</sup> Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, p. 29.

it is terribly unlike it. They understand nothing, we say to ourselves, of the world on which they operate. They fight blindly in the dark, and the power that works through them makes them the instrument of a design that is not theirs. They act freely, and yet their action binds them hand and foot. And it makes no difference whether they meant well or ill.<sup>6</sup>

Politics in a tragic key, then, will operate always with a sense of the horror and danger built into human affairs. 'And everywhere we see them perishing, devouring one another and destroying themselves'. This is a mystery. But (again quoting Bradley, this time pushing him specifically in our direction) 'tragedy is the . . . form of this mystery [that best allows us to think politically], because the greatness of soul which it exhibits oppressed, conflicting and destroyed, is the highest existence in our view. It forces the mystery upon us'. And it *localizes* the mystery, it stops it from being an immobilizing phantom—it has any one politics (for instance, our own) be carried on in the shadow of a specific political catastrophe.



Our catastrophe—our Thebes—is the seventy years from 1914 to 1989. And of course to say that the central decades of the twentieth century, at least as lived out in Europe and its empires, were a kind of charnel house is to do no more than repeat common wisdom. Anyone casting an eye over a serious historical treatment of the period—the one I never seem to recover from is Mark Mazower's terrible conspectus, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (1998)—is likely to settle for much the same terms. 'The Century of Violence', I remember an old textbook calling it.<sup>7</sup> The time of human smoke.

The political question is this, however. Did the century's horrors have a shape? Did they obey a logic or follow from a central determination—however much the contingencies of history (Hitler's charisma, Lenin's surviving the anarchist's bullet, the psychology of Bomber Harris) intervened? Here is where the tragic perspective helps. It allows us *not*

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<sup>6</sup> Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, p. 32.

<sup>7</sup> The actual title is David Thomson, ed., *The Era of Violence 1898–1945*, Cambridge 1960. The overall editors of *The New Cambridge Modern History*, in which Thomson's volume appeared, quickly ordered a revised edition called *The Shifting Balance of World Forces*.





Collectivization campaign, USSR circa 1930 ('We kolkhozniks are liquidating the kulaks as a class, on the basis of complete collectivization').

*to see* a shape or logic—a development from past to future—to the last hundred years. It opens us, I think rightly, to a vision of the period as catastrophe in the strict sense: unfolding pell-mell from Sarajevo on, certainly until the 1950s (and if we widen our focus to Mao's appalling 'Proletarian Cultural Revolution'—in a sense the last paroxysm of a European fantasy of politics—well on into the 1970s): a false future entwined with a past, both come suddenly from nowhere, overtaking the certainties of Edwardian London and Vienna; a chaos formed from an unstoppable, unmappable criss-cross of forces: the imagined communities of nationalism, the pseudo-religions of class and race, the dream of an ultimate subject of History, the new technologies of mass destruction, the death-throes of the 'white man's burden', the dismal realities of inflation and unemployment, the haphazard (but then accelerating) construction of mass parties, mass entertainments, mass gadgets and accessories, standardized everyday life. The list is familiar. And I suppose that anyone trying to write the history that goes with it is bound to opt, consciously or by default, for one among the various forces at work as predominant. There must be a heart of the matter.



Which leads to the question of Marxism. Marxism, it now comes clear, was most productively a theory—a set of descriptions—of bourgeois society and the way it would come to grief. It had many other aspects and ambitions, but this was the one that ended up least vitiated by chiliarism or scientism, the diseases of the cultural formation Marxism came out of. At its best (in Marx himself, in Lukács during the 1920s, in Gramsci, in Benjamin and Adorno, in Brecht, in Bakhtin, in Attila József, in the Sartre of ‘La conscience de classe chez Flaubert’) Marxism went deeper into the texture of bourgeois beliefs and practices than any other description save the novel. But about bourgeois society’s ending it was notoriously wrong. It believed that the great positivity of the nineteenth-century order would end in revolution—meaning a final acceleration (but also disintegration) of capitalism’s productive powers, the recalibration of economics and politics, and breakthrough to an achieved modernity. This was not to be. Certainly bourgeois society—the cultural world that Malevich and Gramsci took for granted—fell into dissolution. But it was destroyed, so it transpired, not by a fusion and fission of the long-assembled potentials of capitalist industry and the emergence of a transfigured class community, but by the vilest imaginable parody of both. Socialism became National Socialism, Communism became Stalinism, modernity morphed into crisis and crash, new religions of *Volk* and *Gemeinschaft* took advantage of the technics of mass slaughter. Franco, Dzerzhinsky, Earl Haig, Eichmann, Von Braun, Mussolini, Teller and Oppenheimer, Jiang Qing, Kissinger, Pinochet, Pol Pot, Ayman al-Zawahiri. This is the past that our politics has as its matrix. It is our Thebes.

But again, be careful. Tragedy is a mystery not a chamber of horrors. It is ordinary and endemic. Thebes is not something we can put behind us. No one looking in the eyes of the poor peasants in the 1930 photograph, lined up with their rakes and Stalinist catch-phrases, off to bludgeon a few kulaks down by the railway station—looking in the eyes of these dupes and murderers, dogs fighting over a bone, and remembering, perhaps with Platonov’s help, the long desperation the camera does not see—no one who takes a look at the real history of the twentieth century, in other words, can fail to experience the ‘sense of sadness and mystery’ Bradley points to, ‘which is due to the impression of waste . . . And everywhere we see them perishing, devouring one another and destroying themselves . . . as though they came into being for no other end’.



However we may disagree about the detail of the history the kolkhozniks in the photo are living, at least let us do them the justice not to pretend it was *epic*. ‘Historical materialism must renounce the epic element in history. It blasts the epoch [it studies] out of the reified “movement of history”. But it also explodes the epoch’s homogeneity, and intersperses it with ruins—that is, with the present’.<sup>8</sup> The shed on the right in the photo might as well be a *Lager*, and the banner read *Arbeit macht frei*.



‘The world is now very dark and barren; and if a little light should break forth, it would mightily refresh it. But alas: man would be lifted up above himself and distempered by it at present, and afterwards he would die again and become more miserable’: this is the Puritan revolutionary Isaac Penington in 1654, confronting the decline of the Kingdom of Saints.<sup>9</sup> Penington thinks of the situation in terms of the Fall, naturally, but his attitude to humanity can be sustained, and I think ought to be, without the theological background. His speaking to the future remains relevant. And it can coexist fully with the most modest, most moderate, of materialisms—the kind we need. Here for example is Moses Wall, writing to John Milton in 1659—when the days of the English republic were numbered:

You complain of the Non-progressency of the Nation, and of its retrograde motion of late, in liberty and spiritual truths. It is much to be bewailed; but yet let us pity human frailty. When those who made deep protestations of their zeal for our Liberty, being instated in power, shall betray the good thing committed to them, and lead us back to Egypt, and by that force which we gave them to win us Liberty, hold us fast in chains; what can poor people do? You know who they were that watched our Saviour’s Sepulchre to keep him from rising.

(Wall means soldiers. He knows about standing armies.)

Besides, whilst people are not free but straitened in accommodations for life, their Spirits will be dejected and servile: and conducing to [reverse

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<sup>8</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Cambridge, MA 1999, p. 474, Convolute N9a, 6.

<sup>9</sup> Isaac Penington, *Divine Essays*, London 1654, quoted in Christopher Hill, *The Experience of Defeat*, New York 1984, p. 120.

this], there should be an improving of our native commodities, as our Manufactures, our Fishery, our Fens, Forests, and Commons, and our Trade at Sea, &c. which would give the body of the nation a comfortable Subsistence . . . <sup>10</sup>

Still a maximalist programme.



A tragic perspective on politics is inevitably linked, as Wall's letter suggests, to the question of war and its place in the history of the species. Or perhaps we should say: to the interleaved questions of armed conflict, organized annihilation, human psychology and sociality, the city- and then the nation-state, and the particular form in which that something we call 'the economy' came into being. I take seriously the idea of the ancient historians that the key element in the transition to a monetized economy may not have been so much the generalization of trade between cultures (where kinds of barter went on functioning adequately) as the spread of endemic warfare, the rise of large professional armies, and the need for transportable, believable, on-the-spot payment for same.<sup>11</sup> And with money and mass killing came a social imaginary—a picture of human nature—to match.

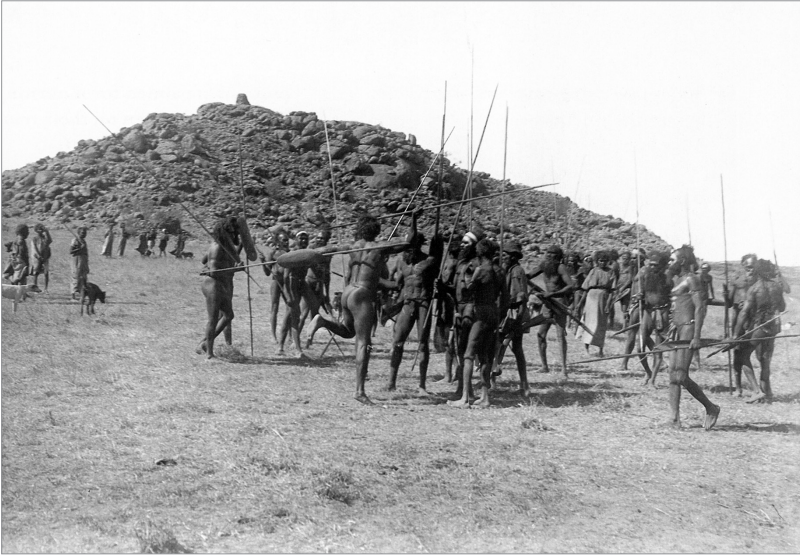
'When, in a battle between cities', says Nietzsche,

the victor, according to the *rights* of war, puts the whole male population to the sword and sells all the women and children into slavery, we see, in the sanctioning of such a right, that the Greek regarded a full release of his hatred as a serious necessity; at such moments pent-up, swollen sensation found relief: the tiger charged out, wanton cruelty flickering in its terrible eyes. Why did the Greek sculptor again and again have to represent war and battles, endlessly repeated, human bodies stretched out, their sinews taut

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<sup>10</sup> Moses Wall, letter to Milton, 25 May 1659, quoted in David Masson, *Life of Milton*, London 1858–80, vol. 5, pp. 602–3; quoted in part and discussed in Hill, *Experience of Defeat*, pp. 53, 280–1, 327–8. Masson's great *Life* is a good companion to Bradley.

<sup>11</sup> On a deeper level, Jean-Pierre Vernant's argument for a connection between the rise of 'de-individualized' hoplite warfare, the generalizing of a culture of competitiveness (*agon*), the move towards a conception of social 'equality' or *isonomia* (for the citizen few), and the drive towards a numerical valuation of more and more aspects of social life, remains fundamental. See Jean-Pierre Vernant, *The Origins of Greek Thought* [1962], Ithaca 1982.



Baldwin Spencer, 'Men quarreling after accusations over disobedience of social laws', Alice Springs, 9 May 1901; in *The Photographs of Baldwin Spencer*, Carlton VIC 2005, plate 36.

with hatred or the arrogance of triumph, the wounded doubled up in pain, the dying in agony? Why did the whole Greek world exult in the pictures of fighting in the *Iliad*? I fear we do not understand these things in enough of a Greek fashion . . . and we would shudder if we did . . .<sup>12</sup>

Nietzsche is vehement; some would say exultant. But much the same point can be made with proper ethnological drabness.

Many prehistoric bone fractures resulted from violence; many forearms appear to have been broken deflecting blows from clubs. Most parrying fractures are on the left forearm held up to block blows to the left side of the body from a right-hander. Parrying fractures were detected on 10 per cent of desert men and 19 per cent of east-coast women; for both groups they were the most common type of upper-limb fractures . . . Fractured skulls were twice to four times as common among women as men. The fractures are typically oval, thumb-sized depressions caused by blows with a blunt instrument. Most are on the left side of the head, suggesting frontal attack

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<sup>12</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, 'Homer's Contest' (unpublished fragment from circa 1872), in Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Carol Diethe, Cambridge 2007, pp. 174–5.

by a right-hander. Most head injuries are thus the result of interpersonal violence, probably inflicted by men on women.<sup>13</sup>



Do not think, by the way, that dwelling in this way on man's ferocity leads necessarily in a Nietzschean direction. Listen to Hazlitt, speaking from the ironic heart of the English radical tradition:

Nature seems (the more we look into it) made up of antipathies: without something to hate, we should lose the very spring of thought and action. Life would turn to a stagnant pool, were it not ruffled by the jarring interests, the unruly passions of men. The white streak in our own fortunes is brightened (or just rendered visible) by making all around it as dark as possible; so the rainbow paints its form upon the cloud. Is it pride? Is it envy? Is it the force of contrast? Is it weakness or malice? But so it is, that there is a secret affinity, a *hankering* after evil in the human mind . . . Protestants and Papists do not now burn one another at the stake: but we subscribe to new editions of *Fox's Book of Martyrs* [a contemporary equivalent might be *The Gulag Archipelago*]; and the secret of the success of the *Scotch Novels* is much the same—they carry us back to the feuds, the heart-burnings, the havoc, the dismay, the wrongs and the revenge of a barbarous age and people—to the rooted prejudices and deadly animosities of sects and parties in politics and religion, and of contending chiefs and clans in war and intrigue. We feel the full force of the spirit of hatred with all of them in turn . . . The wild beast resumes its sway within us, we feel like hunting-animals, and as the hound starts in its sleep and rushes on the chase in fancy, the heart rouses itself in its native lair, and utters a wild cry of joy . . .<sup>14</sup>

This has more to say about Homs and Abbottabad, or Anders Breivik and Geert Wilders, than most things written since.



It is a logical error of the left, this is the point, to assume that a full recognition of the human propensity to violence—to blood-soaked conformity—closes off the idea of a radical reworking of politics. The

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<sup>13</sup> Josephine Flood, *The Original Australians: Story of the Aboriginal People*, Crows Nest NSW 2007, pp. 122–3, following Stephen Webb, *Palaeopathology of Aboriginal Australians: Health and Disease across a Hunter-Gatherer Continent*, Cambridge 1995, pp. 188–216.

<sup>14</sup> William Hazlitt, 'On the Pleasure of Hating' (1823), in Hazlitt, *Selected Writings*, Harmondsworth 1970, pp. 397–8.

question is: what root is it we need to get down to? And even a Hazlitt-type honesty about 'a *hankering* after evil in the human mind' can perfectly well coexist (as it did in Hazlitt's post-Augustan generation) with a 'By our own spirits are we deified'. Human capacities may well be infinite; they have certainly been hardly explored, hardly been given their chance of flowering; but the tragic sense starts from an acknowledgment that the infinity (the unplumbable) is for bad as much as good.

It likewise is wrong to assume that moderacy in politics, if we mean by this a politics of small steps, bleak wisdom, concrete proposals, disdain for grand promises, a sense of the hardness of even the least 'improvement', is not revolutionary—assuming this last word has any descriptive force left. It depends on what the small steps are aimed at changing. It depends on the picture of human possibility in the case. A politics actually directed, step by step, failure by failure, to preventing the tiger from charging out would be the most moderate and revolutionary there has ever been.

Nietzsche again is our (Janus-faced) guide, in a famous glimpse of the future in *The Will to Power*. As a view of what the politics of catastrophe might actually be like it remains unique. He begins with an overall diagnosis that will be familiar to anyone who has read him; but then, less typically, he moves on. The diagnosis first:

To put it briefly . . . What will never again be built any more, *cannot* be built any more, is—a society, in the old sense of that word; to build such, everything is lacking, above all the material. *All of us* [Nietzsche means us 'moderns'] *are no longer material for a society*; this is a truth for which the time has come!<sup>15</sup>

We moderns no longer provide the stuff from which a society might be constructed; and in the sense that Enlightenment was premised on, perhaps we never did. The political unfolding of this reversal of the 'social' will be long and horrific, Nietzsche believes, and his vision of the century to come is characteristically venomous (which does not mean inaccurate): the passage just quoted devolves into a sneer at 'good socialists' and their dream of a free society built from wooden iron—or maybe, Nietzsche prophesies, from just iron on its own. After 'socialism' of this

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<sup>15</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* [1882], trans. Walter Kaufmann, New York 1974, p. 304 (trans. slightly modified). I opt for the *Gay Science's* formulation of a thought repeated constantly, but never so economically, in *The Will to Power*.



sort will come chaos, necessarily, but out of the chaos a new form of politics may still emerge. 'A crisis that . . . purifies, that . . . pushes together related elements to perish of each other, that . . . assigns common tasks to men who have opposite ways of thinking . . . Of course, outside every existing social order'. And the upshot is as follows:

Who will prove to be the strongest in the course of this? The most moderate; those who do not *require* any extreme articles of faith; those who not only concede but actually love a fair amount of contingency and nonsense; those who can think of man with a considerable reduction of his value without becoming small and weak themselves on that account . . . human beings who are sure of their power and who represent, with conscious pride, the strength that humanity has [actually] achieved.<sup>16</sup>

Of course I am not inviting assent to the detail (such as it is) of Nietzsche's post-socialism. His thought on the subject is entangled with a series of naive, not to say nauseating, remarks on 'rank order' as the most precious fruit of the new movement. But as a sketch of what moderation might mean to revolutionaries, his note goes on resonating.



Utopianism, on the other hand—that invention of early modern civil servants—is what the landlords have time for. It is everything Carlo Levi's peasants have learnt to distrust. Bruegel spells this out. His *Cockaigne* is above all a de-sublimation of the idea of Heaven—an un-Divine Comedy, which only fully makes sense in relation to all the other offers of other-worldliness (ordinary and fabulous, instituted and heretical) circulating as Christendom fell apart. What the painting most deeply makes fun of is the religious impulse, or one main form that impulse takes (all the more strongly once the hold of religion on the detail of life is lost): the wish for escape from mortal existence, the dream of immortality, the idea of Time to Come. 'And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away'. What Bruegel says back to the Book of Revelation—and surely his voice was that of peasant culture itself, in one of its ineradicable modes—is that all visions of escape and perfectibility are haunted by the worldly

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<sup>16</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will To Power* [1901], trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, New York 1967, section 55, pp. 38–9 (trans. slightly modified).





Pieter Bruegel the Elder, 'The Land of Cockaigne', 1567. Alte Pinakothek, Munich.

realities they pretend to transfigure. Every Eden is the here and now intensified; immortality is mortality continuing; every vision of bliss is bodily and appetitive, heavy and ordinary and present-centred. The man emerging from the mountain of gruel in the background is the 'modern' personified. He has eaten his way through to the community of saints.

The young man on the ground at right, with the pens at his belt and the bible by his side, we might see as none other than St Thomas More, awake but comatose in his creation. And the lad gone to sleep on top of his flail? Who but Ned Ludd himself?



Utopias reassure modernity as to its infinite potential. But why? It should learn—be taught—to look failure in the face.



About modernity in general—about what it is that has made us moderns no longer stuff for the social—I doubt there is anything new to say. The topic, like the thing itself, is exhausted: not over (never over),



Baldwin Spencer, 'Final burial ceremonies', Tennant Creek, 23 August 1901;  
in *Photographs of Baldwin Spencer*, plate 75.

just tired to death. All that needs restating here—and Baldwin Spencer's great photos of the longest continuing human culture are the proper accompaniment—is that the arrival of societies oriented toward the future, as opposed to a past of origins, heroisms, established ways, is a fact of history not nature, happening in one place and time, with complex, contingent causes. Personal religion (that strange mutation) and double-entry book-keeping being two of them. And by modernity is meant very much more than a set of techniques or a pattern of residence and consumption: the word intends an ethos, a habitus, a way of being a human subject. I go back to the sketch I gave in a previous book:

'Modernity' means contingency. It points to a social order which has turned from the worship of ancestors and past authorities to the pursuit of a projected future—of goods, pleasures, freedoms, forms of control over nature, new worlds of information. The process was accompanied by a terrible emptying and sanitizing of the imagination. For without the anchorage of tradition, without the imagined and vivid intricacies of kinship, without the past living on (most often monstrously) in the detail of everyday life, meaning became a scarce social commodity—if by 'meaning' we have in mind agreed-on and instituted forms of value and understanding, orders

implicit in things, stories and images in which a culture is able to crystallize its sense of the struggle with the realm of necessity and the realities of pain and death. The phrase Max Weber borrowed from Schiller, 'the disenchantment of the world'—gloomy yet in my view exultant, with its promise of a disabused dwelling in the world as it is—still sums up this side of modernity best . . .

'Secularization' is a nice technical word for this blankness. It means specialization and abstraction, as part of the texture of ordinary doings; social life driven by a calculus of large-scale statistical chances, with everyone accepting or resenting a high level of risk; time and space turned into variables in that same calculus, both of them saturated by 'information' and played with endlessly, monotonously, on nets and screens; the de-skilling of everyday life (deference to experts and technicians in more and more of the microstructure of the self); available, invasive, haunting expertise; the chronic revision of everything in the light of 'studies'.<sup>17</sup>

This does no more than block in the outlines: descriptively, there would be many things to add. But from the present point of view only two motifs need developing. First, that the essence of modernity, from the scripture-reading spice-merchant to the Harvard iPod banker sweating in the gym, is a new kind of isolate obedient 'individual' with technical support to match. The printed book, the spiritual exercise, coffee and *Le Figaro*, *Time Out*, Twitter, tobacco (or its renunciation), the heaven of infinite apps. Second, that all this apparatus is a kind or extension of *clockwork*. Individuality is held together by a fiction of full existence to come. *Time Out* is always just round the corner. And while the deepest function of this new chronology is to do work on what used to be called 'subject positions'—keeping the citizen-subject in a state of perpetual anticipation (and thus accepting the pittance of subjectivity actually on offer)—it is at the level of politics that the Great Look Forward is most a given.



What, in the trajectory of Enlightenment—from Hobbes to Nietzsche, say, or De Maistre to Kojève—were the distinctive strengths of the right? A disabused view of human potential—no doubt always on the verge of tipping over into a rehearsal of original sin. And (deriving from the first) an abstention from futurity. Nietzsche as usual is the possible exception

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<sup>17</sup> Clark, *Farewell to an Idea*, New Haven and London 1999, p. 7 (changed slightly).

here, but the interest of his occasional glimpses of a politics to come is, as I have said, precisely their ironic moderation.

Does the right still possess these strengths? I think not. It dare not propose a view of human nature any longer (or if it does, it is merely Augustinian, betraying the legacy of Hume, Vico, even Freud and Heidegger); and slowly, inexorably, it too has given in to the great modern instruction not to be backward-looking. The right has vacated the places, or tonalities, that previously allowed it—to the left's shame—to monopolize the real description and critique of modernity, and find language for the proximity of nothing. The left has no option but to try to take the empty seats.



Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will? Not any more: because optimism is now a political tonality indissociable from the promises of consumption. 'Future' exists only in the stock-exchange plural. Hope is no longer given us for the sake of the hopeless: it has mutated into an endless political and economic Micawberism.



The tragic key makes many things possible and impossible. But perhaps what is central for the left is that tragedy does not expect something—something transfiguring—to turn up. The modern infantilization of politics goes along with, and perhaps depends on, a constant orientation of politics towards the future. Of course the orientation has become weak and formulaic, and the patter of programmers and gene-splicers more inane. Walter Benjamin would recoil in horror at the form his 'weak messianism' actually took once the strong messiahs of the twentieth century went away. The Twitter utopia joins hands with the Tea Party. But the *direction* of politics resists anything the reality of economics—even outright immiseration making a comeback—can throw at it. Politics, in the form we have it, is nothing without a modernity constantly in the offing, at last about to realize itself: it has no other *telos*, no other way to imagine things otherwise. The task of the left is to provide one.



‘Presence of mind as a political category’, says Benjamin,

comes magnificently to life in these words of Turgot: ‘Before we have learned to deal with things in a given state, they have already changed several times. Thus, we always find out too late about what has happened. And therefore it can be said that politics is obliged to foresee the present’.<sup>18</sup>



You may ask me, finally, what is the difference between the kind of anti-utopian politics I am advocating and ‘reformism’ pure and simple. The label does not scare me. The trouble with the great reformists within the Internationals was that they shared with the revolutionaries a belief in the essentially progressive, purgative, reconstructive destiny of the forces of production. They thought the economy had it in it to remake the phenotype. Therefore they thought ‘reform’ was a modest proposal, a pragmatic one. They were wrong. (The essential and noblest form of socialist reformism—Bernstein’s—came juddering to a halt in 1914, as the cycle of twentieth-century atavisms began. As a socialist project, it proved unrevivable.) Reform, it transpires, is a revolutionary demand. To move even the least distance out of the cycle of horror and failure—to leave the kolkhozniks and water-boarders just a little way behind—will entail a piece-by-piece, assumption-by-assumption dismantling of the politics we have.



To end by rephrasing the question posed earlier: the left in the capitalist heartland has still to confront the fact that the astonishing—statistically unprecedented, mind-boggling—great leap forward in all measures of raw social and economic inequality over the past forty years has led most polities, especially lately, to the right. The present form of the politics of *ressentiment*—the egalitarianism of our time—is the Tea Party. In what framework, then, *could* inequality and injustice be made again the object of a politics? This is a question that, seriously posed, brings on vertigo.

Maybe the beginning of an answer is to think of inequality and injustice, as Moses Wall seemed to, as epiphenomena above all of permanent

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<sup>18</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, pp. 477–8, Convolute N12a, 1.

warfare—of the permanent warfare state. And to frame a politics that says, unequivocally: ‘Peace will never happen’. It is not in the nature of (human) things that it should. But that recognition, for the left, only makes it the more essential—the more revolutionary a programme—that the focal point, the always recurring centre of politics, should be to contain the effects and extent of warfare, and to try (the deepest revolutionary demand) to prize aggressivity and territoriality apart from their nation-state form. Piece by piece; against the tide; interminably. In the same spirit as a left which might focus again on the problem of poverty—for of course there *is* no left without such a prime commitment—all the more fiercely for having Jesus’s words about its permanence ringing in their ears.



The question of reformism versus revolution, to take that up again, seems to me to have died the death as a genuine political question, as opposed to a rhetorical flourish. To adapt Randolph Bourne’s great dictum, extremisms—the extremisms we have—are now the health of the state.

The important fact in the core territories of capitalism at present (and this at least applies to Asia and Latin America just as much as Europe) is that no established political party or movement any longer even pretends to offer a programme of ‘reform’. Reforming capitalism is tacitly assumed to be impossible; what politicians agree on instead is revival, resuscitation. Re-regulating the banks, in other words—returning, if we are lucky, to the age of Nixon and Jean Monnet.

It surely goes without saying that a movement of opposition of the kind I have been advocating, the moment it began to register even limited successes, would call down the full crude fury of the state on its head. The boundaries between political organizing and armed resistance would dissolve—not of the left’s choosing, but as a simple matter of self-defence. Imagine if a movement really began to put the question of permanent war economy back on the table—in however limited a way, with however symbolic a set of victories. Be assured that the brutality of the ‘kettle’ would be generalized. The public-order helicopters would be on their way back from Bahrain. Jean Charles de Menezes would have many brothers. But the question that follows seems to me this: what are

the circumstances in which the predictable to-and-fro of state repression and left response could begin, however tentatively, to de-legitimize the state's preponderance of armed force? Not, for sure, when the state can show itself collecting severed and shattered body parts from the wreckage of Tube trains. Extremism, to repeat, is the state's ticket to ride.



There will be no future, I am saying finally, without war, poverty, Malthusian panic, tyranny, cruelty, classes, dead time, and all the ills the flesh is heir to, because *there will be no future*; only a present in which the left (always embattled and marginalized, always—proudly—a thing of the past) struggles to assemble the 'material for a society' Nietzsche thought had vanished from the earth. And this is a recipe for politics, not quietism—a left that can look the world in the face.