

# Hegel after Occupy

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Historical thought can be saved only if it becomes practical thought.<sup>1</sup>

– Guy Debord

Every important action proceeded directly or indirectly according to a decision regarding the revolution: preparing or preventing it, there was no other choice.<sup>2</sup>

– Jean-Claude Milner

I apologize for the title. I know that it seems far too bombastic a way of posing the question I have in mind. But I want to talk about historical agency—historical agency today—and about why discussing and locating this historical agency is so difficult. Hence Hegel and hence Occupy. Hegel and Occupy together, somehow. The idea that there's a direction to world history or dialectics in the chaotic mess in which we now find ourselves. The title smacks of the philosophy of history, or, just as bad perhaps, historical materialism, the idea of a historical subject, a latent transgressive subjectivity embodied by the proletariat. The reader is probably immediately overwhelmed by a sense of fatigue and exhaustion. Or more likely embarrassment. Is he kidding? Occupy as the subject of history? Occupy as Napoleon or the industrial working class? Although many are probably a little tired of the “deconstruction” of the subject (and the historical subject), it isn't the same as engaging in a resurrection of dialectics in which one locates some kind of historical necessity. Even as a parody, this is surely too much. So again, apologies for the title, but I couldn't help myself, and it's important to force the matter, I think, and to try to talk about the relationship between history and agency.

1. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994), 50.

2. Jean-Claude Milner, *Relire la Révolution* (Paris: Verdier, 2016), 13.

The promise of so grand a title will no doubt remain undelivered and a source of embarrassment, but I wanted to make a gesture and to, for one brief moment at least, link history and subject.

Let me start again, this time without an apology, knowing that the reader will “get” the title and see it as tongue-in-cheek. “I get it.” It’s late. The party ended hours ago. But for some reason, we’re still here. There’s nowhere else to go. And there’s nothing new to say. Everything has already been said. Already been done. Is there anything left to say despite it all? Despite all that has already been said? It is indeed late, and the end of history has already been reached. This is not new. We’ve heard it many times before. We have reached the end of history. Hegel, Kojève, Gehlen, and so on. “What is to come, has already occurred.” There’s nothing left to say, or at most, it’s just a question of an epilogue, a PS, the postscript. We are living *after*, living after History. In a kind of vacuum. Is there anything left to say, to say in spite of everything that has already been said? Shall we simply say that everything has already been said? That everything has already played out? That every conceivable gesture has already been made? And has been made indefinitely? It seems pointless to do it again, pointless to say it again, but it is also pointless to stop doing it. There’s no end to the end. Everything has already been said and done, and there’s nothing left. After Occupy, Trump. No Left, nothing. Just rubble. An empty stage.

But hang on. This narrative is no less parodic than the attempt to put some dead Marxist analysis into action, analysing “the era of globalisation” with a view to locating the proletariat. If there’s no Marxist science of politics after Althusser, or revolutionary praxis after Lukács, or whatever kind of revolutionary Marxist theory (and practice) we’re talking about, then the idea of an end—that we are living after the end, living the end—is by now no less parodic, no less of a representation.

“The end of history” obviously carries more weight today. *This* is the end we have embraced and in which most of us are spending our daily lives (in the global West, at least). It comes equipped with lattes, iPhones, and a pair of Vetements jeans. This is the *lingua franca* of both politics and academia, either in the form of some kind of melancholic lament for the past or just the consensual administrative talk of politicians and bureaucrats alike, “where there is what there is.”<sup>3</sup> Simulacrum all over again. We are trapped in representation. Trapped in a Dadaist upheaval in which a complete fool, a joke, a meme becomes president of the US of A. The revolution has finally taken place but in the distorted form of Trump. Hegel’s citizen-soldier-worker, who was engaged in a revolutionary struggle in the service of the absolutely rational state, has been replaced by a racist moron and reality TV star. We seem to be living in a zombie afterlife of modernity in which its forms and institutions still exist but have been completely hollowed out. But I’m getting carried away.

Allow me to go back and start over a third time. I’ve ended up with my title because I’ve been looking at various attempts to think and categorize the present historical situation (theories of postmodernity, globalization, and contemporaneity), the ways in which they implicitly or explicitly conceptualize the relationship between historical present and political action. They all diagnose an end of former historical political projects and analyse how the present tends to engulf the past and the future, annulling the futurity of modernity. They all

3. In a Danish context, the consensualization of politics reached a high point when the Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen, who headed a right-wing government supported by the extreme, racist Danish People’s Party, which participated in the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and facilitated the Muhammed cartoon crisis and used it domestically to gain racist votes, repeatedly stated

“there’s nothing to discuss.” This became a kind of mantra, applied to numerous areas, such as the invasion of Iraq, cuts in welfare, and harder immigration laws. Move along, there’s nothing to discuss. For an analysis of consensual politics, see Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 95–121.

very persuasively describe a breakdown of former historical categories and projects but paradoxically end up understanding this breakdown as the end of politics *tout court*. Analysis and “position” thus merge: the analytic diagnosis of a disavowal of the future (and the past) ends in a disavowal of politics. “We are trapped in the present” strangely comes to resemble an ending of history, whether it’s described as postmodernity, globalization, or contemporaneity. But I’m getting ahead of myself. Let’s backtrack a bit and look at some of the attempts to come up with a description of the present. Globalization will go first, then postmodernism, and finally contemporaneity. Neither Hegel nor Occupy will play much of a role. Instead, think of the title as a means of inquiring into the relationship between history and political or revolutionary subjectivity. I will not engage in a long discussion concerning Occupy and its class composition, showing that it does indeed constitute a new revolutionary perspective: “The most important offensive against the system in the last forty years,” or something like that. Hegel and Occupy are placeholders for the question of history and political agency, a question that frames my discussion of the theories of globalization, postmodernity, and contemporaneity.

### A New World

In his 2004 book *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds*, cultural historian Michael Denning charts the passage from what he terms “the age of three worlds” to “a singular global culture,” from culture to globalization.<sup>4</sup> The book concerns the emergence of the concept of culture as a critical description of mass produced capitalist culture in the period after World War Two. During these decades, a whole generation of Marxist and Marxist-inspired critics, writers, and philosophers affiliated with the New Left sought in different ways to come to terms

4. Michael Denning, *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds* (London: Verso, 2004).

with the dramatic development that was taking place, in which former notions and practices of culture were supplemented and replaced by mass culture in all three parts of the world, the capitalist First World, the Communist Second World and the decolonizing Third World. In all three parts of the world, culture became the battle ground on which a new, mass-produced world was taking shape. Various critics and philosophers tried to analyse the shifts and turns that took place in this transition, with the emergence of a new and relatively autonomous region of social life, somehow erasing or rendering invisible the divisions in capitalist society, yet also appearing to promise an exit from this very society. Denning's mentors, Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall, opted for "culture" as the critical description of this process; Roland Barthes called it mythology and later, communication; and Guy Debord sought to uphold a more Marxist interpretation by speaking of the spectacle-commodity economy and the recuperation of once-revolutionary forms. Yet all these critics and theorists, in common with their peers on the other side of the Iron Curtain and in the decolonizing so-called Third World, registered the uneven emergence of a new reality of mass commodity culture that somehow "seemed to occupy an imaginative space equal to the state and the market."<sup>5</sup> As Denning puts it, in the period after 1945, "everyone discovered that culture had been mass produced like Ford's cars," everyone realized that "the masses had culture and culture had a mass."<sup>6</sup>

Denning's riff on Raymond Williams's classic analysis of the displacement of two previous notions of culture — a conservative notion centred on high culture and an anthropological one centred on a not-yet-mass-produced popular culture "at home" as well as the "savage" cultures of the so-called "primitive people" in the colonies — is a retrospective analysis.<sup>7</sup> The texts

5. *Ibid.*, 4.

6. *Ibid.*, 1.

7. See Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1982).

in the book were written during the 1990s and early 2000s, at a time when another shift was taking place, replacing culture with globalization. It was clear to Denning in retrospect that culture had acquired a particular meaning in the post-war period, had been the prism through which Marxist critics and writers had sought to analyse the accelerated coming into being of a new world that was divided in three but was united in feeling the impact of capitalist mass culture. This period, Denning writes in the introduction, is coming to a close. We are no longer living in “the age of three worlds,” and “culture” is no longer the terrain on which the critical analysis of capitalist society is occurring. Or at least not in the same way as before, Denning argues, noting the crisis of cultural studies. The object of cultural studies has changed or is in the process of changing. Although it’s unclear what, precisely, is going on, some kind of shift is taking place. Of this, Denning is certain. Culture, it seems, has been replaced by globalization, he wrote. If culture became mass-produced after 1945, it became global after 1989. Global primarily meaning North American. Hollywood, the USA’s culture industry, and all that. In other words, not a good thing. For Denning, this shift marks the end of something (good).

Denning’s description of the emergence of culture (as capitalist mass culture) and the related coming into being of cultural studies and all the other Marxist or Marxist-derived “cultural” analyses of post-World War Two capitalist society is thus made possible by the dismantling of the very paradigm he is describing. This is “the present crisis,” as Denning puts it, with a reference to Perry Anderson, seeking to account for “the origin of the present crisis” through a reading of the transition from “three worlds” to “globalization.”<sup>8</sup> Culture is a global culture now or is simply “globalization.” We’ve moved from the plurality of three worlds to the singularity of one global

8. See Perry Anderson, “Origins of the Present Crisis,” *New Left Review*,

no. 23 (1964): 26–53.

culture. 1989 is the historical turning point, Denning notes, marking the end of the Cold War and thus the disappearance of a political ideology that offered competition to the West's combination of market capitalism and parliamentary democracy. We're entering a new political situation, Denning writes: "The age of three worlds is over."<sup>9</sup>

What "globalization" means is less clear. The retrospective analysis of the age of three worlds and of culture can be undertaken with the certainty of historical distance, but this is not the case with globalization, as Denning writes. As for his analysis of the current era of global culture, Denning poses more questions than he answers. He is dismissive of the various "end of history" interpretations that swept the world in the 1990s and reads "globalisation as the name of the end, not of history, but of the historical moment of the age of three worlds."<sup>10</sup> His take is thus primarily retrospective and historical. Like his mentor Stuart Hall, Denning often looks at the development of cultural studies from the perspective of the present, from the perspective of an ongoing transformation in which previous modes of analysis and former alliances are breaking apart and must be replaced by something different. The book is thus also an attempt to develop a new kind of cultural analysis more in tune with globalization and culture's emergent globality by looking back upon the "culturalization" of society in a previous period. This back and forth enables Denning to focus on both continuities and discontinuities across 1989, and he understands the shift as one in which culture is replaced by globalization (culture, followed by globalization) and one in which capitalist mass culture becomes global (the coming into being of the "American" world). This duality also accounts for the difficulty of deciding whether culture has in fact been replaced as the primary societal battleground or whether it has simply taken on a new form, whether or not the transi-

9. *Ibid.*, 10.

10. *Ibid.*, 11.

tion from culture to globalization constitutes a radical break. Denning's take on globalization is a cultural studies-inflected Western Marxist one, focusing on the spread of what he terms "the culture of transnational corporations," exemplified by companies such as Nike, which creates a global market in cultural commodities. As Denning writes, in the age of three worlds, the new "American" mass culture still circulated largely within national cultures. With globalization, a shift occurs from these national cultures to a genuinely global culture. This is largely a negative development for Denning, with globalization meaning homogenization and further commodification of the last vestiges of human life. The homogenization of global culture in which the grand four-letter companies of globalization — Nike, Coca-Cola, Sony, etc.— supply the consumer with an endless quantity of commodity objects is, however, challenged by an internationalist left-wing migrant culture personified by Bob Marley, writes Denning, somewhat optimistically, hoping against hope. Globalization is thus a competition between two global cultures: on the one hand, the culture of transnational corporations characterized by a certain commodity aesthetics and, on the other hand, an international migrant aesthetics that at least virtually constitutes a new planetary "socialist realism." Even globalization thus possesses a kind of "profane creativity," and Denning is advancing the historical "origin" of this counter-globalization, showing how writers and artists constitute a sort of "novelists" international [that] spans the globe and the century."<sup>11</sup> Instead of giving up on globalization, Denning is thus seeking to bring forth an "older" Left globalism in which culture and artistic creation are embedded in a broader social movement that he sees as going from the Chartist movement in the mid-19th century to the alter-globalization movement that grappled with new emergency legislation after 9/11, when he was completing his book.

11. *Ibid.*, 53. "Profane creativity" is the term used by another CCS alumni, Paul Willis in his study of bikers and

hippies in *Profane Culture* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978).

Denning is drawing up a balance sheet for the latter half of the twentieth century. Unlike Eric Hobsbawm, who saw only disintegration in globalization in the final chapter of *The Age of Extremes* and to whom Denning is clearly indebted in his analysis of the ongoing shift, Denning finds reasons for optimism.<sup>12</sup> He has to work for it, of course, but globalization is not just a process of loss; it is also a process of possibility, a new world in the making.

Things move fast. Denning's text is not particularly old in historical terms, yet its attempt to put a positive spin on globalization already seems somewhat antiquated. Denning does the same with democracy in another of the book's chapters: starting out by dismissing the term, "it's just another name for invasions and Coca Cola, war and capitalism," then trying to resuscitate the term by highlighting another, truer democracy—democracy as social movement, Marx, and the Chartists. Today, after Trump, that move comes off as pretty damn optimistic.<sup>13</sup>

### Will the Real Globalization Please Stand Up?

With respect to its attempt to put a positive spin on globalization, Denning's book belongs to the globalization-affirmative 1990s. This was a time when it remained possible to envision either; a Clintonite American-led globalization, in which globalization would harmonize behavior and customs while ushering in prosperity, development, and democracy; or to foresee a counter-globalization like that imagined by Hardt and Negri, in which the development of capitalist production was somehow rendering itself obsolete from within, freeing the multitude from capital's dialectic mediation or using existing institutions such as

12. Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914–1991* (London: Michael Joseph, 1994).

13. Trump is not an external threat to democracy but is himself symptomatic of the inherent authoritarian dimension of

nation-state democracy and a crisis-ridden capitalism's attempt to save itself by making concessions to that portion of USA's capital that has lost out on globalization. See Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen, *Trump's Counter-Revolution* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2018).

the EU to enact a global expansion of the social-democratic welfare state.<sup>14</sup> Today, globalization seems somewhat dated as a concept and not particularly useful as a description of the present. This isn't to say that we now possess better concepts. It's simply to say that 9/11, the financial crisis, and the emergence of both a new global but fragmented protest movement and the rise of authoritarian nationalism have given globalization a somewhat different nuance. There is little hope for a happy resolution, whether in the guise of liberal market democracy or in the form of a culturalist alter-globalization as envisioned by Denning. Crisis now seems to be the order of the day in a completely different way than in the 1990s.

How different things looked just twenty-five years ago. During the 1990s, globalization seemed to many people to capture the essence of the age. It was the intellectual and cultural motif of the time. Observing the spread of economic liberalization, the rise of new information and communication technologies, the increased salience of international organizations, and the resurgence of a cosmopolitan human rights agenda, it was not politicians and journalists but also a whole army of academics who believed that the world was opening up to a new form of interconnectedness, remaking international politics, establishing a multilateral system of global governance. "Global governance" and "multilateralism" were the words of the day, yet globalization was understood not only as an institutional change in international politics but also as a much more radical transformation of human existence. Globalization was nothing less than a spatiotemporal transformation of human existence. The international system was not just being replaced

14. A typical pro-globalization statement from Clinton: "Today we must embrace the inexorable logic of globalization — that everything, from the strength of our economy to the safety of our cities, to the health of our people, depends on events not only within our borders, but half a world away. We must see the opportunities and the dangers of the

interdependent world in which we are clearly fated to live." William Jefferson Clinton, "Remarks by the President on Foreign Policy," February 26, 1999, <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/clintfips.htm>. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

by a post-Westphalian global future; human life itself was changing.<sup>15</sup>

In the rosy days of globalization, the leading role was played not by the creation of a global or transnational labor market and the introduction of millions of Southeast Asian workers into the world market but by the rise of new patterns of deterritorialized social relations, enabled by new means of communication. The sudden implosion of Cold War divisions and the disappearance of fifty years of military and ideological opposition seemed to usher in a new united world, of transitional integration to form a single social space, the globe.<sup>16</sup>

Of course, globalization discourse had been subjected to critique prior to the historical development and the financial crisis finally eroded even the most die-hard globalizers' belief in one prosperous and united globe.<sup>17</sup> Justin Rosenberg dismantled what he calls globalization theory in his 2000 book *The Follies of Globalisation Theory*, which convincingly shows that globalization theorists had misread the conjuncture of the 1990s, mistaken it for a new era in which the nation-state was being replaced by a borderless world that would soon come together in cosmopolitan peace.<sup>18</sup> According to Rosenberg,

15. There was no shortage of optimistic predictions at the time. David Held and Anthony McGrew, for instance, predict, in a tellingly titled article "The End of the Old Order?" that "geo-political forces will come to be socialized into democratic agencies and practice through a process of progressive, incremental change." David Held and Anthony McGrew, "The End of the Old Order? Globalization and the Prospects for World Order," *Review of International Studies* 24, no. 5 (1998): 242.

16. In 1999, Anthony Giddens is able to write that "following the dissolving of the Cold War, most nations no longer have enemies." Anthony Giddens, *Runaway World: How Globalization is Reshaping Our World* (London: Profile Books, 1999), 18.

17. A useful evaluation of globalization is provided by the Center for Economic and Policy Research's 2001 report *The Scoreboard on Globalization 1980–2000: Twenty Years of Diminished Progress* (Washington: Center for Economic and Policy Research, 2001), 2. It concludes: "For economic growth and almost all of the other indicators [growth of income per person, life expectancy, mortality among infants, children and adults, literacy, and education], the last 20 years have shown a very clear decline in progress as compared with the previous two decades."

18. Justin Rosenberg, *The Follies of Globalisation Theory: Polemical Essays* (London: Verso, 2000). See also Rosenberg's follow-up essay, "Globalization Theory: A Post Mortem," *International Politics*, no. 42 (2005): 2–74.

globalization was what had to be explained; it was not the explanation itself. Globalization was an uncritical affirmation of significant changes taking place in the 1990s. New communication technologies were indeed changing national public spheres, but not in the way in which globalization theorists argued. They celebrated the new interconnectedness but did not analyse it; instead they took it at face value as the coming into being of a new world. People like Giddens were so infatuated by globalization and the fall of the Wall that they believed they were entering a new period in human history and not just living through a particular conjuncture. They were thus themselves part of the phenomenon and, instead of offering analysis, they uncritically affirmed a further opening up of the world market and the integration of the former Soviet bloc into this world.

As Rosenberg shows, numerous important left-wing social theorists — including Zygmunt Bauman, Manuel Castells, Anthony Giddens, and David Held — argued that we were entering a new phase of human development in which a new form of human society was emerging. This, they argued, required nothing less than a new theory of human society. Looking back on human history from the perspective of globalization, it was evident that history needed to be rewritten on the basis of the newfound centrality of spatial distance and speed of communication.<sup>19</sup> Globalization was such a dramatic transformation that it was necessary to fundamentally rethink — and not just update — social theory. Globalization was a paradigm shift.

The euphoria did not last long. While some desperately sought to uphold the picture of globalization as a post-Westphalian system of global integration even after 9/11 and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the financial crisis of 2007–2008, which quickly became a worldwide economic crisis,

19. Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization: The Human Consequences* (Cambridge:

Polity, 1998), 15.

effectively ended the globalization hype. The emergency laws introduced after 9/11 pulled the rug out from under cosmopolitan talk of a new post-Cold War order in which international organizations and institutions (UN, International Criminal Court, NATO, EU, etc.) would supersede traditional national sovereignty. In the 1990s, it was still possible to present various protests—from the Zapatista uprising in Mexico in 1994 to food riots in Venezuela to the summit protests in the late 1990s—as a kind of optimistic counter-globalization movement, yet this was quickly replaced by a more sombre discourse, in which it was less a question of building a new world than of just surviving or rescuing that which had not already been smashed by a forty-year neoliberal crash landing. The mood shifted from “another world is possible” to “the children of chaos” and “times of riots.”<sup>20</sup>

With the onset of the financial crisis, it was not 1989 and the fall of the Berlin Wall that stood out as the important historical date but instead 1971, when Nixon dissolved the Bretton Woods system of fixed exchange rates, ushering in a new era of free-floating currencies and international capital flows. The period since 1971 has been “one long slow crash landing,” in the words of Loren Goldner, in which capital has been keeping up appearances in North America, Western Europe, and East Asia while engaging in outright slaughter in the rest of the world.<sup>21</sup> It was only thanks to an enormous amount of credit and debt that North America and Western Europe were able to maintain a semblance of normality. Beneath the talk of globalization, the booming post-war

20. “Another world is possible” was the slogan of the alter-globalization movement. “Children of chaos” is the title of French anthropologist and riot researcher Alain Bertho’s 2016 book: *Les enfants du chaos* (Paris: La découverte, 2016). “Times of riots” is the catchy English subtitle of Badiou’s *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings*,

trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2012).

21. Loren Goldner, “The Historical Moment That Produced Us: Global Revolution or Recomposition of Capital,” *Insurgent Notes: Journal of Communist Theory and Practice*, no. 1 (2010), [http://insurgentnotes.com/2010/06/historical\\_\\_moment/](http://insurgentnotes.com/2010/06/historical__moment/).

economy was coming apart at the seams, driving down real wages and leaving the welfare state without support. Since the early 1970s, recessions have set in every five to ten years. In 1973–1975, 1980–1982, 1990–1991, 2001–2002, and 2007–, whole regions in the USA and Western Europe have been deindustrialized and simply abandoned by capital (and the state). In Eastern Europe and Russia, society has been split in two since 1989, with enclaves of yuppiedom (based on natural resources and real estate speculation) surrounded by misery and decline. The development in Africa, Latin America, the non-oil Middle East, and the former Soviet Central Asian countries has been one of almost utter decay. Hundreds of millions of peasant-subsistence economies have lost their means of existence, and more than one billion people seek to survive in the shadow economies of slum cities.<sup>22</sup> So-called failed states dot the map. China stands out as the positive figure in the story, with 400 million new members of its middle class, but even there, we must take into account the 900 million peasants who have been left behind by the capitalist modernization that has swept parts of the country since the late 1970s, when the economy opened to the world market.

It is difficult to argue that globalization has ever been something positive. Factor in environmental destruction, and we have an image of utter desolation. It almost beggars belief that so many people bought into the globalization hype for so long, yet this was largely the case until 2008. Although the alter-globalization movement voiced criticism of what it called “neoliberalism” in the mid- to late 1990s, it was first with the financial crisis that the ongoing and highly uneven capitalist development truly became visible. And even the alter-globalization movement, at least its Western parts, still subscribed to a positive vision of globalization.

22. See Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso, 2006); Serge Latouche, *In the Wake of the Affluent Society:*

*An Exploration of Post-Development*, trans. Martin O'Connor and Rosemary Arnoux (London: Zed Books, 1993).

From the early 1980s onwards, when the economic transformation became a political program headed by Thatcher and Reagan, what was going on in the “economy” remained somehow invisible or less important than the technological and geopolitical developments. As Moishe Postone puts it, it was almost as though the dominant social theories of the 1980s and 1990s (such as post-structuralism and related post-Marxist and post-foundationalist theories, like those of Latour) simply stopped looking at the economy and preferred to question the existence of such a sphere by focusing on details that did not add up to any kind of social totality, leaving the theorist unwilling or unable to account for large-scale historical changes.<sup>23</sup>

Denning might be on the right track when he considers just ditching the term globalization altogether. Of course, he doesn't do so and instead opts for the “progressive” *longue durée* version of globalization, seeking to trace the origins of a different kind of globalization, mapping the continuities between earlier international left-wing projects in the post-World War Two period and the Bob Marley globalization that he argues challenge the American-led globalization in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Denning is thus highly critical of both the academic globalization theory and the political discourse of globalization that had such an impact in the 1990s. He is trying to show how the culture of the three worlds remains virtually present in globalization, creating a differentiated globalization. Culture is present as a different horizon or perspective, haunting the Clintonite rhetoric of prosperity and freedom. But this too might be a product of Denning's internalized globalization optimism: He is not mourning a loss but seeking to make visible the continued presence of a different perspective. Today, it is perhaps this very optimism — this belief in a different perspective, another world — that makes Denning's analysis

23. Moishe Postone, “History and Helplessness: Mass Mobilization and

Contemporary Forms of Anticapitalism,” *Public Culture* 18, no. 1 (2006): 93–110.

look dated. Like Hardt and Negri, Denning is looking ahead, sketching out a competing globalization to that of Bill Clinton.

Already by the time Denning's book was published, globalization had taken on a new shape. Globalization had become "war on terror," the new-old combination of gunboat diplomacy abroad and emergency laws at home.<sup>24</sup> And then, less than five years after the invasion of Iraq, globalization became the worst economic crisis since the 1930s. In retrospect, the brief adventure of globalization became submerged within a forty-year-long neoliberal offensive.<sup>25</sup>

### The Postmodern Impasse

If globalization is clearly not an inadequate description of the present historical moment — and probably never was, *pace* Denning's attempt to put it to different use, *contra* Clinton and academic fellow travellers like Giddens — the question is, what other options do we have at our disposal? Globalization was itself a partial continuation and displacement of the terms "postmodernity" and "postmodernism," as proposed by Jean-François Lyotard and Fredric Jameson in 1979 and 1984 respectively.<sup>26</sup> Postmodernity has felt slightly awkward for quite some time: As T.J. Clark put it in 2000, in a response to Perry Anderson and Fredric Jameson, the "Does postmodernism deserve the name?" debate appears sterile,

24. See Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen, "The Control Society and Gunboat Diplomacy," *Left Curve*, no. 37 (2013): 4–9.

25. Michael Denning has continued to work on globalization focusing on what he terms "wageless lives," the unemployed workers who are forced to earn a living but unable to get jobs. Already in *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds*, he argued that cultural studies must develop a "labour theory of culture," but in this book at least, the concept remains somewhat undertheorized. In his 2010 article the cultural aspect is toned down in favor of a more sociological approach.

Michael Denning, "Wageless Life," *New Left Review*, no. 66 (2010): 79–97.

26. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984); Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review*, no. 146 (1984): 53–92. Jameson later rewrote the text and included it in the book of the same title that came out in 1991. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

suggesting that we may have been asking the wrong question all along. As such, it might be relevant to briefly restage the terms of the analysis that Lyotard and Jameson proposed over thirty-five years ago, before the term was reduced to epistemological relativism or a particularly care-free artistic approach to historical genres and forms.<sup>27</sup>

The term postmodernism—including the terms postmodern and postmodernity—had amazing success and quickly became part of a broader public culture that began speaking of itself as postmodern. Postmodernism won, yet this was, in a sense, the source of its defeat. As Hal Foster, who described himself as a postmodernist intent on challenging what he termed “institutional modernism” (i.e. the remnants of Greenbergian modernism) as well as “right-wing postmodernism” (i.e. the cultural New Right in the USA in the 1980s) puts it, “We did not lose. In a sense a worse thing happened: treated as a fashion, postmodernism became *démodé*.”<sup>28</sup> This emptied the concept of analytic content, and postmodernism was reduced to epistemological relativism and textual play. Postmodernism was not only a particular artistic style characterized by self-referentiality and appropriation but became a lifestyle. Irony 2.0. In many respects, postmodernity thus suffered the same fate as globalization did a little later, having a hugely impressive rise and an even quicker fall. As early as the mid-1990s, postmodernity and postmodernism seemed to be truly odd descriptions, inadequate and devoid of critical content. By the late 1990s, nearly everybody seemed somewhat ashamed of all the fuss the discussion had once aroused.

But I'm getting ahead of myself again. From the perspective of 2017, I feel the terms actually remain relevant as attempts to describe the present era. Let's go back and revisit the terms of the debate.

27. T. J. Clark, “Origins of the Present Crisis,” *New Left Review*, no. 2 (2000): 85.

28. Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 206.

As is well known, Lyotard was asked by the Québécois Conseil des universités to write a report on “the problem of knowledge in the most developed industrial societies” but ended up analysing “the vaster political problem of the legitimation of a whole social order,” as Jameson puts it in his introduction to the English translation of *The Postmodern Condition*.<sup>29</sup> Lyotard’s apparently inconspicuous report was in fact explosive, proposing nothing less than the supersession of the basic ideas of modern society, both a structural-functionalist view of society as a whole and the Marxist notion of class struggle. As Lyotard unobtrusively phrases it: “The economic ‘redeployment’ in the current phase of capitalism, aided by a shift in techniques and technology, goes hand in hand with a change in the function of the State: the image of society this syndrome suggests necessitates a serious revision of the alternate approaches considered.”<sup>30</sup> Postmodern knowledge is somehow rendering obsolete the Marxist analysis of the capitalist mode of production; the grand contradiction has simply disappeared. Neither functionalist, positivist, nor Marxist analyses could account for these ongoing changes, Lyotard argues. Society is becoming an information society, and this development is undermining the modern notion of society, both society as a totality and as an opposition between classes or capital and labor. It is thus necessary to bid farewell to “the grand narratives” in favor of a plurality of small narratives. Lyotard does just this, without any anxiety or sense of loss.

For Lyotard himself, the abandonment of metanarratives was part of a radical self-critique that had been going on for almost ten years. He had been a member of *Socialisme ou barbarie*, the council communist group inspired by Rosa Luxemburg, and had offered the most significant opposition to

29. Fredric Jameson, “Foreword,” in Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, viii.

30. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 14.

Sartre's pro-Stalinist existentialism in 1950s French Marxism, writing reports on the situation in Algeria in the late 1950s and early 1960s. He had intimate knowledge of the Marxism he was leaving behind, knew how to undertake an analysis of the historical situation with a view to intervening in it to end exploitation. He had already launched a fierce attack on Marx and Marxism in his 1974 book *Libidinal Economies*, in which he turned Marx's theory of alienation and the idea of a revolutionary abolition of capitalism upside down, arguing that the workers in fact desired the destructive workings of capitalism: "Why," he asked his former allies (and himself), "do you incline toward the proletariat? In commiseration for what? I realize that a proletarian would hate you, you have no hatred because, you are bourgeois, privileged smooth-skinned types, but also because you dare not say the only important thing there is to say, that one can enjoy swallowing the shit of capital."<sup>31</sup> In his report to the Québécois Conseil des universités, he left behind this supercharged sneering in favor of a more sociological analysis of the coming into being of a new society. In 1979, he indulged in less self-critique and Marxist self-flagellation, opting for a seemingly neutral description of post-industrial society.

Lyotard would immediately abandon the historical and sociological analysis of a historical shift, in which the postmodern condition is an epochal description of the period after World War Two, in favor of a notion of postmodernity as a specific modality that one can find, for instance, in the experiments of the artistic avant-garde. Postmodernity is not a new epoch but a certain openness to unique happenings and instabilities, the putting forward "of the unrepresentable in presentation itself."<sup>32</sup> Periodization explodes, and

31. Lyotard, *Libidinal Economies*, trans. Ian Hamilton Grant (London: The Athlone Press, 1993), 115–116.

32. Lyotard, "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?," trans. Régis Durand, in Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 81.

postmodernity somehow becomes a cyclical re-beginning of modernism, a postmodernity before modernity.<sup>33</sup>

Jameson wrote the introduction to the English translation of Lyotard's report and followed it up with a long list of texts that were compiled in 1991 and later supplemented with a follow-up volume in 1998.<sup>34</sup> By this point, the notion of postmodernity had already fallen out of favor and been superseded by globalization. Unlike Lyotard, Jameson was not ready to give up on Marxist periodization and somehow continued the analysis that the French philosopher had quickly abandoned. The title of Jameson's text, "Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," says it all. He is trying to analyse a new social formation within the framework of historical materialism, combining Ernst Mandel's analysis of *late capitalism* with Lyotard's description of postmodernity in an analysis of the new cultural forms of the new society. He goes about this by updating and rethinking the Marxist base/superstructure model at a moment when the model seemed simultaneously obsolete and absolutely necessary. As is clear from his foreword to the translation of Lyotard's book, Jameson agrees with Lyotard that a shift has occurred: Capitalism has entered a new phase of accumulation, in which culture and economy are being integrated in new ways. But at the same time, Jameson seeks to uphold a Marxist analysis of this development, a development that — according to Lyotard's analysis in the report — rendered Marxism outdated. This was a complicated position of enunciation. Postmodernity is the coming into being of a new social formation in which modernity's master narratives collapse but in which Marxism somehow survives, enabling Jameson's diagnosis of postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism. Jameson is trying to continue historical analysis

33. *Ibid.*, 79.

34. Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983–1998* (London: Verso, 1998).

after the end of historical analysis. Lyotard finds it easy to ditch Marxism in favor of apathy as a move away from established political structures, but Jameson never goes down this route, preferring instead to continue analysing the ongoing political-economic and cultural shift within the framework of a Marxist periodization adopted from Mandel and Adorno.

One of the challenges is, of course — as visible in the title of Jameson's text, in which political-economic and cultural periodization seems to be out of joint — that Jameson is merging two readymade analyses of the development of capitalism: on the one hand, Mandel's and Adorno's description of late capitalism and, on the other hand, Lyotard's description of post-industrial society. Jameson looks at different cultural objects that he argues are characterized by a peculiar emptiness or lack of historical depth. This is what he terms "postmodernism" (rather than "postmodernity"). Jameson's operation is an intricate one. "Late" sits uncomfortably with "post," as if the cultural sphere were moving out ahead of the political-economic sphere. It is not late modernist but postmodernism. The problem is that Jameson is trying to adapt a readymade concept, rethinking the relationship between culture and economy. He can't abandon the Marxist analysis of the capitalist mode of production, as Lyotard does, yet he nevertheless wishes to account for the new culture that is characterized by a strange suspension of the central categories of modernist art and culture, especially newness and subversion. The new culture is somehow strangely relieved of these demands. Echoing Lyotard's "end of the grand narratives" (and foreshadowing Fukuyama's "End of History"), Jameson analyses this development as the emergence of an "inverted millenarianism," "in which premonitions of the future, catastrophic or redemptive, have been replaced by senses of the end of this or that (the end of ideology, art, or social class; 'the crisis' of Leninism, social democracy, or the welfare state, etc., etc.)." Jameson

continues: "Taken together, all of these perhaps constitute what is increasingly called postmodernism."<sup>35</sup>

The Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles by John Portman came to exemplify the new phenomenon. The hotel is what Jameson calls "a postmodern hyperspace" in which time is obliterated and returns as endlessly expansive but mysterious spatial arrangements. The hotel disorients the human subject, who is unable to organize the past and future into coherent experience. The hotel produces a schism between body and environment: The human subject is decentred and unable to organize its surroundings perceptually and unable cognitively to map its position in the world, effectively annulling agency and the capacity to act politically. The hotel constitutes a world in itself and aims to replace the city, Jameson writes. This confusing architecture or architecture turned world, in which it is no longer possible to organize the past and future into coherent experience, is the world of postmodernism for Jameson. Postmodernism is itself, of course, the symbol of late capitalism's indistinctness and the difficulty of representing "the great global multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects."<sup>36</sup> Temporality has been short circuited by the unity of the global economic regime and the instantaneity of informatics in "a culture increasingly dominated by space and spatial logic," making it impossible to map "the truth of postmodernism, that is, to say, to its fundamental object — the world of multinational capital."<sup>37</sup>

Whereas Lyotard writes about knowledge, Jameson focuses on culture, especially architecture, using it as an unpleasant mirror for the new society, a new era of capitalist development. The picture isn't a pretty one. Jameson sees bewilderment and exhaustion. Postmodernism is the

35. Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 1.

36. *Ibid.*, 44.

37. *Ibid.*, 209, 232.

disappearance of historical depth, yet Jameson nonetheless seeks to account for the crisis in historical terms, periodizing even when it seems impossible.

Jameson has clung to “postmodernism” despite its near-complete disappearance as a critical analysis of the present. Just recently, in 2015, he restates his original analysis in the essay “The Aesthetics of Singularity,” once again published in *New Left Review*.<sup>38</sup> “Modernity, in the sense of modernisation as progress, or telos, was now definitively over; and what I tried to do [...] was to explore the shape of the new historical period we had begun to enter around 1980,” Jameson writes.<sup>39</sup> He thus maintains his analysis of postmodernism as a new stage of modern culture, related to different modes of capitalist production, but admits to having chosen the wrong term back in the early and mid-1980s. “Postmodernism” should have been “postmodernity” as a description of the new historical period “in which all kinds of things, from economics to politics, from the arts to technology, from daily life to international relations, had changed for good.”<sup>40</sup> Postmodernism, Jameson acknowledges, was wrong because it suggested a change in style, postmodernism as a particular new artistic style. But that was never, in fact, Jameson’s argument; he had been following Lyotard’s 1979 report in arguing that a transition had occurred, had sought to analyse a new culture and a new era. It was not just a question of stylistic change. It was society as a whole that had changed: economics, politics, art, etc.

In retrospect, from the viewpoint of 2015, it is evident to Jameson that he was in fact engaged in an early analysis of what later became known as globalization. As he puts it: “But after my initial work on what I now call postmodernity; a new word began to appear, and I realised that this new term was what had been missing from my original description.

38. Fredric Jameson, “The Aesthetics of Singularity,” *New Left Review*, no. 92 (2015), 101–132.

39. *Ibid.*, 104.

40. *Ibid.*, 104.

The word, along with its new reality, was globalization; and I began to realize that it was globalization that formed, as it were, the substructure of postmodernity, and constituted the economic base of which, in the largest sense, postmodernity was the superstructure."<sup>41</sup> This is why Jameson in the text speaks about the present as "our moment of postmodernity, late capitalism, globalization," sticking to his original analysis but slightly readjusting it, supplementing it with globalization, using that term as a name for the economic transformation that, so to speak, underpins postmodernism or postmodernity as cultural change. Somewhat strangely, Jameson says almost nothing about the creation of a global labor market, the deindustrialization of the USA and Western Europe, and the inclusion of China as the new factory of the world market. He instead focuses exclusively on financial capitalism, following Giovanni Arrighi's analysis of the cyclical development of hegemonic capitalist powers across the history of capitalism, in which finance is a sign of faltering hegemony.<sup>42</sup> Postmodernity is the autumn of the short American century. The expansion of illusory capital is a sign of crisis, a desperate recourse to speculation, as capital is unable to wring a profit out of investment in production. This is postmodernism as crisis.

This brings us back to Jameson's initial description of postmodernism as an ending. Postmodernism is the end of modernism, but even more importantly for Jameson, postmodernism or now postmodernity is the end of history, is now described as "a dissolution of past and future alike, a kind of contemporary imprisonment in the present."<sup>43</sup> Postmodernity or globalization is a cancellation of history,

41. *Ibid.*, 104.

42. Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times* (London: Verso, 1994). Although Jameson still uses the term late capitalism, Arrighi has replaced Ernst Mandel as the primary go-to guy

when it comes to a history of the modes of capitalist production. Cf. Fredric Jameson: "Culture and Finance Capital," in Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern*, 136–160.

43. Jameson, "The Aesthetics of Singularity," 120.

a shrinkage to the present. In this, Jameson follows Lyotard's analysis of the end of grand narratives but gives it a sombre tone. The great modern political project or projects have been ruined and are thus no longer available. In postmodernity, there is no historical depth, no continuity in politics or art. Jameson continues to conceptualize this transformation as the increasing predominance of space over time, in a manner somewhat similar to another Anglo-American Marxist, the geographer David Harvey, who speaks of postmodernity as "space-time compression."<sup>44</sup> If time dominated the modern, then space reigns over postmodernity at the expense of time. This results in an inability to imagine alternatives. Confusion proliferates to a much more radical degree than ever before, Jameson writes. He has primarily shown this by analysing different art forms and cultural objects, but such confusion is a general characteristic of postmodernity. If you are trained in the synchronic habits of zero-sum calculation, it is, as Jameson puts it, difficult to engage in long-term projections.<sup>45</sup>

Jameson has always been attentive to unconscious attempts to articulate alternatives in a postmodernist culture devoid of alternatives. As Jameson has consistently argued, even Hollywood blockbusters such as *Jaws* and *Speed* contain utopian elements, not in the sense that they constitute genuine political alternatives (they don't; that's the point of postmodernism) but in the sense that they are political allegories that function symbolically and provisionally resolve a variety of social and political conflicts. Both "cognitive mapping" and conspiracy theories are in their own ways answers to the impossibility of visualizing one's place within the totality of the capitalist mode of production.<sup>46</sup> These and

44. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

45. Fredric Jameson, "The End of Temporality," *Critical Inquiry* 29,

no. 4 (2009): 705.

46. Fredric Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana IL: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 347-360.

other examples in Jameson seem, in fact, to be symptoms of the withering of political action. In “our postmodernity, late capitalism, globalization,” politics has been replaced by utopias with little relation to the possibility of creating a different world. We have reification *and* utopia, as the title suggests in the programmatic essay of the late 1970s. Yet utopia is by definition not politics. As the opening line of the postmodernism essay puts it, we are living the end of politics, symbolically written as the crisis of Leninism and social democracy.

Jameson nonetheless seems unable to accept the consequences, and whenever he moves from historical analysis to political strategy, he advances the bankrupt social democratic project. In “An American Utopia” from 2016, he proposes taking over the USA’s army and using it as an alternative government, as a strategy of dual power.<sup>47</sup> Inspired by the soviets that were set up during the October Revolution in Russia in 1917 as well as by the Black Panther Party’s free breakfast program in the late 1960s and the extensive social service system set up in Southern Lebanon by Hamas today, Jameson engages in a “thought experiment” (his words), proposing that the USA’s army effectively act as part of the state being used against the (rest of the) state, eliminating representative politics. This is a strange solution indeed, one in which Jameson provocatively disregards the actual struggles taking place in the streets and elsewhere. He is outright dismissive of the new protests that have surfaced since 2011. In the USA, these include Occupy, Black Lives Matter, and Standing Rock, which combine to constitute the biggest anti-capitalist offensive since the late 1960s. Jameson, however, completely ignores these struggles and instead proposes taking over the army. There’s nothing going on since postmodernity is, after all, the eradication of “another world” — so let’s take over (one part of) the state. Capital and the state are all powerful,

<sup>47</sup> Jameson, “An American Utopia,”  
in *An American Utopia: Dual Power and the*

*Universal Army*, ed. Slavoj Žižek, (London:  
Verso, 2016), 1–96.

Jameson says and then proposes moving in and getting going *before* a break has occurred. It could, of course, be argued that the post-2011 protests themselves represent just such a break, but Jameson strangely dismisses these, characterizing them as little more than “flash crowds.”<sup>48</sup> They have more to do with the new informational technology of mobile phones and texting than with historical revolts and protests, he writes. The historical role of the square occupation movement of 2011 is to “provide new forms for other kinds of manipulation than that of governmental venality and corruption,” he dismissively concludes.<sup>49</sup> There’s nothing going on in the streets. Or more accurately, the protests are caught in the spatialization of politics, in which time disappears: The flash mobs are “politics of the instant,” “a reduction to the body.”<sup>50</sup> Jameson is on the verge of understanding them when he writes that they are a rebuke to representative politics, but then he himself proposes taking over the USA’s army, as if that would solve anything or is even possible.

This move speaks volumes about the difficulty of conceiving political action today. Jameson is struggling valiantly to keep political disillusionment at bay. In a somewhat similar manner, he ends “The Aesthetics of Singularity” with a weak gesture, placing his hope in the ability of Syriza and Podemos to come up with an answer to the political dead end: “Maybe Syriza and Podemos have some new answers to these questions [can postmodernity be a new beginning]?”<sup>51</sup> Syriza as an end or exit to postmodernity, a new beginning, is quite a concession on Jameson’s part. The inability to envision any kind of radical politics seems finally to have overtaken the Marxist critic. Analysis becomes position. Are we really left with Syriza and Podemos? Imprisoned in the present, Jameson seems unable to point to any kind of historical subject

48. *Ibid.*, 13.

49. Jameson, “The Aesthetics of Singularity,” 132.

50. Jameson, “An American Utopia,” 13.

51. Jameson, “The Aesthetics of Singularity,” 132.

besides two left-wing, anti-austerity parties that haven't been able to change anything at all and that remain firmly attached to national democracy, with all its deficiencies and modes of inclusive exclusion, as Agamben would put it.<sup>52</sup>

But like many others on the left, Jameson seems mesmerized by the prospect of a socialist mass party in charge of a Western European state. Syriza seemed to be skipping the dual power transition and seizing state power directly in Greece. The experiment went, as we now know, horribly wrong. If euro-communism was a tragedy the first time around, Syriza's mixture of adjusted euro-communism and nationalism was a farce and never constituted an alternative. Tsipras' politics entailed the most modest of Keynesian measures aimed at levelling out austerity and restarting the economy. Alongside Arrighi and Mandel, Jameson already knows this is no longer possible: "Our postmodernity, globalization" is precisely the end of this compromise, in which capital acknowledged workers as both cost and investment. Globalization is the dismantling of the so-called Keynesian wage productivity compromise, the (unrealizable) dream of profit without labor. Keynesianism promises a better management of capital, but it could not save capitalism the first time around and is itself partly responsible for the forty-year crisis.<sup>53</sup>

In any case, whatever kind of programme Syriza had, the cards were stacked massively against it from the start as the Troika (composed of representatives from the EC, the ECB, and the IMF) was intent on getting its way. Syriza thus quickly agreed to privatize a breathtaking range of public services, airports, and harbors and even sell Greek islands. After some dancing around, a series of meetings, and a few elections, Tsiapras agreed to impose pension cuts, lower

52. Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

53. See Andrew Kliman, *A Failure of Capitalist Production: Underlying Causes of the Great Recession* (London: Pluto Press, 2012).

salaries, and impose new taxes. To contend for state power under such conditions was volunteering to lead the debacle and to be in charge of cuts that would materialize no matter what one did. In retrospect, Syriza represented the recuperation of the street protests that had beset Greece from 2008 to 2012, the political left once more did its job and defused a dramatic situation by steering politics from the streets and into the parliament (where it was a question of who got to be in charge of distributing the Troika's medicine).

This is a peculiar reversal. Jameson convincingly shows that postmodernity has shifted the terms of politics, but he is strangely unable to accept the consequences and ends up trying to return to the already ruined social democratic project that he argues has already disappeared. The conditions of possibility of that project no longer exist: Jameson has shown that himself. This kind of reformism is stone dead. But Jameson will not relinquish his position, seems unable to take the next step and rethink the revolutionary project in the break, preferring instead to go back. If Syriza is postmodernity's utopia, then we really are fucked.

#### Contemporaneity as Insurmountable Crisis

What to do then? There is no question that modernity is in profound crisis and that Jameson's postmodernity is in many respects a good analysis of this crisis. However, at least in Jameson's case, this appears to "politically" lead back in time to the recent past, resurrecting now defunct social democratic programs aimed at reforming capitalism (thus "missing" the structural contradictions of capital as well as paradoxically disavowing the very analysis of postmodernity). Peter Osborne has recently advanced a related but slightly different analysis of the present, terming it "contemporaneity." In his programmatic text, "The Postconceptual Condition: Or, The Cultural Logic of High Capitalism Today," Osborne departs from Lyotard's and Jameson's analyses of the postmodern turn, paraphrasing

both texts in the title and displacing key elements of their analyses concerning how to describe contemporaneity, which he defines as “a new, internally disjunctive global historical-temporal form, a totalizing [...] radically disjunctive, contemporaneity.”<sup>54</sup> Somehow combining his persuasive analysis of the various modern temporalizations of history in *The Politics of Time* with his study of conceptual art in the large Phaidon anthology *Conceptual Art*, Osborne places his philosophy of contemporary art (as presented in *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*) within what he, mimicking Jameson, dubs “the cultural logic of high capitalism.”<sup>55</sup> Contemporaneity is not what is current but is a new epochal periodization in contrast to modernity and postmodernity. It is also an achievement of temporal combination, in which past and future are subsumed by the present. Osborne is at pains to show that contemporaneity is not simply a new periodizing category, a label to be applied to cultural objects or sociohistorical processes. Contemporaneity is also — and most importantly — a new historical form of time expressed grammatically as con-temporaneity, a coming together not just “in” time but also “of” times. “We do not just live or exist together ‘in time’ with our contemporaries [...] but rather the present is increasingly characterized by a coming together of different, but equally ‘present’ temporalities or ‘times.’”<sup>56</sup> This constitutes what Osborne calls “a temporal unity in disjunction, or a disjunctive unity of present times.”<sup>57</sup>

As is evident from the title of Osborne’s article, he introduces his contemporaneity thesis on the back of postmodernity/postmodernism and is critical of both Lyotard

54. Peter Osborne, “The Postconceptual Condition: Or, The Cultural Logic of High Capitalism Today,” *Radical Philosophy*, no. 184 (2014): 23.

55. Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time* (London: Verso, 1995); Osborne, ed., *Conceptual Art: Themes and Movements* (London: Phaidon, 2002).

56. Osborne, “Temporalization as Transcendental Aesthetics: Avant-Garde, Modern, Contemporary,” *Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, no. 44–45 (2013): 44.

57. *Ibid.*, 44.

and Jameson. It is the latter, however, who bears the brunt of Osborne's critique. Osborne describes Jameson's post-modernism/late capitalism superstructure-base analysis as a dead end. He argues that Jameson got it doubly wrong when he chose to analyze "post" modernism as the cultural logic of "late" capitalism. "Post" modernism is wrong because it implies the approaching end of modernity and capitalism, Osborne writes. As I've noted above, there's no question that the pair "post" and "late" sit uncomfortably in juxtaposition, with "post" promising something that is implied by—but not quite the same as—"late." "Post" would accompany some kind of post-capitalist stage. Nevertheless, Osborne argues, the other term represents the real problem. The notion of "late capitalism" is seriously wrong, he says, proposing to replace it with "high capitalism": "How very late, it now seems, still to have been periodizing capitalism as 'late' in 1991, at the very moment of its most powerful renewal."<sup>58</sup> But how Osborne can write this is something of a mystery. "The most powerful renewal?" Of capitalism? In 1991? Sure, the Wall came down two years earlier, and actually existing socialism collapsed, but any critical account of the capitalist world economy and especially the so-called advanced economies, especially the USA, would describe the whole period, the last forty years, as one long downturn. To single out 1991, as Osborne does, is truly strange. In 1990, the USA's economy was mired in a year-long recession; 1991 signalled the near collapse of the country's banking system; and in 1993, the bond market collapsed. Paul Mattick sums up the decade in the following terms:

Throughout the 1990s the deeper reality at the bottom of the wild swings of speculative fortune [...] showed itself in such a phenomena as the depression, born of the fizzling of a real-estate bubble, that has afflicted Japan since

58. Osborne, "The Postconceptual Condition: Or, The Cultural Logic of High

Capitalism Today," 19.

1990; the continuing high unemployment in relatively prosperous Europe; the stagnation of the American economy, with falling wages, rising poverty levels and dependence on constantly increasing debt — personal, corporate and national — to maintain even a simulacrum of the fabled “American standard of living”; the continual slipping into economic difficulties of the nations of Latin America [...]; the relegation of most of Africa [...] to unrelenting misery [...]; and the historically unprecedented accumulation of hundreds of millions of un- or under-employed people in gigantic slums around the world.<sup>59</sup>

“The most powerful renewal,” Osborne calls it. And yet the financialization of the world economy has been unstable ever since the early 1970s, with a continuous series of crises and collapses. Compared to the post-War boom, growth rates have been weak since the late 1960s.<sup>60</sup> So Osborne’s quick dismissal of Jameson’s use of the term “late capitalism” appears somewhat problematic. Ideologically, we could perhaps say that 1991 marked “the most powerful renewal” of capitalism in its neoliberal form. Fukuyama’s “End of History” and all that, including the emergence of globalization theory. In retrospect, however, 1991 doesn’t much resemble “high capitalism” to me. 1991 looks more like the illusory, ephemeral world triumph of “liberal democratic capitalism.”

The 1990s were clearly characterized by a belief in the ability of capital to self-reform. But from today’s perspective,

59. Paul Mattick, *Business as Usual: The Economic Crisis and the Failure of Capitalism* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011), 65.

60. For an account of the global economic crisis from a longer historical perspective, with a focus on the profitability of capital, see Gérard Duménil and Dominique Lévy, *La grande bifurcation. En finir avec le néolibéralisme* (Paris: La Découverte, 2014); and Michael Roberts,

*The Long Depression: How It Happened, Why It Happened, and What Happens Next* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016). Robert Brenner provides the key analysis of the shift from the booming post-war economy to the last forty years of bubble economy, Robert Brenner, *The Economics of Global Turbulence: The Advanced Capitalist Economies from Long Boom to Long Downturn, 1945–2005* (London: Verso, 2006).

after 2008 and 2011, it seems strange to call 1991 the most powerful renewal of capitalism. Osborne's substitution of "late" with "high" is not particularly convincing. Jameson might have ended up returning to a nostalgic social democratic position, one that he himself has long since demonstrated to be impossible, but Osborne seems to be fully inscribed in the world of "liberal democratic capitalism," unable to ascertain the enormous structural problems that have been present all along since the early 1970s: Osborne apparently believes in the permanency of capitalism: "High capitalism" it is.

So much for Osborne's periodization or attempt to update or transcend Jameson's use of the term "late capitalism."<sup>61</sup> As Amadeo Bordiga notes, capitalist development is always also underdevelopment: High capitalism always goes hand in hand with what we could call lumpen capitalism.<sup>62</sup> "Accumulation of wealth at one pole is, therefore, at the same time accumulation of misery, agony of toil slavery, ignorance, brutality, mental degradation, at the opposite pole," as Marx puts it.<sup>63</sup> That this is also the case today is evident in China, where 400 million might have become part of the global working class since the early 1980s by being separated from their means of existence and therefore dependent on the sale of their labor power, but 900 million peasants and workers are found wanting and are not part of the "Chinese miracle."<sup>64</sup>

Osborne also takes on Lyotard, though in less dismissive of a manner than in his treatment of Jameson. Osborne more or less directly engages in the polemic with Jameson while letting Lyotard off the hook, preferring to retain "condition,"

61. It is telling that Osborne doesn't bother finding a replacement for Jameson's Mandel but simply leaves the term "high capitalism" hanging in the air.

62. Amadeo Bordiga, *La questione agraria. Elementi marxisti del problema* (Rome: Libreria editrice del Pcd'I, 1921).

63. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy. Vol. I*, trans. Samuel Moore (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961), 645.

64. See Mylène Gaulard, *Karl Marx à Pékin. Les racines de la crise en Chine capitaliste* (Paris: Demopolis, 2014).

replacing “postmodern” with “contemporary,” and substituting “knowledge” with “art” as the privileged entry into the new condition. Lyotard is apparently not guilty of the same delusions as Jameson. This makes sense in so far as Osborne’s conceptualization of contemporaneity seems to be modeled on Lyotard’s (later) idea of postmodernism—oddly enough, Osborne doesn’t really note the similarity himself—in which postmodern is less a periodizing category and more a particular consciousness or modality. Osborne thus takes us from the postmodern condition to a contemporary condition. Osborne describes contemporaneity as a particular temporalization, somewhat resembling the postmodern *futur antérieur* that Lyotard describes in his later writings on art and the postmodern. Osborne, however, does not address this, preferring to displace Lyotard’s “knowledge” with “art.” As he puts it, “I propose a double displacement of Lyotard’s standpoint: from the ‘postmodern’ to the ‘contemporary’ and from ‘knowledge’ to ‘art’—taken together, from postmodern knowledge to contemporary art—to accompany the displacement of Jameson’s periodizing perspective from a ‘late’ back to a ‘high’ capitalism.”<sup>65</sup>

Contemporary art is, according to Osborne, a privileged site for grasping contemporaneity’s internally complex sets of temporal relations. Lyotard looks at knowledge (and later art, but modernist and avant-garde art from Cézanne to Barnett Newman), Jameson focuses on architecture and culture, and Osborne uses visual art (redefined as post-conceptual art) as a prism through which to investigate the present conjuncture and its particular form of historical time. Conceptual art’s expansion in the late 1960s and early 1970s is key to Osborne’s account of the coming into being of contemporary art and contemporaneity as a form of historical time, “a temporal unity in disjunction.” Contemporary art is post-conceptual in the sense of

65. Peter Osborne, “The Postconceptual Condition: Or, The Cultural Logic of

High Capitalism Today,” 20.

being an anti-aesthetic and post-medium specific practice that expresses and analyses its conditioning by high capitalism. "It is determined at once as an artistic situation and that which conditions it."<sup>66</sup> Post-conceptual art is a laboratory of contemporaneity, conditioned by the "interplay of communications technologies and new forms of spatial relation that constitute the cultural and political medium of economic processes of globalization," and when it lives up to the qualification of being contemporary, Osborne writes, it condenses and reworks these conditions.<sup>67</sup> Drawing upon Adorno's analysis of modern art, Osborne argues that contemporary art is conditioned by the transnational spaces and heterogeneous temporalities of high capitalism but is also able to critically reflect them. Osborne's book on contemporary art, which the article in *Radical Philosophy* supplements (and expands to a more general discussion of the present), is indeed an impressive attempt to give a philosophical account of contemporary art and continue modern philosophy's privileging of art as a sphere that somehow both expresses (in a more passive sense) and transfiguratively reflects (in a more active and critical sense) capitalism.

Like Adorno's aesthetics, Osborne's analysis of contemporary art seems at best to retain a negative perspective—if such a perspective is there at all. The move from late capitalism to high capitalism seems only to shift the analysis into an ever-more downtrodden direction, with Osborne mocking the idea of an end to capitalism. How silly Jameson was to periodize capitalism in that manner! Osborne ends up being even further deprived of political agency than Jameson was. For Jameson, there's at least a gesture toward either utopia in popular culture or social democracy in politics. With Osborne, there's nothing resembling the desperate attempt to engage in the utopian resurrection of socialism or euro-communism. Nothing.

66. *Ibid.*, 25.

67. *Ibid.*, 25.

Osborne prefers to remain within the domain of speculative reasoning or advances the notion of art as somehow occupying the contemporary (in all its disjunctive conjunctiveness). Osborne thus somehow ends up affirming the analysis as “position.” He transforms his description of contemporaneity into a theory. Insight into con-temporaneity’s particular temporalization of history, in which the present submerges past and future, becomes Osborne’s own position of enunciation. This might account for the abstract nature of his description of what he calls high capitalism: There’s a certain disconnectedness from ongoing struggles. The account of “the/our historical present” — “it is in the movement of the difference between these two terms (the ‘the’ and the ‘our’) [...] that the *problem* of history as a category of modernity resides” — remains far removed from any material or more concrete analysis of the present era and its battles on the ground, including in the world of contemporary art, where the rise in unwaged jobs has mobilized art workers in large numbers over the past decade, something to which Osborne is utterly indifferent, preferring to undertake his analysis of art from the top down.<sup>68</sup>

Osborne’s analysis of contemporaneity is a hugely important contribution not only to the philosophical analysis of contemporary art but also to the critical thinking of the present. His analysis nevertheless tends toward abstraction, even toward the formalistic, and ends up collapsing diagnosis and position. The stasis of a present moment becomes stasis *tout court*. The anticipatory dimension of time is encapsulated in the present, in presentness, effectively totalising all times within itself. This represents a defeatist conclusion to the analysis of a defeated present.

68. See Antonella Corsani and Maurizio Lazzarato, *Intermittens et précaires* (Paris: Éditions Amsterdam, 2008); Gregory Sholette, *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in*

*the Age of Enterprise Culture* (London: Pluto, 2011); and Yates McKee, *Strike Art! Contemporary Art and the Post-Occupy Condition* (London: Verso, 2016).

As a result, the future disappears from Osborne's contemporaneity, and with the future vanishes any real sense of political action. Contemporaneity's complex temporalization of history subsumes the past and the future under the present, effectively expanding the present to cover the horizon of expectation. The contemporary is not just a moderated futurity less prone to rupture; it is the disappearance of politics. Politics are symptomatically absent from Osborne's analysis, which has been wiped clean of any material dross or struggles outside the domain of philosophy. The speed and disparity of high capitalism or globalization annuls the future, Osborne argues. It is impossible to connect the contemporary with any kind of larger history. Conjunction and world history are at odds and cannot be unified. This both the analysis and the conclusion. Futurity has disappeared, and Osborne is trapped in the contemporary—reduced to the present, not unlike Jameson.

The analysis of the disavowal of the future by the present transforms itself into a disavowal of politics. Analysis becomes position, and any radical politics is abandoned. The difficulty in locating a historical subject forces Osborne into a kind of abstract post-Adornoism, in which art is a laboratory of the new condition but has long ago abandoned any hope of transcending this condition. No future means no avant-garde, for the avant-garde is the temporality of precisely that future which has been swallowed up by contemporaneity. We are left, at best, with a moderate futurity—if we can even call it that. The disappearance of the avant-garde goes hand in hand, it seems, with the disappearance of radical politics. It is impossible to locate political agency in globalization, for globalization has no subject save for capital. That's the conclusion Osborne draws. The contemporary subject is precisely subject to globalization and unable to become a subject. As Osborne writes, "globalization *subjects* us to these new contemporaneities."<sup>69</sup>

69. Peter Osborne, "The Postconceptual Condition: Or, The Cultural Logic of

High Capitalism Today," 24.

We are indeed living *after*, wrested from any kind of historical continuity, without a project or programme, unable to relate conjuncture to period or mode of production. The present totalizes all coeval times within itself. This is an absolutization of the present that leaves absolutely no room for a practical critique of “high capitalism,” neither artistic nor “political.”

What I have done over the previous pages, you will realize, is take Osborne’s critique of Jameson and turn it around to critique Osborne for his flawed, nearly non-existent analysis of the structural changes of capitalism. Osborne will, I guess, object that this does not alter his description of the temporality of the contemporary. I agree. But the question of the eternalization of the present and subsequent annulment of political agency remains. This comes forth, I think, in Osborne’s rather supercilious rejection of Jameson’s “late capitalism,” which he replaces with “high capitalism.” This is a puzzling move, and it of course springs forth in the complete absence of any account of actual struggles going on today. These struggles have simply evaporated in the fairly abstract investigation of “the disjunctive conjuncture of contemporaneity.” Anyway, the point is that both Jameson and Osborne end up with nothing: There’s no political subject today.

That’s what I’m trying to say, with and against them.  
That’s the problem.

That’s the challenge.

### The Missing Subject

Osborne is spot on. It appears impossible to envision any kind of radical change. The resurrection of former modes of analysis—such as those of Marx and Engels in 1844, with the notion of the proletariat as a virtual subjectivity that pressed the world and the way the world was to be understood, or that of Lenin in 1917, who deciphered “the special conjuncture of historical circumstances,” the complex web of forces that made it possible for the Russian proletariat to go from a

revolt against Tsarism to a revolt against the bourgeoisie and capitalism — becomes a simulacrum. Is it even possible to use this kind of language anymore?<sup>70</sup> Not for Osborne. Jameson too has abandoned any revolutionary perspective and instead places his hopes on some kind of state-led socialist project, one that has nothing to do with communism and the abolition of capitalism in Marx's sense. What seems to unite all these descriptions is a sense of confusion. Something's missing. The different descriptions — those of Lyotard, Jameson, and Osborne — are all relevant, but they each end with resignation concerning the very conditions of impossibility they set out to analyse. It is as though historical analysis is detrimental to political action.

That this is indeed the case today is evident if we, for a short moment, leave the attempts to analyse the historical situation and instead consider some of the most important attempts to think politics. If it is impossible to move from historical description to politics, it is likewise impossible to move in the other direction — that is, from politics to history. This holds for some of the most important contemporary philosophers, such as Alain Badiou and Jacques Rancière, both of whom seem to have given up on embedding political agency in history, favoring instead abstract notions of the political event as existing outside of history.

For Badiou, this takes the form of the stark oppositions between, on the one hand, the state of things and the state (the two meanings of *état* in French) and, on the other hand, politics and the event. For Badiou, political subjectivation is external to objective determination, takes place *ex nihilo*. It's an explicit refusal of the objective and of history. In an attempt to save the communist hypothesis, Badiou gives up on thinking

70. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Holy Family or Critique of Critical Criticism: Against Bruno Bauer and Company*, trans. Richard Dixon (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1956);

V. I. Lenin, "Letters from Afar" [1917], in Lenin, *Lenin Collected Works: Volume 23*, trans. M.S. Levin (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964), 295–342.

the relationship between subjective will and historical necessity, instead hypostatizing pure subjective will as an intervention from outside.<sup>71</sup> “The subject is not given, but must be found.”<sup>72</sup> The subject is an exception.

In Rancière’s case, democracy is conceptualized as a rupture in which the part who has no part utters an incomprehensible enunciation that makes visible the fictive nature of the existing order’s naturalized hierarchy. There is no pre-existing political subject for Rancière; the political subject is always a supplementary part that is not identifiable with any sociological category. Rancière’s anti-sociological conception of the political subject is radically trans- or even anti-historical: It is the same political scene or process he finds in ancient Greece as in May 1968.<sup>73</sup>

Both Badiou and Rancière thus uphold a conception of the political subject as disconnected from history. Political agency has nothing to do with the historical development of the capitalist mode of production but is an extremely rare event that cannot be “read from” the economy or history. This “eventualization” of politics is symptomatic of the disappearance of the kinds of left-wing politics that Jameson and Osborne indirectly analyse in their mappings of late and high capitalism.

There’s no Marxist political economy in Badiou and Rancière. We thus have a situation in which we have either cultural-historical accounts of the present conjuncture or abstract philosophical notions of political subjectivity—conjunctural analysis on one hand and politics on the other. This seems to be the present impasse, an inability to think history and political agency together. The metaphysical antinomies of politics and history seem impossible to overcome. The analysis

71. Alain Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis*, trans. Steve Corcoran and David Macey (London: Verso, 2010).

72. Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, trans. Bruno Bosteels (London: Continuum, 2009), 279.

73. Jacques Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics*, trans. Liz Heron (London: Verso, 1995).

of contemporaneity is an analysis of precisely this situation. This is the strength of Osborne's analysis: The engulfing of the past and the future by the present leaves no space for ruptural futurity.

Badiou's neo-Platonist gesture and Rancière's anti-sociological stance do not present a solution inasmuch as they remain completely detached from any kind of historical development. They both try to safeguard political subjective agency but can only do so by abandoning the critique of political economy and history. Perhaps it's simply no longer possible to go from the objective situation of exploitation to subjective action. That's the revolutionary moment. In Hegelian terms, this is a matter of going from necessity to freedom. Is it still possible to envision a use of the old dialectical apparatus, knowing fully well that profound practical and theoretical doubt has been cast upon that which once held it together, the notion that there was a direction to history? This is difficult. There's a reason Jameson and Osborne end up deprived of politics, trapped in the present.

### Revolution and Subjectivity

The new protest movement emerged in a vacuum. There's no historical project in the sense of Lenin and Trotsky, who thought of themselves as continuing the processes of 1789 and 1871. The protesters in Athens, Tunis, Cairo, Madrid, Oakland, Paris, and so on take to the streets *after* the breakdown of the Western working class movement.<sup>74</sup> We must somehow start by accepting this, that the protest movement sprang up from the void. This doesn't mean we need to accept the crisis as an end, as Osborne tends to do with his analysis of the contemporary, in which the crisis becomes a totalizing temporal category that deprives us of any kind of agency. We're unable even to address the crisis. It has somehow found its way into time itself,

74. As Guy Debord once put it, "Revolutionary theory is now the sworn enemy of all revolutionary ideology — and

*it knows it."* Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 90.

splintering it from within, erasing past and future — effectively making capitalism invisible and invincible. “High capitalism” indeed. We should not, however, seek to reactivate the very political projects that are no longer possible in the present conjuncture, should not follow Jameson in pointing to Syriza or imagining that the USA’s army could serve as a kind of socialist dual power. To be fair to Jameson, we could say he’s seeking to articulate or retain some kind of negative message of hope. His is a Blochian gesture, an act of resistance in the face of postmodernity. Nevertheless, there’s little to suggest a return to the old workers’ movement organizations or a new lease on the life of the worker as a conceptual and political category on which to build a revolutionary project. Jameson seems unwilling to follow through on his analysis, while Osborne seems to have given up on analysing any kind of contradiction. To Osborne, capitalism is apparently capable of integrating any kind of resistance, using any kind of crisis, and has never been better. We are *subject* to globalization.

There’s a reason for the gloomy tones Jameson and Osborne hit, yet their analyses of the present as a wrapping up of the past and the future ought to include an analysis of the struggles of today, even if the current situation is one of crisis and breakdown, with no coherent class-subject in sight. There’s no revolutionary movement. Trump is a counterrevolution without a revolution. However, for the first time in over forty years, something is happening. The crisis has seriously shaken the hegemony of neoliberal ideology. To speak in the terms of Marx, the class struggle has suddenly become two sided. Any analysis of the present conjuncture must take into account the fragmented coming into being of a new global protest movement that has clear anti-capitalist bearings. There is a lot of bad timing in the new cycle. Protests erupt here but are struck down before they erupt there. It’s a discontinuous process, but the system is in no way as invincible as Osborne seems to imagine. Although the spectacle is doing

its best to keep things in place, the (imaginary) tranquillity of what Adorno once called the “class-less class society” (of the West) is beginning to fall apart.<sup>75</sup> More and more people are being excluded from wage labor, even in the former center of accumulation, and around the world, the capitalist state is taking on ever-more authoritarian forms. We’re all living in the postcolony now, in the words of Achille Mbembe.<sup>76</sup>

Any analysis of the present must depart from the concrete struggles against private property and for the common, which since 2011 have been as widespread as they have been multiple.<sup>77</sup> The position of enunciation must be the real vistas of struggles that have spread rapidly from North Africa to all parts of the world. I’m repeating myself, I know. It seems as if the absence of a revolutionary perspective, an international revolutionary movement, forces the text into not only taking a stand but also becoming quasi-religious: “I believe in the possibility of a revolution.” The system is falling apart and has difficulty reproducing itself, both politically and economically. This is important. We need to analyse the crisis, not least the very real ongoing biospheric meltdown. The crisis is an expression of something. It points to the necessity of a radical solution, radical in the sense of going to the roots.

But despite the growing number of protests and the emergence of a genuine revolutionary perspective in the Arab revolts, there’s no coherent, composed revolutionary class-subject today.<sup>78</sup> This is not because the negativity

75. Theodor W. Adorno, “Zur Lehre von der Geschichte und von der Freiheit (1964–1965),” in Adorno, *Nachgelassene Schriften. Abteilung IV. Vorlesungen. Band 13* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2001), 55.

76. Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

77. For an analysis of the new protest cycle, see Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen, *Crisis to Insurrection: Notes on the*

*Ongoing Collapse* (Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2014).

78. For a good analysis of the Arab Spring revolts as more than just attempts at regime change or getting rid of local lumpen despots, see Gilbert Achar, *The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Spring*, trans. G.M. Goshgarian (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); Achar, *Morbid Symptoms: Relapse in the Arab Spring* (London: Saqi Books, 2016).

corresponding to the existence of the proletariat as defined by Marx—the radical absence of property—is missing; it has been reconstituting itself on a massive scale globally as well as locally, in both the center and on the periphery, for the past forty years. However, the path from objective situation to revolutionary subjectivity seems to be blocked at present.<sup>79</sup> There's no "party of the movement" flooding the gates of the "party of order." There's no working class movement in this. The identity of the worker is no longer available.<sup>80</sup> The working class has abandoned the scene of history. Today, the revolution appears completely abstract. The supposed subject of revolution, the proletariat, has not yet materialized. There are plenty of "revolutionary" situations today, and there are hundreds of millions of people who have an interest in "changing the world," but there's no active collective agent capable of resolving the contradiction. The theory of revolution will thus so far necessarily appear abstract (and the theory of revolution isolated). The global proletariat hasn't been able to produce a rupture in the reciprocal presupposition of the classes. The proletariat is caught *within* the system. There are proletarianized individuals everywhere, but no proletariat. It is the becoming subject of the revolution that is thus far missing. In this sense, we are *after* the revolution or are trapped in a latent conflict.<sup>81</sup>

79. As Beverly Silver argues, the outsourcing of industrial production to the former periphery of capitalist accumulation and the deindustrialization of the center is merely a postponement of class struggle, as workers in Southeast Asia and China are beginning to protest and strike for better wages and working conditions. Beverly Silver, *Forces of Labor: Workers' Movement and Globalization since 1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). Whether this struggle will take place within or against capital remains to be seen.

80. See Roland Simon, *Fondements critiques d'une théorie de la révolution*.

*Au-delà de l'affirmation du proletariat* (Paris: Senonevero, 2001).

81. "After the revolution," also in Arif Dirlik's hopeful sense, which untangles the theory and practice of revolution the state-centred economies of so-called "actually existing socialism." "1989" would then, according to Dirlik, be the releasing of Marxism from the ideological servitude of the authoritarian bureaucracies of actually existing socialism. Arif Dirlik, *After the Revolution: Waking to Global Capitalism* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994).

In this sense, Osborne is right to say the present has internalized the past and the future that we are after — or perhaps before. The revolution is always *futurum exactum*. Transcending existing relations is not a theoretical exercise but occurs through class struggle. The revolutionary perspective always precedes its own theorization. We must thus make do with an abstract notion of revolution, plus “sociological” descriptions of the crises and the protests, however unsatisfactory these might be.<sup>82</sup>

Today, a theory of revolution must account for chronological displacements and transformation of subjectivity: Greece from 2008 to 2012, Iran’s “Green Revolution,” the revolts of the Arab Spring, the Spanish Indignados, the London riots of 2011, Occupy, the Chilean student strikes, the Brazilian “anti-fare hike” movement in 2013, the Ukrainian Maidan, the Hong Kong democracy movement in 2014, Nuit debout in 2016 in France, Black Lives Matter in the USA. There’s no narrative synthesis across the revolutionary agencies listed here, yet compared to Baghdad, Copenhagen, Hebron, Utøya, Bahrain, East Jerusalem, Damascus, London, and Charlottesville, all sites of a powerful counter-mobilization against the coming into being of a revolutionary perspective, we can begin to discern a map of revolutionary subjectivity (and counter-revolution). It’s only by looking at the real movement that we can begin to formulate something about political agency today. But there’s no eschatology for us today. It’s only when the revolutionary process has already taken off (after

82. Isn’t there something dissatisfying about even the best analyses of actual struggles? I’m thinking of *Endnotes*’ piece on the London riots, or TPTG’s many texts on the riots in Greece, or Movement Communiste’s different brochures, or *Insurgent Notes*’ attempt to come to terms with Occupy and BLM. These analyses are often chronicles of failure, they show that the struggles remained limited and were not

able to connect to broader movements or unable to go from the sphere of consumption to the sphere of production, in other words failed to become revolutionary. The limits these analyses come up against are precisely the inability to locate a unified subject capable of launching a full-scale assault on capital (and the proletariat as a capital-internal subject).

the fact, so to say), when latent forms have become manifest forces, that we will be able to identify the subject and escape ultra-leftist tautology. It can only be present as a spectre, the spectre of revolution, the spectre of communism,<sup>83</sup> the proletariat as spectral presence.<sup>84</sup> Not “Hegel after Occupy,” but “Communism in Occupy,” we could tentatively call it.

83. Of course, communism not as an idea but as “the real movement which abolishes the present state of things.” Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology: Part One*, trans. C. Dutt and

C.P. Magill (New York: International Publishers, 1970), 57.

84. See Carsten Juhl, “La révolution allemande et le spectre du proletariat,” *Invariance*, no. 5 (1974): 25–32.

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Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen is an art historian, cultural theorist, and Associate Professor in the Department of Arts and Cultural Studies, at the University of Copenhagen. He studied art history and philosophy in Aarhus and Paris. He has written books on late modernist and contemporary art, the anti-artistic avant-gardes, fascism, modern political philosophy and the revolutionary tradition, among them *Avantgardens selvmord* (Antipyrene, 2009/2014), *En anden verden: Små kritiske epistler om de seneste årtiers anikapitalistiske satsninger i kunst og politik og forsøgene på at udrydde dem* (Nebula, 2011), *Playmates and Playboys on a Higher Level: J. V. Martin and the Situationist International* (Sternberg Press, 2014), *Crisis to Insurrection* (Minor Compositions, 2015), *Samtidskunstens metamorfose* (Antipyrene, 2016), and *After the Great Refusal: Essays on Contemporary Art, its Contradictions and Difficulties* (Zero Books, 2018). He has edited and coedited a number of books, including *Totalitarian Art and Modernity* (Aarhus University Press, 2010), *Expect Everything Fear Nothing: The Situationist Movement in Scandinavia and Elsewhere* (Nebula & Autonomedia, 2011), and *Cosmonauts of the Future: Texts from the Situationist Movement in Scandinavia and Elsewhere* (Nebula & Autonomedia, 2015). He has contributed to cultural theoretical collections and journals such as *e-flux journal*, *Mute*, *Rethinking Marxism*, *Texte zur Kunst*, and *Third Text*, and is coeditor of the journals *K&K* and *Mr Antipyrene*.

PEN=0,1,1,0, WEIGHT=130, SLANT=0.1, SUPERNESS=0.7

The typeface used to set this series is called Meta-the-difference-between-the-two-Font (MTDBT2F), designed by Dexter Sinister in 2010 after MetaFont, a digital typography system originally programmed by computer scientist Donald Knuth in 1979.

Unlike more common digital outline fonts formats such as TrueType or Postscript, a MetaFont is constructed of strokes drawn with set-width pens. Instead of describing each of the individual shapes that make up a family of related characters, a MetaFont file describes only the basic pen path or \*skeleton\* letter. Perhaps better imagined as the ghost that comes in advance of a particular letterform, a MetaFont character is defined only by a set of equations. It is then possible to tweak various parameters such as weight, slant, and superness (more or less bold, Italic, and a form of chutzpah) in order to generate endless variations on the same bare bones.

Meta-the-difference-between-the-two-Font is essentially the same as MetaFont, abiding the obvious fact that it swallows its predecessor. Although the result may look the same, it clearly can't be, because in addition to the software, the new version embeds its own backstory. In this sense, MTDBT2F is not only a tool to generate countless PostScript fonts, but \*at least equally\* a tool to think about and around MetaFont. Mathematician Douglas Hofstadter once noted that one of the best things MetaFont might do is inspire readers to chase after the intelligence of an alphabet, and "yield new insights into the elusive "spirits" that flit about so tantalizingly behind those lovely shapes we call "letters.""

For instance, each volume in The Contemporary Condition is set in a new MTDBT2F, generated at the time of publication, which is to say \*now.\*

Dexter Sinister, 02/06/18, 14:28 PM