

Postscript: Poetry and Anti-Politicsⁱ

Roger Farr

[P]roletarian revolutions, like those of the nineteenth century, constantly criticize themselves, constantly interrupt themselves in their own course, return to the apparently accomplished, in order to begin anew; they deride with cruel thoroughness the half-measures, weaknesses, and paltriness of their first attempts, seem to throw down their opponents only so the latter may draw new strength from the earth and rise before them again more gigantic than ever, recoil constantly from the indefinite colossalness of their own goals – until a situation is created which makes all turning back impossible, and the conditions themselves call out:

Hic Rhodus, hic salta!

– Marx, *18th Brumaire*ⁱⁱ

The expression “*Hic Rhodus, hic salta*” has a tangled history of translation. Its origins are Greek. Marx uses the expression in both *Capital* and the *18th Brumaire*, and seems to have adapted it from Hegel, who in turn adapted it from Latin sources. It is said originally to have been the punch-line to a gag about an athlete who boasts about having witnesses who can confirm he is able to make a fantastic jump, to which a bystander remarks that if he can indeed accomplish such a feat, he should do it now: *Hic Rhodus, hic salta*, or “Here is the rod, jump!” In the Preface to *The Philosophy of Right*, Hegel mysteriously translates the line as “Here is the rose. And here we must dance!,” which, according to the *Encyclopedia of Marxism*, refers “to the rose in the cross of rosicrucianism, implying that fulfillment should not be postponed to some Utopian future.”ⁱⁱⁱ Given its placement in the passage above, where it follows one of the most significant utterances in radical thought – “until a situation is created which makes all turning back impossible, and the conditions themselves call out” – the expression is often read as illustrative of the revolutionary moment itself: that point where the proletariat is compelled *to leap*.

The problem, however, is that the logic of necessity ticking away inside this utterance – a logic captured syntactically in the form of the conditional sentence (“*If* the conditions are correct, *then* the people will revolt”) – is either inherently flawed, or has been hijacked by some other spook, perhaps that other, better known maxim, *cogita ante salis*.^{iv} Either way, a *huge leap* is

indeed required to get from the “if” to the “then.” As Jacques Camatte observes, “All the conditions would seem to be ripe; there should be revolution. Why then is there such restraint? What is to stop people from transforming all these crises and disasters, which are themselves the result of the latest mutation of capital, into a catastrophe for capital itself?”^v To which Fredrika Bremer might add, “Nothing is more provoking than to waste one’s time in waiting, nothing more useless, more *intolerable*, nothing that might more easily be remedied were there but the determination.”^{vi}

As for the determinations, much of the revolutionary thought of the twentieth century has held fast to Marx’s thesis that historical and social transformations are determined by the emergence of a self-conscious class protagonist, or antagonist, that arrives at its knowledge of itself and its historical agency under a set of specific conditions, i.e., at a specific stage of capitalist development where productive forces reach their full capacity and create a material base for communism. At this moment the class becomes, in Lukacs’ words, an “identical subject-object” of history.^{vii} For Marx, and many of his immediate followers, this “historical inevitability” could be logically induced from actual material conditions: the economic processes and struggles that allowed history to “progress” were seen as inextricably linked to the activity of the working class. And perhaps they were. But what happens when, as Camatte, Debord and others warned, capital reaches a stage where it *emancipates* itself from human agency,^{viii} in order to achieve the form not merely of universal economy, but rather that of a “mechanistic *utopia* where human beings become simple accessories of an automated system”?^{ix}

The world is out of control. By which we mean, of course, out of *our* control. For even when we experience them first-hand, the social, political, economic, and ecological crises of our time – “the conditions” – *appear* somewhere else: a distant, hyper-mediated space populated not by “the workers,” or even people, but by images, statistics, charts, tables, and the disinterested experts who move them around, poke them with sticks, report them, refute them, revise them. And the same is true of much of our spurious resistance, it must be said, which, unsurprisingly, appears not as an inevitability, as Marx predicted, but as an *alternative* – another choice to be made in the democratic marketplace of ideas, where all ideas are options, and “all options are available,” including the total liquidation of the planet and its inhabitants. The once fêted, now hackneyed slogan of the anti-globalization movement, “Another world is possible,” illustrates precisely the extent to which social transformation has become modalized not as a probability,

let alone a necessity, but as a *possibility*, instead of what it truly is – *an emergency*.^x Nowhere is this more frustratingly evident than in the current Hopefulness on the Left. Hope, as recent events have proven conclusively, has become the second most valuable commodity on the planet, just after a safe place to do business.

But just as when one empties the trash on one's computer, the evacuation of humanity from the social world is not simply the erasure of an essence – it is a new source of production and reproduction, a site of accumulation in its own right, one which involves the often violent *overwriting* of old subjects with new subjects. In other words, once capital escapes from its host, it reinvests a portion of its surplus back into the recalibration of the subjects it hijacked, broke down, and set to work, by reconstituting itself as their *community*. This marks a stage Marx did not predict: the *anthropomorphization* of capital.^{xi} In this “pseudo-world,” as Debord called it,^{xii} communication, like the economy it animates, also becomes something alien and autonomous, an abstract force – a ghost, a virus, a code – that harnesses “users” to execute its commands. Language, which we always knew was “saturated with ideology,”^{xiii} is more precisely at this moment “permeated by money.”^{xiv} The language of the news, entertainment, sports, weather, statistics, culture: here is the muted call of “the conditions.” Here is “the material.”

In this light, we might appreciate the prescience of Mayakovsky's remark that there are certain problems in society for which solutions can only be found in *poetic terms*.^{xv} As a mode of language that is not confined to the trafficking of easily-consumable images and ideas, nor to its worn-out role as a conduit for the elaboration of a priestly or panoptic subjectivity (poem-as-voiceover), poetry can respond to the problems of its historical circumstance by forming a provisional “poetic front” – or perhaps a *bloc*^{xvi} – charged not with the fatigued political work of “consciousness raising” or “altering perception” (as one wry commentator has put it, “the very fact that we have heard of Roger Daltry proves we cannot develop revolutionary consciousness”^{xvii}), nor with the “appropriation” of a crumbling discursive machinery, but with weakening the command of the capitalist information field through the re-presentation of the empty volume of its own social facts. A writing that acknowledges its deeply material entanglement with *exchange* by replicating that particular transaction which every capitalist seeks to avoid: the return of used, damaged, or stolen, goods for a full refund – or, in this case – *a full life*.^{xviii} A *dis-utopian* un-writing^{xix} – one that avoids the old traps of “moral commitment, beautiful soul, ideological militancy, etc.”, in favour of “a new realism...the testimony of a

desperate epoch, constructive punk realism, expressive violence shaking the techniques of mystification of communication...[a] hope incarnated by that which we know can no longer sustain it.”^x

Such a task is not “political,” at least not in the conventional sense. Poets are not legislators. Writing does not have to concern itself with the distribution of epiphanies and sensibilities, nor with the prepping of a fresh citizenry in time for the next Federal election. It does not need to solve the problems that capital needs solved. In short, it does not have to help anyone “come to terms” with the world, which is always the first step in legitimizing it. Instead, poetry’s role remains primarily affective: *to joyfully render the present even more intolerable than it already is*, while gesturing toward new forms of affinity, agency, and association. To provide accounts without tallies. Events without examples. Means without ends, by whatever means necessary.

Hic Rhodus, hic salta!

~

Notes

ⁱ Originally composed as a letter to *Letters: An Anti-political Communist Journal* in March 2009.

ⁱⁱ Available at <marxists.org>.

ⁱⁱⁱ The discussion of this passage in the *Encyclopedia* draws on an explication at the Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library: <http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/lists/quotations/quotations_by_ib.html>.

^{iv} “Look before you leap.”

^v “Against Domestication.” *This World We Must Leave, and Other Essays*. Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 1995.

^{vi} *Strife and Peace*. Charleston, SC: BiblioLife, 2008.

^{vii} *History and Class Consciousness: A Study in Marxist Dialectics*. Boston, MA: MIT, 1972.

^{viii} As Jeff Derksen notes, in its appropriation and transmogrification of social and aesthetic critique, neoliberalism responds to its detractors with its own demands “for the *liberation of capital itself* rather than those whose very labour produce capital in surplus.” *Annihilated Time: Poetry and Other Politics* (Talon, 2010).

^{ix} Camatte, “The Wandering of Humanity.” *This World We Must Leave, and Other Essays*. Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 1995.

^x Unless, as Negri suggests, the slogan “implies an exodus that leads to *ourselves*.” See “Art and

Culture in the Age of Empire and the Time of the Multitudes.” *SubStance* #112, Vol. 36, no. 1, 2007.

^{xi} Camatte, *ibid.*

^{xii} *Society of the Spectacle*. Trans. Fredy Perlman. Detroit, Black and Red, 1983.

^{xiii} Bakhtin, MM. *The Dialogic Imagination*. Trans. C Emerson and M Holquist. Texas: UP, 1981.

^{xiv} Deleuze, Gilles . “Control and Becoming.” *Negotiations*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995.

^{xv} *How are Verses Made?* Trans. GM Hyde. London: Cape, 1970. See also Louis Cabri “After 1923: ‘The Social Command’” (*XCP: Cross Cultural Poetics* 14).

^{xvi} While often used synonymously with “front” – a military term designating both a terrain of opposition and a group identity built around a common struggle (usually that of organized labour) – a “bloc” has come to refer more to a set of *tactics* (masked anonymity, barricades, graffiti, occupations, and property destruction) embraced by the German *autonomen* of the 1980’s, and later associated with anarchist interventions at large anti-globalization protests (“black bloc”). Both terms, however, are tied historically to “insurgent social movements” (Denning) and to forms of international solidarity. See Denning, *The Cultural Front* (1998) and Massot & Van Deusen, *The Black Bloc Papers* (2010), the latter of which is available on-line: <<http://www.infoshop.org/page/BlackBlocPapers>>.

^{xvii} Monsieur Dupont. *Nihilist Communism: Cruelty or the Inclusion of the Distributive Sphere* <<http://salondeverluisant.org/texts/nihilistcommunism.html>>.

^{xviii} For an account of the efficacy of retail fraud from the perspective of capital, see “Many Unhappy Returns for Retailers,” *BusinessWeek* August, 2005. For an account from an anarchist’s perspective, see *Evasion*. Atlanta, GA: Crimethinc, 2002.

^{xix} “[D]is-ustopia: the capacity to remain within, to hollow out language from inside and make the material desire for transformation emerge.” Negri, *ibid.*

^{xx} Negri, qtd. in Stevphen Shukaitis, *Imaginal Machines: Autonomy & Self-Organization in the Revolutions of Everyday Life*. London & NY: Minor Compositions/Autonomea, 2009.

Roger Farr is the author of *SURPLUS. MEANS* and *IKMQ* are forthcoming. Recent critical writing on autonomous social movements and the avant-garde appears in *Anarchist Studies*, *Dandelion*, *The Postanarchism Reader*, and *Social Anarchism*. A critical introduction to Alice Becker-Ho’s *The Essence of Jargon*, on the language of the dangerous classes, is forthcoming from Autonomea. He teaches in the Creative Writing and Culture and Technology Programs and edits CUE Books at Capilano University in Vancouver.