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Our Mandate

This journal represents an attempt to explore issues, ideas, and problems that lie at the intersection between the academic disciplines of social science and the body of thought and political practice that has constituted Marxism over the last 150 years. New Proposals is a journal of Marxism and Interdisciplinary Inquiry that is dedicated to the radical transformation of the contemporary world order. We see our role as providing a platform for research, commentary, and debate of the highest scholarly quality that contributes to the struggle to create a more just and humane world, in which the systematic and continuous exploitation, oppression, and fratricidal struggles that characterize the contemporary sociopolitical order no longer exist.

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Introduction

Charles R. Menzies

New Proposals Editorial Collective

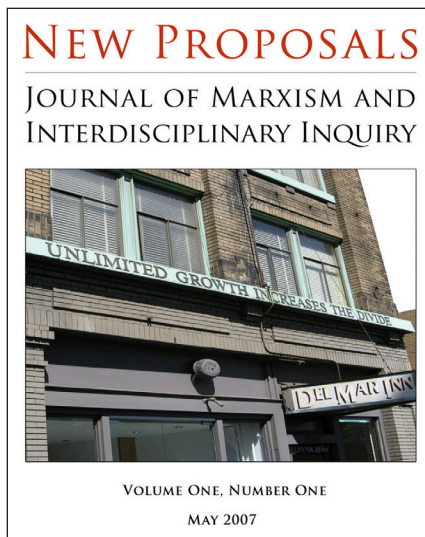
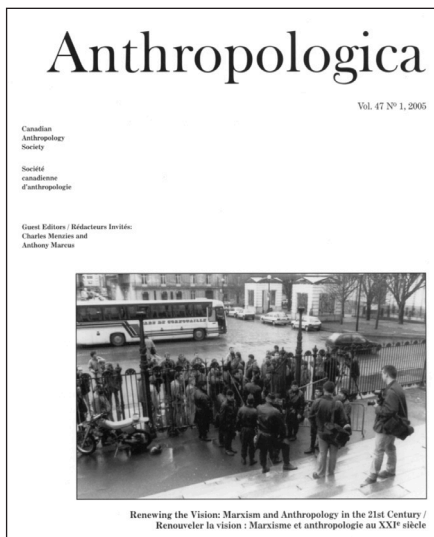
A Final Word

May, 2007 the first issue of *New Proposals* came off the digital press. It was a project that my friend Anthony Marcus and I had imagined for several years. We had put together a special issue on Anthropology and Marxism in the Canadian journal, *Anthropologica* (Menzies and Marcus 2005) based on a session Anthony and I had organized for the 1997 American Anthropological Association meetings. Our success with the special issue led us to think maybe there was space for a journal of Marxist anthropology.

Our inaugural editorial collective included Anthony and I as well as Katherine McCaffrey and

Sharon Roseman. Over time my colleagues had other projects that pulled them away. Sharon and I co-edited for a good number of years until I was the last one standing. I was in the process of shutting the project down with this last issue when a colleague, Scott Timcke, stepped up to take on the responsibility of editing and maintaining this journal.

The name *New Proposals* came directly from the title of a rather old paper by Kathleen Gough in which she exhorted fellow anthropologists to realign their allegiances to the colonized, not to ‘develop’ their capacity, but rather to support their national



liberation struggles. This was a moment of radical progressivism within anthropology. It was one of the many responses to a resurgent colonial world that had tired of Euro-American Imperialism. While the old guard anthropologists were displaced by younger scholars, the vision of anthropology held by Kathleen Gough did not win the day. Instead came a decades-long withdrawal from action through the so-called reflexive/textual turn.

Anthony and I, as students, found ourselves at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. For young doctoral students the CUNY Grad Center was an exciting place. Looking back on it now, I think we could be forgiven our earnest belief that fundamental change was possible based upon the radical space we had landed in at the heart of Imperialism.

We participated in demonstrations against American aggression in the Middle East. We organized in our school against the rising tide of neo-liberalism (even orchestrating an occupation of our campus in 1990: Menzies 2010; McCaffery, Kovic, Menzies 2020). But we were in a bubble. Around us the forces of conservatism and reaction were winning. As we moved through graduate studies into our professional careers we came to face the obstacles and

opportunities involved in living life were we found ourselves. Our training in the pragmatics of believing a better world is possible played a role in shaping our careers. Each in our own ways have found ways to continue to act from a place of conviction even while erstwhile comrades have taken different paths.

Projects like New Proposal won't change the world. What this project can do is continue the story in little ways that we hope will be more a part of the solution in ways that make a difference.

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The Wretched of the Earth as Interrogation-Machine: Nation, Religion, and Race in Fanon's Decolonization Manifesto

Jastej Luddu
Thomas Kemple

ABSTRACT: Taking as our point of departure the final line of Frantz Fanon's first book, *Black Skins, White Masks* (1952) "– Oh my body, always make me a man who questions! –" we examine how Fanon's posthumously published *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) may be treated as a kind of "interrogation-machine." Rather than approach this work as either transparently expressing the intentions of its author ("the text as body") or as a surface sliding across meanings that can be assembled in any number of ways ("the text as machine"), we read three key episodes in *The Wretched of the Earth* as posing questions in ways that exceed the answers Fanon himself offers – a prose poem by Guinea writer Fodéba Keïta; Fanon's treatment of the radical potential of Islam through his correspondence with Iranian sociologist Ali Shariati; and the responses of his patients to the trauma of torture. In highlighting these interlocutors, who tend to be neglected by most commentators on Fanon, we conclude that the text functions as a kind of "manifesto" appealing to different audiences in the tradition of Marx and Engels, both colonized and colonizer. We also consider how Fanon's call for a "new humanism" speaks to our own crises of virulent state-nationalism, religious fundamentalism, and institutionalized racism.

KEYWORDS: Fanon, colonialism, national liberation, Islam, racism, resentment

Introduction: The WE-Machine

On the day of Frantz Omar Fanon's (1925-1961) death, the French police confiscated copies of *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) from Paris bookshops (Bhabha 2004, viii). *The Wretched of the Earth*, published at the very end of Fanon's life, reads like it ought to be read aloud posthumously to the masses to inspire revolution. The text in the first instance is a "decolonization manifesto" for the Algerians, Fanon's primary interlocutors, challenging them to see through the fight against the French colonizers. But it is also addressed to all oppressed peoples suffering the violence of colonialism, and thus could be applicable in other times and places as well. Anyone who reads this work can hear the urgency in Fanon's

voice, perhaps because it was literally written in his dying days as he battled leukemia. In fact, much of it was dictated to his wife as he lay on his deathbed, so that his writing often takes on "the rhythm of a body in motion and the cadences of the breathing voice" (Cherki 2006, 14). Less a prophecy or a program as is often assumed, *The Wretched of the Earth* is Fanon's final call to action to the colonized people of the world. Perhaps it is for this reason that French authorities, in the middle of the Algerian War (1954-1962) and on the day of Fanon's death, feared the intensity of his message resonating in the ears of the colonized.

As a Black man, revolutionary fighter, Marxist, and psychologist, Fanon does not just address 20th

century colonialism in *The Wretched of the Earth*. He also speaks to the ways the social catastrophes of racism, land seizures, capitalist crises, and mental illnesses emerging from colonialism are interconnected. These injustices are based on complex institutional structures and informal networks which require analysis if one is to make sense of the whole. Fanon does more than just examine the individual threads; he explicates the construction and unravelling of the entire web. Though it is a text written primarily to Algeria, where Fanon fought as a revolutionary against the French, Fanon did not live to see Algeria liberated from the colonizers, or to witness the full impact of his words on the Algerian people or other colonized peoples to whom it addressed. In both its medium and its message Fanon's text is arguably something other and even greater than what he could have anticipated. As a work that continues to inspire activists committed to fighting against global systems of injustice, it also captivates scholars who hope to understand the complexity of the social issues that he speaks to, above all those that concern the role of revolutionary violence and the relevance of Marxist analytical categories in making sense of that violence. Here we focus on three distinct yet deeply interconnected strands of this text that have received varying degrees of attention and have troubled later readers: national liberation, religiously inspired revolution, and racialized resentment. These themes are activated in and through the text through the ways in which Fanon interrogates and is interrogated by interlocutors who are often overlooked in readings of this text, respectively: the Guinean writer and politician Fodéba Keïta; the Iranian sociologist and revolutionary Ali Shariati; and two anonymous psychiatric patients, a French torturer and his Algerian victim. In approaching the text from the perspective of these figures and with these general issues in mind, we are interested in the answers Fanon provided in response to his own situation as well as in the questions he poses to our times.

We treat the text of *The Wretched of the Earth* as an "interrogation-machine," that is, as a work that continues to ask questions long after the person who first posed them and the people to whom they were

addressed have passed on. By this we do not mean to ignore the ways in which Fanon's unique embodied voice speaks through this text to his intended readers; rather, we approach the text in a way that remains open to receiving its message while also rethinking its many meanings for ourselves. To clarify this point, it is useful to note the distinction Paul de Man makes in *Allegories of Reading* between "text as machine" and "text as body" (De Man 1979, 298). De Man contrasts *the body of the text* on the one hand, where meaning is presumably fixed by the intentions of the author or the referents of its words, with *the machinations of the text* on the other, where meaning may slide across multiple surfaces of signification and be reassembled in multiple ways as it is operated on by readers. Rather than oppose these ways of approaching a text, we envision *The Wretched of the Earth* as an assemblage of "body-text-machine." That is, since Fanon's own embodied condition in dictating and writing this text itself bears witness to its fragmentary design as in part a posthumous work, such an assemblage poses questions to a variety of actual and anticipated readers situated across many possible and practical contexts. We follow Charles Barbour in his reading of Marx by treating Fanon's influential final work not just as the last testament of a dying man and a dying colonialism, but also as a living work that others can dismantle and recompose for other times and circumstances (Barbour 2012, 10-12; Kemple 2022, 17-18).

To illustrate our approach, we imagine the text somewhat anachronistically as a kind of program (platform) or set of applications (apps) displayed on a modern-day hand-held communication device (such as a cell-phone for messaging and texting). That is, the text operates through reading-and-writing-bodies that transmit messages across other devices and over a wide range of thinking-feeling-acting bodies. The "machinations" of the text appeal to affects, as in its references to nationalist aspirations, religious passions, and feelings of resentment, even as they resonate with the intellect, through philosophical citations, historical claims, and political arguments. Less a mechanism for one-to-one messaging between networked yet isolated individuals (on the model

of an iPhone), the text of *The Wretched of the Earth* might be called a *WE-Machine*, a medium for posing new questions relating to other occasions, and a means of calling for collective action while addressing multiple groups in many contexts.¹ Such questions ultimately exceed the intentions of the author or the text's anticipated readers, and sometimes reach beyond the manifest meanings of their referents or interpretations of their recipients. Just as Fanon concludes his first book, *Black Skin, White Masks*, with a "final prayer: O my body, always make me a man who questions!," so we begin by approaching his last book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, as an *interrogation-machine* that challenges today's readers to find applications to the global issues we continue to face concerning nation, religion, and race (Fanon 2008, 206).

The Question of National Liberation

For many readers, the question of nationalism is itself one of the most questionable aspects of Fanon's argument in *The Wretched of the Earth* (Lazarus 1999; Neocosmos 2011; Zeiny 2020). As he emphasizes in the chapter "On National Culture," which originated as a paper presented at the Second Congress of Black Writers and Artists in Rome in 1959, to the extent that literary and intellectual culture expresses the restless aspirations of a people, "they will necessarily lead to the discovery and advancement of *universalizing values*":

Far then from distancing it from other nations, national liberation puts the nation on the stage of history. It is at the heart of national consciousness that *international consciousness* establishes itself and thrives. (Fanon 2004, 180)

As Fanon states in the opening sentence of *The Wretched of the Earth*, national liberation is among other things another name – a metonym – for decolonization, which he insists is "always a violent phenomenon [*un phénomène violent*]" (Fanon 2004, 1). At stake in

this struggle is not just the means of decolonization employed in local settings but also its ends as a globalizing movement, an emancipatory aspiration, and a cosmopolitan ideal. Even as he considers the relationship of cultural means to political ends, Fanon's reflections also pose another question to those who read him in other times and places: can pre-colonial customs, structures of feeling, and political norms potentially inspire post-colonial national culture and transnational struggles?

Following Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto*, Fanon notes that nationalism is a modern product of globalized trade networks and capitalist processes of exploitation as well as a cornerstone of international solidarity and cosmopolitan culture. He juxtaposes his conception of an anti-colonial and nationalist bourgeoisie, which reproduces and expands inequalities between core and peripheral countries while exacerbating uneven and underdevelopment, with what may be called the "nationalist internationalism" of an anti-colonial alliance and militant insurgency (Lazarus 1999, 162). The former "nationalism of the bourgeoisie" is primarily concerned with reproducing local social hierarchies and exploiting the international division of labour in the pursuit of capital accumulation, and in the interests of its own private enrichment as a social class or as a means of reinforcing state power and consolidating social order through public mechanisms of party representation. By contrast, the latter "universalist nationalism" of allied intellectuals and activists from diverse social strata entails perpetually interrogating the misadventures of state political processes, and thus raising questions about the meaning of popular culture for an emerging independent nation. This "nationalism from within and below" evokes questions about whether nationalist movements of resistance can survive globalization; whether local customs will be forced to retreat into chauvinism and nativism; or whether national culture may furnish the motivation for liberation struggles.

Fanon's challenging argument implicitly responds to the argument that Marx and Engels make in *The Communist Manifesto* about whether national identities are destined to disappear:

¹ Writing on the traditional, ancestral, and stolen Indigenous lands known as Canada and across two generations, we wish to acknowledge the shifting and contested character of this collective "WE." Since we began collaborating on this piece in the early days of the global pandemic, the designation "WE" has also taken on the connotation of Canadian-style humanitarian colonialism in the form of the WE Charity Scandal (Canadaland 2021).

National differences and antagonisms between peoples are daily vanishing more and more with the development of the bourgeoisie, with freedom of trade, the world market, uniformity in industrial production and in corresponding conditions of existence. (Marx and Engels 2004, 79)

Fanon revises this classic thesis by “slightly stretching” Marxist terminology to address the colonial realities of the second half of the 20th century, especially in Africa and specifically in Algeria (Fanon 2004, 5). Rather than noting the political tactics and strategies of oppositional national parties, as Marx and Engels (2004, 93-94) do in the final section of the *Manifesto*, Fanon addresses these familiar interlocutors in the text by examining what he calls “the trials and tribulations [*les mésaventures*] of the national consciousness,” with equal concern for its regressive tendencies and its progressive possibilities.

Fanon is especially critical of the mentality of the national petty bourgeoisie, which pursues trade rather than industry; is easily distracted by local disputes at the expense of transnational struggles; and acts in its own self-interest rather than for the advancement of popular movements. At best, this nationalist bourgeoisie treats the party as an instrument in the hands of the government, and at worst, as an intelligence agency to pacify the masses or a police force to impose order on insurgents. Against this nationalist strategy, Fanon asserts that “the party is an instrument in the hands of the people, the vigorous spokesperson and the incorruptible defender of the masses” (Fanon 2004, 127, 130). Drawing explicitly on his experiences as a member of the Front de la Libération Nationale (FLN) in Algeria from 1956 to 1961, Fanon optimistically characterizes the political mission of the party as a pedagogical project for opening up the minds of citizens to the wider world, especially the peasants and lumpenproletarians who may be more inclined to spontaneous revolt than their co-opted counterparts among the urban working classes: “The meeting of the local cell or the committee meeting is a liturgical act. ... At every meeting the brain multiplies the association of ideas and the eye discovers a wider human panorama” (Fanon 2004, 136). In effect, Fanon’s text moves beyond providing

a critical assessment of anti-colonial treatises and pro-capitalist tracts, as Marx and Engels do in their review of “socialist and communist literature,” by invoking practical models for political awakening and by articulating a social imaginary and educational programs for socio-economic transformation (Marx and Engels 2004, 83-92).

To illustrate how these dilemmas of national culture play out quite literally on the “historical stage” of anti-colonial liberation, Fanon quotes a long passage from Guinea poet and politician Keïta Fodéba’s “African Dawn” (*Aube Africaine*, 1957), a prose poem interrupted by guitar, kora, and balafon music that “interprets the rhythmic images of [Keïta’s] country from a revolutionary perspective” (Fanon 2004, 163). The title alludes to “the combat between day and night” which punctuates the sequence of events experienced by the main character of the story, Naman, a peasant farmer who is awoken one morning by young girls chanting verses from the Koran. Naman is then called to the palaver tree by the elders, who decide he must follow the district guard to fight a war for the whites in Europe. The poem ends on the morning his wife Kadia learns he has been shot and killed in Dakar in a dispute between African soldiers and their white chiefs, at the very moment when his return home is announced. The climax of the story occurs some years before when the villagers learn that Naman has been taken prisoner by the Germans:

The elders held counsel and decided that henceforth Naman was authorized to dance the Douga, the sacred dance of the vulture, reserved for those who had performed an exceptional feat. ... Kadia found consolation in seeing her husband raised to the dignity of a national hero. (Keita in Fanon 2004, 166)

Without commenting explicitly on the historical event that Keïta’s dramatic poem commemorates (the mutiny and massacre of colonial infantry (*tirailleurs*) at Thiaroye-sur-Mer in Senegal in 1944), Fanon focuses instead on its “pedagogical value” as both an intellectual exercise and a political treatise, if not also as an affective tract to stir people’s emotions by inciting them to act (Fanon 2004, 167). He reads it

as an allegory of national liberation in which all colonized subjects will recognize themselves, particularly people like Naman who have been conscripted to defend the liberty and civilization of the colonists and then used by them to break up the independence movement.

When we note that Keïta was himself executed several years later by Guinea President Sékou Touré, whom Fanon quotes approvingly in this context for calling on artists and intellectuals to commit themselves completely “to join with the people to make this revolution,” then we might feel compelled to question Fanon’s assertion that “national consciousness is the highest form of culture” (Fanon 2004, 145, 179; see Lazarus 1999, 180). To be sure, Fanon himself interrogates such nationalist misadventures from many perspectives throughout *The Wretched of the Earth*. He observes, for example, “how easy it is for young independent countries to switch back from nation to ethnic group and from state to tribe – a regression which is so terribly detrimental and prejudicial to the development of the nation and national unity” (Fanon 2004, 97). His emphasis on artistic, emotional, and intellectual culture as a possible foundation for national liberation is therefore not simply a modernist declaration of the death of “aboriginal society,” which he presents as an artifact of colonialism, but rather the reverse side of this, in that “in the colonies the economic infrastructure is also a superstructure” (Fanon 2004, 5; Lazarus 1999, 172). In other words, in contrast to the metropole, the political and cultural superstructures of colonial society are integrated into the system’s economic infrastructure. As Marx argues in the final chapter of *Capital*, titled “The Modern Theory of Colonization,” in the colonies the dependence of workers and subjects on the conditions of capitalist settlement (*Ansiedlung*) does not appear as a law of nature, as it does in the “civilized” countries, but instead “must be created by artificial means” (Marx 1976, 934, 937). These instruments of colonial power include political coercion and ideological persuasion exercised by occupying authorities, which are vulnerable to resistance and subversion by colonized people when they break the lines of transmission between the national economy and

global capital. As Marx and Engels and later Fanon acknowledge, the expression of discontent and revolt may come not just from the urban proletariat and rural peasantry but also from the lumpenproletariat and “the wretched of the earth” more broadly, as each of these classes draws upon emerging revolutionary or even older religious resources of struggle (Marx and Engels 2004, 72; Fanon 2004, 81).

The Question of Religious Revolution

While Fanon’s endorsement of national culture in *The Wretched of the Earth* remains one of the most contested aspects of his “decolonization manifesto,” his argument is further complicated when we consider religion as a form of culture with a possible political role in the project of decolonization. If nationalism runs the risk of creating further divisions and antagonisms both within and between nations, an endorsement of religion becomes even more questionable in the colonial contexts that Fanon speaks to, as well as in those he invokes only implicitly or not at all. Fanon views a revival of pride in national culture as a potentially effective strategy to combat the national degradation that occurs when the colonizer attempts “to convince the indigenous population it [will] save them from darkness” (Fanon 2004, 149). The colonizer sees native culture, traditions, language, and religion as belonging to an age of darkness, as a kind of “barbarism” that must therefore be enlightened (Fanon 2004, 149). Often overlooked in Fanon’s endorsement of national culture is his corresponding appreciation for pre-colonial religious customs and ritualism potentially counteracting colonial occupation and its devastating effects on the social, economic, and cultural infrastructure of subjugated peoples, especially Islam in the Arab world.

Although his overall attitude towards religion remains guarded and even hostile at times, the careful reader can discern that Fanon is at times direct in expressing his appreciation of Islam as a form of national culture, and thus of political resistance. (Slisli 2008) He writes, for example, that in the Arab world “the struggle for national liberation was linked to a cultural phenomenon commonly known as the awakening of Islam. The passion displayed by con-

temporary Arab authors in reminding their people of the great chapters of Arab history is in response to the lies of the occupier” (Fanon 2004, 151). The value of an Islamic revival for Fanon lies in combating the spiritual degradation that colonial realities have imposed on the Arab colonies, convincing the people that their religion is backwards, an arrogance that is still evident today in the resurgence of Islamophobia in the global war on terror and beyond. With its open-ended multi-dimensional presentation of the religious sources of “national culture,” *The Wretched of the Earth* invites contemporary readers to consider aspects of social phenomena that he himself does not give much attention to, but which provoke new questions and ideas for us today (Farahzad 2017).

This interpretive challenge is precisely what Fanon’s contemporary Ali Shariati, the Iranian sociologist, Muslim intellectual, and anti-imperialist revolutionary, takes up in his reading of *The Wretched of the Earth*. Shariati is often credited as the ideologue of the Iranian Revolution of 1979 in presenting Shi’a Islam as a revolutionary religion promoting anti-Shah sentiments (Abrahamian 1982, 24–28; Bayat 2017). Shariati’s political education was largely inspired by a skeptical view of Marx’s critique of capitalism and colonialism. He was also Fanon’s peer and spent his years studying at the Sorbonne while active in support of the Algerian War at the same time as Fanon was working with the FLN (Abrahamian 1982, 24–28). Shariati’s interest in translating *The Wretched of the Earth* into Farsi for an Iranian audience was certainly in part an attempt to make this decolonization manifesto applicable to a country that had never been explicitly colonized but was rather targeted by western imperialism.² Translations of *The Wretched of the Earth* into other languages themselves constitute a mechanism through which the text comes to be used by activists in creating a “multiplicity of ideological interpretations” which respond to and provoke specific actions and affects (Farahzad 2017, 130). Shariati is among those social theorists who have used this text as a point of departure for their own

teachings and practical programs, in part by adapting it to address questions of progress, knowledge, and belief posed by Islam (Byrd and Miri 2017).

Shariati is perhaps best known for arguing that reviving Islam as a social justice philosophy and “internationalist ideal” can combat the cultural degradation and sense of inferiority imposed on natives living in colonial and imperial situations (Rahnema 1998, 25). Though certainly idealistic about Islam’s subversive potential, and decidedly more optimistic about the political prospects of revolutionary movements than Fanon, Shariati’s hope for an Islamic revival is based on economic analyses and political principles that align with Fanon’s appreciation for “the awakening of Islam” in the Arab world as a form of national culture (Fanon 2004, 151). In an exchange of letters the year *The Wretched of the Earth* was published, Fanon offers explicit support for Shariati’s belief that revolution may be inspired by religious sensibilities, noting that the world of Islam – understood as both a philosophy and a people – has “fought against the west and colonialism more than all Asia and all Africa,” and that western colonialism has “inflicted serious wounds on [Islam’s] body and soul” (Fanon 2018, 668). Fanon partially endorses Shariati’s aspiration that Islam can re-inspire Muslim people who have been oppressed and humiliated for centuries by the western conviction that Islam is inherently a barbaric, backwards, and violent religion. Though wary of the oppressive, sectarian, and regressive ways that an Islamic revival may manifest itself, he tells Shariati that it is “incumbent” on him and like-minded scholars to develop Islamic principles of social justice and to “*breathe this spirit* into the weary body of the Muslim orient” (Fanon 2018, 669).

Despite Fanon’s support for Shariati’s aspirations in these letters, he still expresses reservations that Islam may be too limiting as a political philosophy to serve an anti-oppressive cause insofar as religious sentiments hold an emancipated future hostage to conservative traditions: “I think that reviving sectarian and religious mindsets could impede this necessary [global] unification – already difficult to attain – and divert that nation yet to come ... from its ideal future, bringing it instead closer to its past” (Fanon 2018,

² As Farahzad points out, the extent of Shariati’s involvement in the translation of *The Wretched of the Earth* is contested, although he was certainly engaging with the works of Fanon for an Iranian audience (see also Rahnema 1998).

669). He goes on to express his skepticism towards the idea that inward spiritual exploration of the self may provide a means for liberation, since such an individual path may instead detract from the collective project of creating a universal philosophy that could unite oppressed people throughout the world (Shatz 2017). These reservations shed light on *The Wretched of the Earth* on the eve of its publication as a purposely open-ended text designed to resonate with colonized people in multiple contexts. Certainly, Islam may be useful in the Muslim colonies in igniting and reinvigorating the confidence the colonizer has tried to degrade, but Fanon's text is even more concerned to support global solidarity articulated through universal concepts that are not limited to any one religious group or nation.

Fanon's nuanced view of the revolutionary potential of Islam as proposed by Shariati is grounded in his overriding concerns with political strategy and tactics, and in this regard, it is congruent with Marx's own understanding of religion. The young Marx's notorious characterization of religion as the "opium of the people" has become emblematic of the Marxist disregard and disdain for all forms of religious expression (Marx 1975, 244). Taken from "A Contribution to a Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*. Introduction" (1844), this catchphrase on its own seems to emphasize the numbing, addictive, and escapist qualities of religion while obscuring any critical appreciation of its revolutionary potential (not to mention its historical resonance for Marx in the colonial context of the first Opium War). In the preceding lines that are often passed over, however, Marx highlights his positive appreciation for the critical and emotional sources of religious beliefs and practices: "Religious suffering is at one and the same time the expression of real suffering and a *protest* against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the *heart of a heartless world* and the *soul of soulless conditions*" (Marx 1975, 244; emphasis in the original). Rather than rejecting all religious expression as devoid of any liberatory potential, he sees religion as a form of protest against injustice, and as the "heart and soul" (*Gemüt und Geist*) of a heartless and soulless world.

Shariati's interest in the revolutionary politics of Islam may have drawn inspiration from the mystical and even lyrical tone that Marx sometimes assumes in describing how capitalist exploitation has hollowed out the world's spirit, despite his reservations about the atheistic underpinnings of Marxism. In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, for instance, Marx writes that capitalist society "estranges man's own body from him, as it does external nature and his *spiritual essence*," echoing Shariati's critical views on the soul-destroying character of western imperialism (Marx 2016, 52). Despite these affinities, outside Iran Shariati's critical view of Marxism has partly been shaped by the popularity of his posthumously published book *Marxism and Other Western Fallacies: An Islamic Critique*. The credibility of this book as an authentic representation of Shariati's ideas and the accuracy of the English translation are disputed among scholars (Abrahamian 1982). As the title suggests, Shariati makes the case against Marxism as a flawed form of liberatory humanism and advocates for Islam as an alternative philosophy. He argues that western philosophies of humanism, including Marxism, are based on ancient Greek myths in which the gods are depicted as man's first oppressor. To illustrate this point, he cites the myth of Prometheus who steals divine fire – understood both literally as a civilizing technology and metaphorically as an image of wisdom – to give to humans and is then punished by the gods. Within this classic story, the competitiveness, opposition, and jealousy of the Greek gods towards humans stand in stark juxtaposition to their role in fostering enlightenment and emancipation (Shariati 1980, 18).

Shariati is concerned with how this anti-theistic assumption has been internalized in the west, especially in political philosophies like Marxism, arguing that "the modern mind can hardly accept [religion] as a progressive, liberating force" (Shariati 1980, 49). But for Shariati, eastern religions like Islam imagine a very different relationship between humanity and God, one that western progressive scholars misrecognize in dismissing the emancipatory potential of any religion. He contrasts the Greek myth, where the gods punish Prometheus for giving the gift of

wisdom to humanity, to the Islamic story of Iblis, where God damns a divine being who had resided in the highest ranks of heaven alongside angels for refusing to bow to the feet of Aadam (Shariati 1980, 18). Since Aadam is the first human from whom all of humanity descends, from an Islamic perspective God arguably places humans at a higher rank than even some divine entities. For Shariati, Islam reminds believers of their spiritual importance and relative ranking in the cosmos. For the oppressed soul and for “*les damnés de la terre*” (Fanon’s phrase), this realization can be liberating, and may offer inspiration for combatting the moral degradation and social injustices suffered at the hands of colonizers operating in service of an imperialist system.

Although to varying degrees Fanon, Shariati, and Marx express considerable optimism regarding the revolutionary potential of a religious revival, Fanon is especially emphatic in issuing a warning that religion can impede universal projects of liberation. In this regard, Shariati’s visionary claim that “Islam addresses economic welfare and social justice as principles of its social order” seems to ignore the history of political abuses justified by orthodox religious beliefs (Shariati 1980, 73). Despite his confidence in the emancipatory message of Islam, toward the end of *Marxism and Other Western Fallacies*, Shariati himself articulates a more cautious approach in arguing that the future he envisions is “neither predestined nor prefabricated. Instead, it remains to be built” (Shariati 1980, 96). Shariati is aware that even if Islam may potentially deliver or inspire movements for social justice, it has been and continues to be pressed into the service of repressive political agendas. Where Shariati reminds us of the lessons that a religion like Islam may potentially teach for liberatory politics, *The Wretched of the Earth* offers us a place to begin this inquiry and to examine its implications. Intellectuals and activists who hope to understand inequalities and combat injustices may find in that text a warning against the dangers of religious and sectarian politics, as well as inspiration in fighting for justice.

The Question of Racial Resentment

“At certain moments,” Fanon writes in the conclusion to *Black Skin, White Masks*, “the black man is locked in his body” (Fanon 2008, 200). If an analysis of the revolutionary potential of religion and culture offers insight into the dynamics of colonized nationhood and popular struggles, then the psychology of political passions and the embodied relationship between racism, colonialism, and capitalism are for Fanon keys to unlocking the consciousness or soul (*psyche*) of the colonized individual (Appiah 2022). Max Silverman describes *Black Skin, White Masks* as a text that interrogates how “the economic, political, and ideological power of the West to *colonize the minds and bodies of others* was being challenged by new discourses and struggles of liberation by the victims of that power” (Silverman 2005, 2). Fanon offers “an intellectual critique and an existential project, an exposé of the ideological apparatus of colonialism and a passionate cry from deep within a body alienated by that system and in search of liberation from it” (Silverman 2005, 3). An analysis of colonial institutions is paired with an inquiry into the oppressed body/psyche/person. Fanon’s opening question, “What does the black man *want?*,” indicates the urgently personal and racialized nature of the colonized’s demand for decolonization (Fanon 2008, xii).

As Homi Bhabha argues, “in privileging the psychic dimension [Fanon] changes not only what we understand by a *political* demand but transforms the very means by which we recognize and identify its *human agency*” (Bhabha 1986, 115). But Fanon is not so much privileging the psychic dimension as much as he is illustrating its *inherent* political nature.

And then we were given the occasion to confront the white gaze. An unusual weight descended on us. ... In the white world, the man of color encounters difficulties in elaborating his body schema. ... I cast an objective gaze over myself, discovered my blackness, my ethnic features; deafened by cannibalism, backwardness, fetishism, racial stigmas. ... I transported myself ... far, very far from myself, and gave myself up as an object. What did this mean to me? Peeling, stripping my skin, causing a hemorrhage that

left congealed black blood all over my body.
(Fanon 2008, 90, 92)

The Wretched of the Earth builds on this earlier work's central question – “What does the black man want? –” in its more detailed depiction of colonial conditions that diminish and destroy the self-worth of Black people and their experiences under the gaze of white colonizers. In each book, Fanon illuminates a psycho-social dimension (seeing in “the white man's eyes” what racist colonialism has wrought) and the real, bloody wound of occupation (“a hemorrhage that left congealed black blood all over my body”).

The later work turns these psychological judgments about inner life outward toward a political analysis of the Algerian War of Independence. In the final chapter, “Colonial War and Mental Disorders,” Fanon provides graphic descriptions of French attempts to “colonize the minds and bodies” of others in the form of notes from his psychiatric practice. Here, he details several medical cases involving civilians, revolutionary fighters, and colonial officers. Understanding these fragmentary notes requires a perspective from readers that appreciates both the material *and* psychic violence inflicted on the oppressed. Rather than recentering psychology on individual suffering, Fanon sees his own work as a psychiatrist as a radical *political* intervention that acknowledges and draws upon resentment as a valid and indispensable anti-colonial response. The politics of resentment offers an approach to psychic trauma that engages with racism, colonialism, and capitalism in rethinking the potentialities of revolutionary struggle.

Throughout *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon describes how the colonized population is dehumanized intellectually, morally, and emotionally by the colonizer: “The colonist is not content with stating that the colonized world has lost its values or worse never possessed any. The ‘native’ is declared imperious to ethics, representing not only the absence of values but the negation of values” (Fanon 2004, 6). At the same time, the traditions of the native or indigenous culture are supposedly evidence of “innate depravity” (Fanon 2004, 7). Confronted with “a systematized negation of the other, a frenzied deter-

mination to deny the other any attribute of humanity,” this process of internalized colonialism compels the colonized to ask themselves “Who am I in reality?” (Fanon 2004, 182). Colonial occupation is experienced corporeally and psychically, as “a constant and considerable stream of mental symptoms are direct sequels of this oppression” (Fanon 2004, 182). As Fanon argues in his essay “Racism and Culture”, “racism that aspires to be rational, individual, genotypically and phenotypically determined, becomes transformed into cultural racism. The object of racism is no longer the individual man but a certain form of existing” (Fanon 1967, 32). Racism is not incidental to but rather constitutive of the culture of the colonizer, since denigrating the colonized helps “authenticate” the superiority of the colonizer by enforcing the double culture of a “Manichean world” (Fanon 2004, 6). But the colonized are not passive, Fanon insists, if the drive for decolonization “exists in a raw, repressed, and reckless state in the lives and consciousness of the colonized men and women” (Fanon 2004, 1). His distinction between “lives” and “consciousness” is another way of referring to the outer and inner living conditions that structure existence for the colonized.

Bhabha's assertion that Fanon prioritizes the psychological dimension of colonialism, at least in *Black Skin, White Masks*, can be challenged by examining a case from the chapter on “Colonial War and Mental Disorders” that illustrates the interweaving of the psychic and the political. In Series A, Case #4, Fanon reports that a French officer, identified as “A”, is suffering from “behavioral problems” (Fanon 2004, 194). Officer A tells Fanon that his military duties included interrogating Algerian fighters who “never wanted to confess anything” (Fanon 2004, 194). He reports hearing screams every night and stuffing his ears with cotton to drown out the noise, asserting that the prisoners' screams were humorous at first but then disturbed him:

Today I can tell just which stage the interrogation has reached by the sound of the screams. The guy who has been punched twice and given a blow behind the ear has a certain way of talking, screaming, and saying that he is innocent. After

he has been hanging by his wrists for two hours, his voice changes. After the bathtub, a different voice... But it's after the electricity that it becomes unbearable. You'd think he was going to die... Of course there are those who don't scream... But they imagine we are going to kill them immediately. But we're not interested in killing them. What we want is information. We first try and get them to scream, and sooner or later they give in... Mind you, we'd prefer not to. But they don't make things easy for us. Now I can hear those screams at home. Especially the screams of the ones who died at the police headquarters. Doctor, I'm sick of this job. If you can cure me, I'll request a transfer to France. If they refuse, I'll resign. (Fanon 2004, 195)

The officer, A, is treated at home. One day, with Fanon running late, the officer decides to visit the hospital, and when Fanon arrives, he finds him collapsed under a tree. A tells Fanon that he encountered one of Fanon's other patients, an Algerian suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder whom A had once personally tortured (Fanon 2004, 196). The chance meeting elicited "a wave of anxiety and terror" in A, and the Algerian was found trying to commit suicide in a hospital bathroom, convinced the officer had come to take him to police headquarters. Following several more appointments, A's condition improved, and he was cleared of any illness. But the Algerian could not shake the idea that he was being pursued, no matter how hard the hospital staff tried to convince him that he was not going to be arrested and tortured.

Cases like these exemplify how the colonial system impresses itself on both the colonizer and the colonized, who experience a violence that is directly tied to the power and position of the colonizer. In identifying how the relationship takes a toll on both occupier and occupied, Fanon sheds light on the political nature of the psychological condition of each. The officer's nightmares stem from his torture of Algerian nationalists. He has learned a language, "the certain way of talking" exhibited by prisoners during the interrogation. For the officer, the goal was to extract *information*, that is, strategically relevant

facts. The screams of those who refused to give anything up ricochet inside the officer's head years later. Once cured, he promises to return to France, either through transfer or resignation, leaving the colony to resettle in the motherland. The officer can trade in his role as occupier rooted in another place, believing his nightmares are tied to the land he occupies and can be left behind. He is anxious to have these demons exorcised because occupation haunts the minds and bodies of those who constitute the past, present, and future of the colonial "first confrontation, [which is] colored by violence [and] cohabitation" (Fanon 2004, 194). Cohabitation is the key to the colonial situation; when A meets a former prisoner and this situation is made present and palpable, his reaction is frenzied panic. He thinks the Algerian wants revenge and seeks shelter under a tree while the Algerian tries to kill himself in a hospital bathroom fearing he will again be tortured. These respective reactions speak to the political undercurrent driving the psychic reality experienced by both men; in this moment of distress, where both parties are made to confront their place in the colonial situation, the officer can collapse under a tree because *it is his tree*. The patient believes he will be kidnapped once more and chooses death over an unbearable torture. The colony belongs to the colonizer, and his trauma is *validated* by virtue of his occupation of the land. In his role as doctor, Fanon infers that the encounter may have spurred his patient's rehabilitation. The officer has survived the meeting; the screams keeping him up at night could not claim him, and he can move on confident of his safety. But the Algerian, who is being treated in a colonial hospital in his occupied homeland, is even more on edge, convinced he will be arrested and tortured once again.

In the colonial context the political milieu cannot be divorced from the psychological. The "post" in post-traumatic stress for the Algerian in Fanon's case study is only meaningful if understood as the period following the initial violence of occupation, and thus as the political and psychological future of that event; it should not signify an end. The political struggle of decolonization is psychologized and pathologized, couched in medical language yet intimately imbricated

cated in power relations. As a psychiatrist, Fanon acts as mediator between two subjects, both of whom are suffering (according to the classification of the case study) from “severe reactive disorders” (Fanon 2004, 185). Fanon’s post-traumatic politics rely in part on an analysis of the “reactive disorder” of resentment, or what may be characterized as the psychic build-up of resistance in the mind, body, and soul of the oppressed. Resentment is intimately linked with trauma, where the experience of extreme violence during torture is manifested in a chance meeting years later. The torture of Algerian freedom fighters is emblematic of the violence inflicted by colonial forces on the native population, and the fact that it engenders a confrontation long after the initial event (the actual torture) has ended speaks to the pervasiveness of colonial violence.

Glen Coulthard’s *Red Skin, White Masks* offers a re-reading of Fanon’s first book in light of *The Wretched of the Earth* in a way that presents a powerful case for the reappraisal of psycho-political and racial resentment in subsequent colonial struggles. Coulthard’s aim is to rebuke the contemporary politics of recognition and reconciliation through a critique of the Canadian government’s treatment of its Indigenous population. He takes aim at “the global industry” that promotes “forgiveness” and “reconciliation” as a prerequisite to “resolving the deleterious social impacts of intrastate violence, mass atrocity, and historical injustice” (Coulthard 2014, 106). Rather than recognizing historical atrocities and offering or accepting state apologies, Coulthard argues for a reassessment of *the politics of resentment*. Following Thomas Brudholm’s analysis of the emotional dynamics of genocide (Brudholm 2008), he posits that there is no clear moral dividing-line between those who come to terms with experiences of violence and oppression and embrace the reconciliatory stance, on the one hand, and those who harbour feelings of anger and resentment, on the other (Coulthard 2014, 108). “Coming to terms” with the experience of violence *requires* an engagement with feelings of animus towards those structures that have sought and succeeded in causing immense pain. Resentment is not simply

a crude expression of one’s injured self, but also a necessary step towards a more complete subjecthood. Extending Brudholm’s analysis of “the *aftermath* of mass atrocities,” Coulthard argues that the colonial state allocates “the abuses of settler colonization to the dustbins of history and/or purposely disentangles processes of reconciliation from questions of settler coloniality as such” (Coulthard 2014, 108). In short, reconciliation obscures settler-colonial history by promoting a kind of “conceptual revisionism” in which those who do not forgive and forget are resentful because they cannot “move on” from the past and embrace the present (Coulthard 2014, 109).

Coulthard’s insight regarding the false temporal progression “from resentment to reconciliation” proposed by the state is central to his reading of Fanon’s insights into internalized colonialism. As a feeling of “bitter indignation at having been treated unfairly,” resentment has “an in-built *political* component” insofar as it arises in response to “maltreatment, or injustice” (Coulthard 2014, 110). Internalized colonialism is the process by which the native population is socialized to accept a state of violently imposed inequality as hegemonic, and thus as the prevailing common sense (Coulthard 2014, 113). In other words, colonialism needs subjects “that acquiesce to the forms of power that have been imposed on them,” and so submit in less ostentatious ways that are (in Fanon’s words) “more subtle, less bloody” (Coulthard 2014, 112–113, quoting Fanon 2004, 27). Not satisfied with occupying land, the colonizer invades consciousness, impeding both political sovereignty and individual autonomy. While Fanon’s comments on the dreams of the colonized exemplify the workings of internalized colonialism, the reactive feelings born of this situation do not have to be self-destructive and injurious; they can also be weaponized against the colonizer through the “*externalization* of that which was previously *internalized*: a purging of the so-called “inferiority complex” of the colonized subject” (Coulthard 2014, 114). Fanon describes the breakdown of the psychological and economic structure that maintains this “Manichean world” of the colonial subject:

The colonized subject, degraded, impoverished, and abused, begins to look at the colonist's world of 'lights and paved roads' with envy, contempt, and resentment. The colonized begin to desire what has been denied them: land, freedom, and dignity. (Coulthard 2014, 113)

The colonized are reinvigorated through the recognition of an *external* force as the source of their immiseration, embracing cultural traditions denigrated by the occupying force and actively agitating for decolonization. Therefore, "the emergence of reactive emotions like anger and resentment can indicate a breakdown of colonial subjection and thus open up the possibility of developing alternative subjectivities and anticolonial practices" (Coulthard 2014, 115). In a similar vein, Achille Mbembe has recently described what he calls the "struggle ... to convert the economy of hatred and the desire for vengeance into a political economy" (Mbembe 2019, 152). In other words, there is a sense in which the reactive drive towards revenge must be disciplined into a constructive project, and the build-up of resentment within the colonized subject must be directed in a productive way that sustains the revolutionary struggle.³ Such acts of defiance and resistance demonstrate the power of resentment to turn anger towards the oppressor, but in a way that gestures towards a movement of decolonization and recognizes a righteous rage. Resentment acknowledges dispossession, and this in itself is revolutionary.

Conclusion: A New Humanism for New Struggles?

If *The Wretched of the Earth* can be read as a living "interrogation-machine" for today and not just as a relic of a dying and defeated colonialism, as we have argued here, then we must consider not just the questions it poses and the answers it provides – in particular, about nationhood, religion, and race – but also *what and whom it interrogates*. As Jean-

³ Coulthard notes instances of weaponized resentment on the part of Indigenous people in Canada, such as the Oka Crisis of 1990, when the Mohawks of Kanesatake erected barricades to block development on their land. (Coulthard 2014, 116). More recently, barricades were set up all across Canada in solidarity with the Wet'suwet'en People resisting colonial development on their traditional land (see MacCharles and Ballingal 2020).

Paul Sartre boldly states in his infamous "Preface" to this work, which Fanon himself asked him to write, "the Third World discovers *itself* and speaks to *itself* through this voice" (Fanon 2004, xlvi). And yet Fanon's words are not just spoken but also written in the colonial language, which suggests that he must participate in "assuming a culture and bearing the weight of a civilization," as he acknowledges in the opening pages of *Black Skin, White Masks* (Fanon 2008, 2). Sartre is therefore quick to point out that Fanon is addressing the colonized world as well: "Fanon speaks out loud and clear. We Europeans can hear him" (Fanon 2004, xlvi). Just as the question for Fanon is not simply whether to reject the colonial language and write in a local dialect (such as the Creole of his native Martinique), those of us who read him today in English translation or in any other language must struggle to find in this text a resource for our own questions and aspirations. As a work that speaks back to the colonial metropole in its own languages, it provokes a kind of "reverse tutelage" in the lessons of anti-colonial dissent (Gopal 2019). As Esmaeil Zeiny asks in a recent essay on Fanon's attention to the power of the written word, "Can't a 'fighting literature' or a 'national literature' address both the colonized and the colonizers?" (Zeiny 2020, 302).

We have argued that *The Wretched of the Earth* is a manifesto, a handbook for decolonization on the level of a society-shifting revolution, and a kind of *vade mecum* or hand-held device for recognizing the everyday violences of colonialism for the individual and communicating ways of resisting them. Fanon's interlocutors, from Marx and Engels in the European past to Keïta and Shariati in the global present along with his future readers like Coulthard and Mbembe, are each provoked to make use of this text in a decolonizing project that is political as well as psychological. He notes repeatedly that both the land and the minds of the native population must be occupied if the colonizing force is to be effective: "Imperialism ... sows seeds of decay here and there that must be mercilessly rooted from our land and from our minds" (Fanon 2004, 181). Suggesting that national culture, religious beliefs, and psychic resent-

ment can advance political consciousness, Fanon acknowledges that these cannot bring change on their own, although they remain necessary to the process of decolonization and essential in forging ties of solidarity within struggles against racism and capitalism.

In writing about movements for national liberation, Fanon famously calls for a “new humanism” that “is written into the objectives and methods of the struggle” (Fanon 2004, 178). Military barracks and ideological frameworks are targets of this struggle with the aim of questioning the humanism of the colonizer while, importantly, *recognizing the colonized as human*. Fanon’s new humanism remains especially relevant today in a tumultuous moment rocked with protests against police brutality amidst a pandemic that has laid bare the cruel economic realities of colonial capitalism. Without appropriating the language of Indigenous activists in North and South America, Africa, and Asia, many activists and critics are expressing their resentment toward a system of racialized inequality that has caused pain, suffering, and trauma to millions of marginalized people. Fanon reminds us that taking up the call for a new humanism that actively addresses the sources of these violences requires mobilizing “every level of society” (Fanon 2004, 178). His argument is echoed in Shariati’s warning that a new humanism addressing social inequalities and political injustices will not be handed to us; in Keïta’s hope for an “African Dawn”; and even in his patients’ desire to be released from their rage and guilt. Fanon’s parting message to revolutionaries, activists, and scholars is to continue to interrogate, to probe, to question. As a decolonial revolutionary and psychiatrist, he used the record of colonial torture to uncover the deeper logics of violence and trauma at play in the settler-native relationship, in effect, to interrogate the interrogators. By building on Fanon’s commitment to interrogating material, social, and textual conditions, intellectuals and activists may move closer to producing the transformative social change needed for a more just society.

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Radical Complexity: Using Concepts From Complex Systems Theory to Think About Socialist Transformation

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ABSTRACT: Abolishing alienated labour requires the radical democratization of economic production. Complex systems theory offers tools for theorizing how this radical democracy could be constructed. In complex systems theory, the same structures and transformations appear across multiple domains in the physical and life sciences. Evolution is one such concept. Rather than being linear and gradual, evolution is a nonlinear process in which stable equilibria are punctuated by bursts of catastrophic change. Even catastrophic change, however, happens through an incremental process: the production of new forms through new combinations of existing forms. Each evolutionary permutation of a system is a step into its space of adjacent possibilities. The task of revolutionary theory can be conceptualized as that of plotting a course through capitalism's adjacent possibility space, bringing the system to a benign catastrophe that triggers a phase transition into socialism. The complexity of this mapping requires a distributed processing approach to theorizing that prefigures the distributed processing, or socialist general intellect, that must characterize any radically democratic worker control of production. This project suggests the expansion of a new role for professional intellectuals: that of tool makers, developing conceptual materials that feed a recursive process of the construction of socialist networks.

KEYWORDS: theory, socialism, complex systems, relational sociology, revolution

One of the crucial questions that must be answered in the process of transforming capitalist society predicated on the alienation of labour-power and the exploitation of labour to a socialist society predicated on democratic worker control of the forces of production is how radical socialism will work in practice. This is a ferociously difficult question. It is distinct from but intimately connected with the questions of how a socialist state should operate and of how radical socialist struggles within capitalist society should be organized. In this paper, I draw on a number of basic concepts from complex systems theory to present an analysis of why this question is so intractable, and to suggest some possible resources for making it more tractable.

The Need for Materialist Utopianism

In "Socialism for Realists," Sam Gindin distinguishes between "two central tasks the making of socialism demands": the "political battle to defeat capitalism" and "establishing popular confidence in the feasibility of a socialist society" (Gindin 2018). The "overwhelming focus" of socialists' energies has been on the former, he writes, and too little energy has been put into the latter. The very survival of socialism as a movement, in his view, depends on "presenting a framework that contributes to making the case for socialism's *plausibility*." This involves making concrete proposals of how a socialist society would actually function in practice, for what its institutions and norms will be.

In “Marxism, prefigurative communism, and the problem of workers’ control” (Boggs 1977a; see also Boggs 1977b), Carl Boggs also stresses the need for deliberation on how socialism will work in practice. He writes: “A conspicuous deficiency of the Marxist tradition has been the failure to produce a theory of the state and political action that could furnish the basis of a democratic and non-authoritarian revolutionary process” (Boggs 1977a). Leninism on the one hand and liberal or social-democratic reforms on the other have failed to overcome authoritarianism at the level of production relations. Boggs argues that the tradition of prefigurative communism contains the democratic theory and practice that socialism needs, and advocates “asserting the prefigurative over the Jacobin.”

These two tasks, making the case for socialism’s plausibility and developing a theory and practice of democratic production relations, are intimately connected. Historical materialism proposes that human consciousness emerges out of material social relations: “It is not the consciousness of men [sic] that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness” (Marx 1971). Of course the causal interplay between base and superstructure is far more complex than implied by the word ‘determines’; phenomena of the superstructure have relative autonomy and can affect class relations to some extent (Engels 1999; Althusser 2005). But the point is that

the question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question. Man [sic] must prove the truth, i.e., the reality and power, the this-worldliness of his thinking in practice. (Marx 1976b, 3)

As long as the relations of production remain firmly capitalist, there is only so far that culture and politics can bend towards socialist ideals.

Marx “thought communism on a world scale would appear organically and quite rapidly” as a mechanical product of the internal contradictions of capitalism (Boggs 1977a). Workers themselves, engaged in revolutionary struggle, would work out the concrete practices of socialist production. This

leaves theorists with the task of critique, of clearing away the ideological obstacles to working-class political mobilization. Marx’s assumption turned out to be wrong, however. It has been far from obvious how to build socialist societies on national scales, let alone globally. Boggs and Gindin both point to the difficulty of making democratic worker control of production operate beyond local scales. Boggs attributes this difficulty mainly to hostility of statist or Jacobin socialisms to prefigurative projects, but Gindin focuses instead on the *complexity* of the decisions that self-governing workers face:

It is one thing to assert that workers will make the decisions but how, for example, would workers in an appliance plant weigh whether to increase their use of aluminum as opposed to leaving that aluminum for more valuable social purposes elsewhere? Or in deciding how to allocate their year-end “surplus,” how much should be reinvested in their own firm versus other firms? Or if a group of workers wanted to exchange some income for shorter hours, how could they measure and compare the benefits to themselves versus the loss of product or services to society? (Gindin 2018)

Workers need effective ways to resolve these questions through radically democratic deliberation for production to retain a socialist character as it scales up from the local level to national and global levels. And socialists need to be able to point to actual or at least plausible solutions to these dilemmas to attract skeptical workers to the socialist project.

Gindin and Boggs both offer specific institutional models as solutions for the problems they raise (prefigurative communism for Boggs, a “layers of planning” system for Gindin). I’m not doing that in this paper. Instead of a specific institutional framework, I offer a specific theoretical language for deliberating over institutional frameworks. The main obstacles to making socialism work in practice have to do with complexity. Complex systems theory offers tools for addressing those complexities.

Simple and Complex Systems Theories

To define what we mean by a “system,” we can use this formulation by Donella Meadows: “a system

is an interconnected set of elements that is coherently organized in a way that achieves something” (Meadows 2008, 11).¹ Defined this way, a system has three types of components: elements (which can themselves also be systems), the interconnections or relations among those elements, and the functions or outputs generated by the workings of the system. (Meadows describes these functions as the ‘purpose’ of the system, but, like Althusser (Althusser 2006, 187), we can do without this lapse into teleology.) System complexity “arises when the dependencies among the elements become important” (Miller and Page 2007, 9-10). In other words, the relations among elements produce qualities and behaviors not found in the individual elements, an effect called *emergence* (Holland 1998). Complex systems behave nonlinearly and display sensitivity to initial conditions: small changes to the inputs of the system can produce large changes in its functional outputs (Bossel 2007, 133, 140).

Probably every human culture has some version of systems theory or theories. In sociology, systems theorizing appears at the very inauguration of the discipline, in Comte’s work on social statics and social dynamics (Comte 1998). It appears in Spencer’s claim that society is to individual human beings as a living organism is to its individual cells (Spencer 1971), and in Durkheim’s proposition that social facts exist independently of their individual instances and interact directly with each other (Durkheim 1982). The most influential system theorist in sociology is unquestionably Talcott Parsons, whose assumptions can be seen at work in the thinking even of leftists who believe they reject his structural functionalism. This is worth looking at for a moment.

Parsons proposes that any given social action operates simultaneously in a number of overlapping action systems and is subject to the internal dynam-

ics of each of them (Parsons 1937, 1951). Primary among these are the personality system, consisting of the individual’s psychological needs and motivations; the cultural system, consisting of societally shared beliefs and values; and the social system, consisting of norms and roles which may be general throughout society or specific to particular institutional settings. Each of these systems is emergent and tries to adapt to its environments, pursue its own goals, integrate its internal elements, and perpetuate itself over time. Any given action is subject to pressure from the internal dynamics of these multiple systems, and individual behaviour can be explained as an always-imperfect resolution of the constantly shifting tensions among the evolving actions systems (e.g. Parsons 1954). Actions, not individuals, are the constituent elements of society. Actions assemble into institutionalized structures, which are functionally interdependent in the sense that the behaviour of any one structure depends on the behaviour of all the others.

Parsons is often read as a conservative apologist for social order. There is some merit to this interpretation, but not for the reasons people usually think. As used by Parsons, the term ‘function’ does not necessarily imply a benefit to actual people. Instead: a function is a normal product of the workings of a system; a functional prerequisite is something a system needs to go on working; and action is functional or dysfunctional depending on whether it contributes to or detracts from the functional prerequisites of a system (Parsons 1949; 1951, 28-29). In principle, whether an action that is functional for a given social system also benefits actual human beings depends on the system in question: racist violence is functional in a slave society, for instance. In this sense, Parsons’s structural functionalism is a politically protean orientation to the causal interdependencies in a system, and could provide material for social critique if, for instance, certain forms of oppression are functionally necessary for the maintenance of a given social order (Alexander 1985).

In practice, Parsons never seriously considers this point, and often he writes as if social order is always good. But we can read this as a conservative

1 Meadows describes her own work as systems thinking, not systems theory. Systems theorists like Bossel or Thurner operationalize system parameters as quantitative measures and use mathematical models to theorize system dynamics. Meadows uses qualitative concepts and, in the interests of being as accessible as possible, uses very few specialized concepts. We can distribute theoretical work on systems along a continuum of greater or lesser formalization, with the systems thinking of Meadows, Stroh, and others at one end, fully quantified work on the other end, and non-quantified but rigorous social science such as Byrne and Callaghan (2014) or (Sawyer 2005) in between.

bias in his application of his own ideas. The *intrinsic* conservatism of Parsons's system theory, and its unsuitability for theorizing socialist praxis, comes from other assumptions baked in to his conceptual model. Three of these stand out emblematically. First, the Parsonian model conceptualizes society in idealist terms, treating the physical world, including bodies, machines, and the ecosphere, as belonging to one or another environment, separate from the social system per se (Parsons 1951, 1966). Second, Parsons assumes that all social order is premised on the acceptance by individuals of a common set of values (Parsons 1951, 42). Coercion and power are completely absent from his theory, and dissensus is treated as exceptional. Third, Parsons assumes that social systems usually operate fairly close to equilibrium (Parsons 1951, 204-5, 251). These assumptions, I would argue, are not just normatively pernicious but demonstrably false. They produce a theory that vastly overestimates the amount of voluntary normative consensus in societies and the degree to which heterodoxy and conflict threaten social order.

Complex systems theory corrects these errors, for the most part. Complex systems theory, and its predecessor general systems theory (von Bertalanffy 2015), adopts a materialist stance by treating social systems as merely one type of physical system among others. All complex systems, social or otherwise, can be modeled through a common set of concepts such as emergence (von Bertalanffy 2015, 18, 31, 55, 68), self-organization (von Bertalanffy 2015, 97), functional differentiation (von Bertalanffy 2015, 18, 31, 55, 68), hierarchical structures (von Bertalanffy 2015, 27-28), and feedback (von Bertalanffy 2015, 28). Complex systems are not unified but heterarchical (Kontopoulos 1993), consisting of multiple intersecting networks that are not subject to any overall unifying principle. And complex systems are permanently far from equilibrium, existing as driven dissipative processes not as homeostatic structures (von Bertalanffy 2015, 121, 142; Turner, Hanel, and Klimek 2018, 86-88). Though not specifically radical, complex systems theory is politically protean enough to be adaptable for revolutionary socialist ends.²

Modes of Production as Attractors in State Space

Socialism is an essentially contested concept (Gallie 1956). Gindin and Boggs, for instance, both agree on the need for concrete theories of socialist futurity but propose differing models for realizing that futurity. Disagreement and debate about the specific institutional form that socialism will take are important, but disagreement always has the potential to interfere with collective action. To work together effectively, socialists need a certain amount of tolerance for each other's differing visions of the specifics of revolutionary practice. The concepts of system states and state space provide a useful way of justifying this tolerance.

If all of the relevant qualities of all of the elements and relations that make up a system can be validly quantified and measured, the set of those measurements provides a snapshot of the system. That snapshot is the *system state* (Bossel 2007, 36). If we imagine an n-dimensional space, where n is the number of parameters of the system, then the system state occupies a point in that space, which is called the *state space* (Bossel 2007, 37) or phase space (Turner, Hanel, and Klimek 2018, 14, 127, 229) or parameter space (Turner, Hanel, and Klimek 2018, 105). The line constituted by variations in the system state is called the *state trajectory* of the system (Bossel 2007, 37). A visual representation of the phase path of a system (a *phase portrait*) is only feasible if the system has three dimensions or fewer. Social systems have far more than three variables. However, the concepts of system state and state space help us to visualize a social system not as a static thing, or even as a thing that changes, but as a *range of values in state space* or, in other words, *a range of possible permutations*.

Consider the distinction between capitalism and socialism as social systems. In public discourse, it's commonplace to conceptualize this distinction as some particular relationship between states and markets, and to debate what particular relationships, what degree of state 'intervention' into 'free' market dynamics, counts as socialism. Everything

Parsonian systems theory by incorporating complexity and theorizing society as an open system far-from-equilibrium. However, Luhmann's work is arguably even more idealist than Parsons's, which is why I've disregarded it for the purposes of this article.

² Niklas Luhmann's work also corrects some of the limitations of

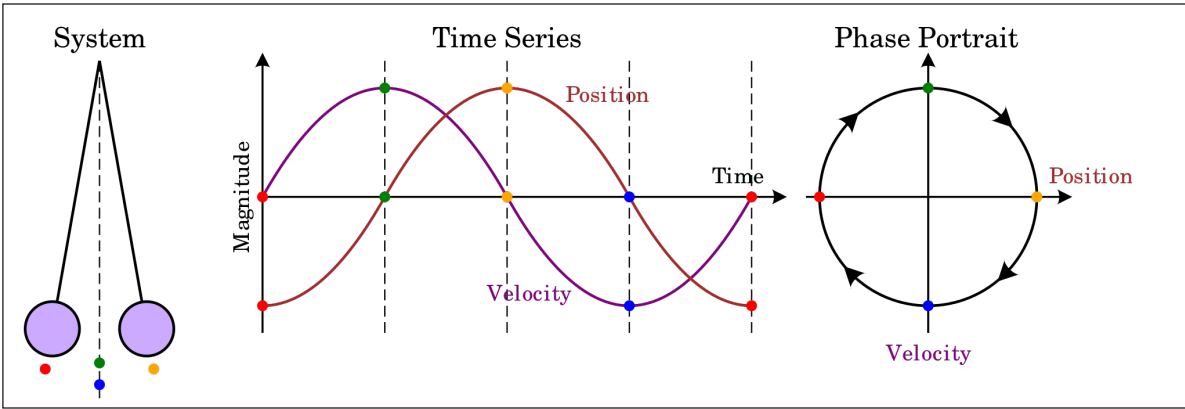


Figure 1. Illustration of how a phase portrait would be constructed for the motion of a simple pendulum. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pendulum_phase_portrait_illustration.svg. Author: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/User:Krishnavedala>. License: Creative Commons BY-SA 4.0, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>

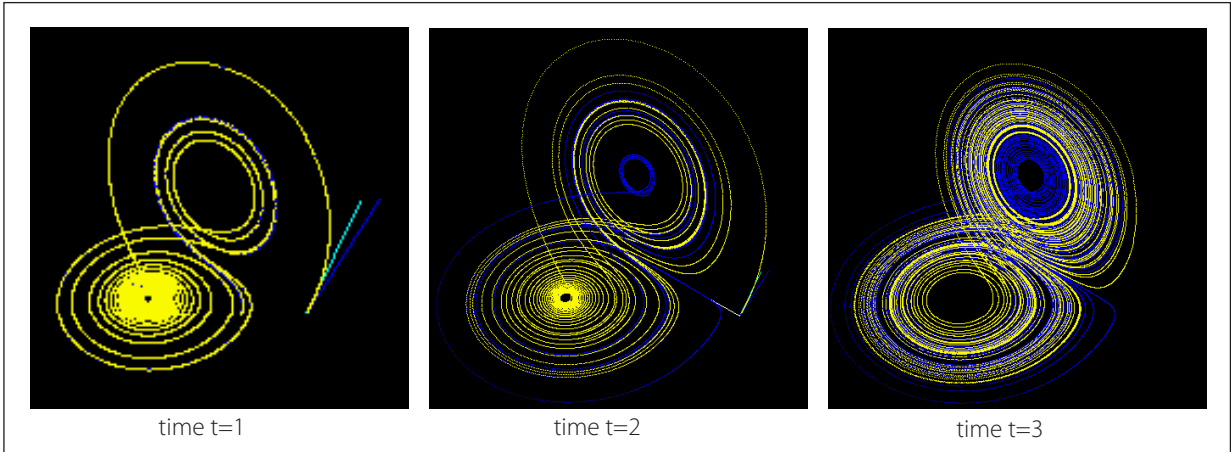


Figure 2. Phase portraits of the Lorenz system, showing sensitive dependence on initial conditions. “These figures – made using $\rho = 28$, $\sigma = 10$ and $\beta = 8/3$ – show three time segments of the 3-D evolution of two trajectories (one in blue, the other in yellow) in the Lorenz attractor starting at two initial points that differ only by 10^{-5} in the x -coordinate. Initially, the two trajectories seem coincident (only the yellow one can be seen, as it is drawn over the blue one) but, after some time, the divergence is obvious.” Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lorenz_system

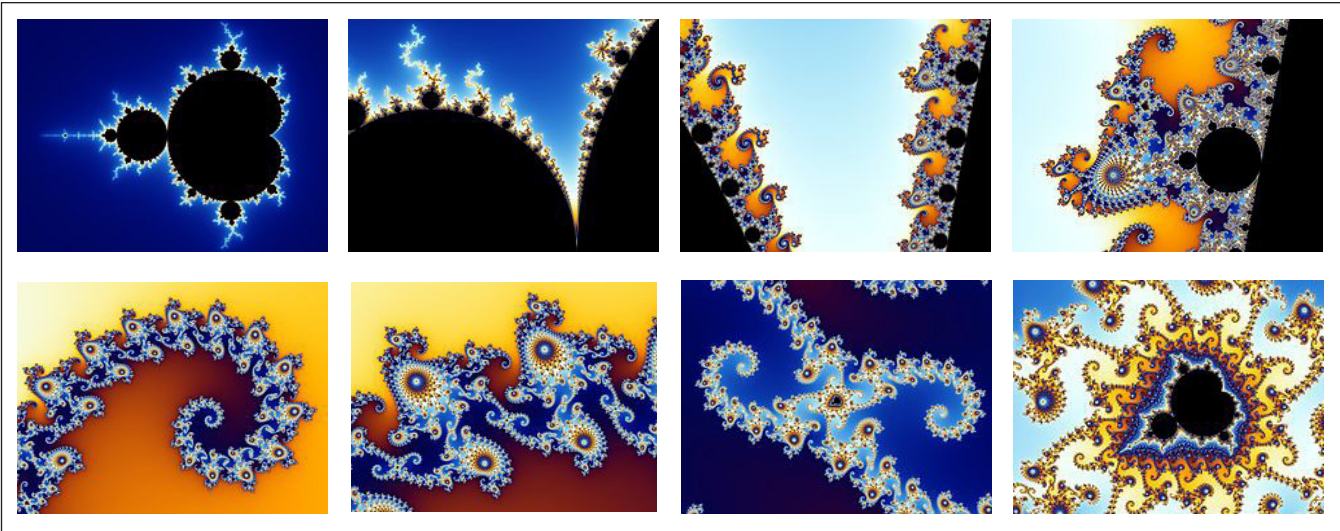


Figure 3. Phase portraits of the Mandelbrot set, zooming in on a single area. The magnification of the eighth image is 213,350 times that of the first. Created by Wolfgang Beyer with the program *Ultra Fractal 3*. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mandelbrot_set

from command economies to social democracy to the most timid forms of welfare liberalism, can be branded 'socialist' by supporters and opponents alike, using this thinking. Marxism, on the other hand, locates the defining features of capitalism in the expansion of capital through the appropriation of surplus value (Marx 1976a), made possible by the alienation of labour-power (Marx 1975, 270ff). This enables Raya Dunayevskaya, for example, to coherently argue that the USSR was a capitalist society (Dunayevskaya 1992), and for Immanuel Wallerstein to claim that command economies, social democracies, and other economic models involving statist redistribution of social wealth remain part of the capitalist world-system (Wallerstein 1983). In the terms of complex system theory, Marxism defines capitalism not as a particular system *state*, but as the underlying systemic *relations* that produce a range of possible states along a particular state space trajectory.

What's more, the movement of a complex system along its state trajectory is not always predictable. This is illustrated by the Lorenz system, a system of ordinary differential equations developed by Edward Lorenz for modelling atmospheric convection (Gleick 1987). For certain parameter values and initial conditions, the Lorenz system displays *sensitivity to initial conditions*: small variations in system state lead to large variations in trajectory. This makes it impossible to predict the behaviour of the system beyond the short term, even though the system itself is completely deterministic. At the same time, the system does produce a definite range of possible states, representable as a definite state trajectory known as the Lorenz attractor. In other words, it is impossible to predict where in state space the Lorenz system will arrive at a given moment in the medium to long term future, but it is possible to say with absolute certainty that it will be somewhere on the attractor.

If modes of production are deterministic systems that are sensitive to initial conditions, then they would behave similarly: the precise system state of, say, the capitalist world-system would be predictable only in

the short term, and capable of a wide range of variations in the medium to long term, but as long as the system remains determined by the same underlying relations, those variations will take certain forms and not others. We can think of command economies, social democracies, welfare liberalism, neoliberalism, right-wing dictatorships, and the Atlantic slave trade as so many different permutations of the same underlying class relations involving the alienation of labour-power and appropriation of surplus value. And, by implication, we can think of socialism as similarly complex. Just as the capitalist world-system comprises a multitude of formally diverse subsystems, of nation-states and individual enterprises pursuing different regimes of exploitation, it seems intuitively plausible that the socialist world-system of the future could also involve a multiplicity of social networks pursuing different regimes of nonexploitative production. This implies that the aim of socialist revolution is not the production of any one particular institutional framework, but the development of generalizable relations of production that will be instantiated in a plethora of differing institutional frameworks. Neither the socialist pluralism of Laski and Cole nor the pluralist socialism of 1960s Czechoslovakia, in particular (Barnard and Vernon 1977; Eisfeld 1996), but a broader socialist multiplicity.

Evolutionary Transformation

If we imagine that successful socialist revolution will produce not one specific institutional order but a diverse multiplicity of institutional forms all characterized by the absence of exploitation and the presence of radically democratized relations of production, a state space rather than a particular system state, we still need to imagine how to transform the capitalist state space into that socialist state space. I would argue that that transformation is necessarily a form of social *evolution*. However, the word 'evolution' carries conservative connotations rooted in non-complex understandings of how evolution works. We therefore need to clarify how evolution is understood in complexity theory to understand the radical potential of evolutionary processes.

Non-Linearity 1: Punctuated Equilibria

The concept of evolution has a fraught history in socialist thinking. Bernstein (1961) invoked evolution as the basis of his argument against seizing state power by force. Levins and Lewontin distinguish between

the ‘minimal theoretical structure’ of a science, which is dependent upon unspoken ideological assumptions, and a kind of ideological superstructure that is built upon the minimal structure but is not logically entailed by it. (Levins and Lewontin 1985, 179)

They brilliantly critique the ideological superstructure of evolutionary theory, including the Eurocentric equation of evolution with progress and the structural-functionalist assumption that evolution tends always to produce optimal distributions of resources. But the point I’d like to focus on here is Bernstein’s association of evolution with gradualism. In light of complex system theory, gradualism is not just part of the ideological superstructure of evolutionary theory but an error at the level of evolution’s minimal theoretical structure.

Bossel defines evolution as “adaptation and self-organization under fitness competition in a population of similar systems” (Bossel 2007, 49). Thurner et. al. describe evolution as a three-step process: first, “a new thing comes into existence within a given *environment*”; second, that new thing interacts with its environment and is selected or destroyed; third, if the new thing is selected, it becomes part of the environment and thus transforms that environment, i.e. the thing and its environment co-evolve (Thurner, Hanel, and Klimek 2018, 15, 227). In biology, evolution happens at many different scales: molecules, cells, organisms, and populations. Evolution also happens in the domain of social practice: “the history of humankind itself is an example of evolutionary dynamics” (ibid.). The history of scientific and technological innovations provides one example of evolution in social practice, and it is easy enough for us to think of social movements, organizations, institutions, etc. as coming into form, being selected or destroyed, and, if selected, becoming part of and thereby modifying their social environments.

The three basic mechanisms of evolution are mutation, selection, and reproduction (Thurner, Hanel, and Klimek 2018, 15). The emergence of new elements in a system can happen through the introduction of elements from outside the system’s normal environment: a storm brings a new species of bird to an island; a merchant brings a foreign word to their home country; a researcher brings an idea from biology into sociology (Thurner, Hanel, and Klimek 2018, 228). More often, however, evolution happens through a combinatorial process, the bringing together in a new way of elements that already exist within the environment: a gamma photon interacts with a piece of DNA to produce a genetic mutation; an ironmonger combines techniques from physics and engineering to produce a commercially viable steam-engine; and so on.

Although Thurner et. al. distinguish between evolution through the introduction of outside elements and combinatorial evolution, any outside elements must themselves have evolved somehow. It therefore stands to reason that all evolution is ultimately combinatorial, provided our definition of a system’s environment is broad enough. This has two important implications: all evolution, and hence all system change, always happens by making use of existing materials; and all evolution happens incrementally and is in a sense continuous (Thurner, Hanel, and Klimek 2018, 15; Bossel 2007, 224-225). As Bossel says, “there can be no instantaneous creation or invention” (Bossel 2007, 225). Crucially, however, this does not preclude “the evolution over many generations of emergent properties or structural changes which produce qualitative jumps of development” (Bossel 2007, 225).

Evolution tends not to happen gradually, but in sudden bursts, a process called punctuated equilibrium. Suppose, for example, we are considering the amount of diversity in a system, such as an ecosystem or a sociocultural system. The gradualist model of evolution predicts that diversity will increase smoothly over time. The punctuated equilibrium model predicts that diversity will remain fairly constant for a long period, then fluctuate chaotically, then stabilize at a new equilibrium.

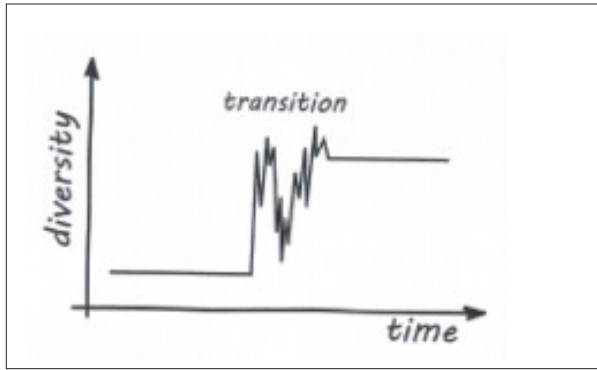


Figure 4. Schematic view of a transition from one equilibrium to another. Evolutionary transition events are usually disruptive and bursty.” (Thurner, Hanel, and Klimek 2018, 225)

Punctuated equilibria appear in many different domains, in “the biological, socio-economical, technological, and linguistic contexts” (Thurner, Hanel, and Klimek 2018, 225). Why evolution should unfold through punctuated equilibria is not well understood and there seems to be no consensus yet on precisely how to theorize it. But the punctuated equilibrium model fits well with the Luxembourgian trajectory of thinking about socialist transformation. For example, Gorz writes that “there is not and cannot be an imperceptible ‘gradual transition’ from capitalism to socialism” (Gorz 1968, 112). Rather, “What can and must be gradual and cumulative in a socialist strategy is the preparatory phase which sets in motion a process leading to the edge of the crisis and the final trial of strength.” Gradual reform within capitalism establishes the conditions for a sudden transformative explosion:

Socialism can only come about through long term and conscious action, which starts with the gradual application of a coherent programme of reforms, but which can only proceed by way of a succession of more or less violent, sometimes successful, sometimes unsuccessful, trials of strength [...]. (Gorz 1968, 111-112)

Both aspects of this process, the ‘preparatory phase’ and the ‘trials of strength,’ are evolutionary. Or, to put it the other way around, theories of complex evolution can, in principle, address both the gradual preparations and the sudden transformations involved in socialist revolution.

The result of cumulative evolutionary change manifesting in a punctuated equilibrium will be a catastrophe — but a good catastrophe. “Catastrophe sounds terrible, but in a systems context it merely refers to a drastic change that may occur (in some systems, under some conditions) if one or a few control parameters change gradually” (Bossel 2007, 45). Bossel goes on to elaborate:

Imagine standing near the edge of a cliff. If you are walking away from it, nothing very interesting will happen. But if you are gradually walking towards it, the eventual “catastrophe” is unavoidable. The topology of state space may contain such “cliffs” causing “catastrophic” changes of state. (Bossel 2007, 45)

The goal of radical socialism is precisely to take the capitalist system over a cliff in state space, producing an *irreversible* change in the range of possible forms that relations of production can take. This catastrophic intentionality distinguishes radical socialism from even the most equitable forms of social democracy or state-monopoly capitalism. To achieve this catastrophe, we need to produce non-exploitative relations of production that are self-stabilizing and self-propagating. In other words, social relations of production need to be resilient enough to withstand unfavourable political conditions and even active attempts to disrupt them, and they need to be rewarding enough that new actors will continually attach to them and reproduce them on an expanding scale. The result will be a viral takeover of capitalist society, rewriting its genetic code, until the remaining capitalist relations become non-viable and the whole system transitions irreversibly.

Non-Linearity 2: Evolutionary Divergence

The punctuated equilibrium model is one of three major ways in which evolution is non-linear. A second is the coevolutionary, non-teleological, predominantly divergent character of evolutionary adaptation.

One major limitation of classical ideas about evolution is their association with a linear scale of progress in which species are ranked as more or less ‘highly evolved’ than others (Lewontin 2007).

Historically, this way of thinking has been applied to human activity in ways that express and reinforce European racism, sexism, and classism (see e.g. Spencer 1896). Lewontin distinguishes between ‘transformational’ and ‘variational’ models of evolution: in transformational theories, evolution unfolds from developmental properties intrinsic to each individual, while variational theories explain evolution as the product of stochastic alterations in individuals that are then selected (or not) and passed on (or not), thereby altering the makeup of the entire species (Lewontin 2007, 276-277). Linear notions of evolutionary ‘progress’ are intrinsic to transformational theories but not to variational theories. Nineteenth century anthropologists like Lewis Morgan subscribed to transformational theories, until Boas and other cultural anthropologists rejected them (e.g. Boas 1940), as did physical anthropologists (American Association of Physical Anthropologists 1996). We can clearly see the influence of transformational theories on Marx’s presentation of historical modes of production as a linear series of stages (Marx and Engels 1976) and on Engels’s similarly linear account of the origins of the patriarchal family, the state, and private property (Engels 1972). It persists in Lenin’s account of imperialism as the highest stage of capitalist development (Lenin 1988). Trotsky’s theorization of uneven and combined development, however, pivots from a transformational to a variational theory of class struggle (Trotsky 2010, 269ff.). The conditions of class struggle in different countries do not represent different points along a single developmental path; rather, the contradictions of capital unfold along different, branching paths even as the dialectical as a whole tends towards a singular outcome. World-systems theory further extends this variational trajectory: Amin argues forcefully against treating European historical experiences as normative (Amin 1989), and Wallerstein shows how European universalism is a function of the historical privileging of European intellectuals in the capitalist world-system (Wallerstein 2006).

That being the case, how does complex systems theory stand? Systems theorists are not immune to ethnocentric errors (e.g. von Bertalanffy 2015, 200,

202, 213), but the underlying theory of evolution in complex system theory is clearly variational and non-teleological. Bossel explicitly stipulates that “teleology and teleonomy are not required to explain evolution: A niche-adapted organism may ‘look as if’ it had this goal from the beginning, although its development was simply shaped by survival and fitness selection” (Bossel 2007, 281). All systems may share general functional prerequisites, but these prerequisites can be fulfilled in radically different ways: “Environmental ‘variability’ and the ‘security’ orientation evolving as a consequence mean specific, but very different things to a bird, a railroad company, or a race-car driver, for example” (Bossel 2007, 231), which means that there is no single trait or collection of traits that define ‘fitness’ for all evolutionary niches, and therefore no universal standard for measuring the ‘fittest’ or ‘most advanced’ species.

This non-linear, non-deterministic quality of complex evolutionary theory mitigates strongly against using theories of evolution as an ideological justification for any particular social order. To borrow a phrase from Žižek, evolution is not the ‘big Other’ who legitimates capitalism, or white supremacy, or patriarchy. At the same time, evolution does not perform this role for socialism either. Evolution, even social evolution, is in itself a blind, amoral process, indifferent to human suffering or well-being. Directing it towards socialist ends requires conscious and informed intervention by human will.

Nonlinearity 3: Coevolution and Relationality

In order for evolution to take place, there has to be some ontological unit that is capable of varying, reproducing itself, and passing on its variations (Lewontin 2007, 286). In biology, this is the individual organism which varies and passes on its variations through its genes. What is this unit in social systems? For Parsons, it was ‘action,’ defined in Weberian terms. This leads to the idealistic slant of Parsonian systems theory. To reassert a materialist frame of reference, it’s tempting to use ‘practices’ as the evolutionary unit. Practices, even intellectual practices, are physical, spatiotemporally local, embodied, and materially consequential. They are the products of

human creativity mixed with nonhuman bodies and forces, and can be viewed as embodying congealed expended labour-power. They do vary, and successful variations do reproduce themselves. However, there is still something potentially atomizing about making practices the unit of analysis in a theory of social systems. Depending on how practice is theorized, it can be missing the quality of relationality which is vital both to radical socialist theory and to complex systems theory.

For Marx, relations precede and produce identities, even class identities (Ollman 1976). Is complex systems theory similarly relational? Perhaps surprisingly, it is. Thurner et. al. define social systems as “*co-evolving multilayer networks*” (Thurner, Hanel, and Klimek 2018, 22, emphasis added). Network theory is, of course, at least somewhat relational (Bates and Peacock 1989), and if we follow Barad in supposing that all network nodes can be understood as products of their ties, i.e. that relations precede relata (Barad 2003), then network theory can be radically relational. The concept of co-evolution brings a dialectical quality to this relationality. Traditional models of evolution treat the system’s environment as fixed; through evolution the system adapts to its environment. However, in actuality, both biological and social systems co-evolve with their environments (Thurner, Hanel, and Klimek 2018, 232-236). Any one system is part of the environment for the other systems in *its* environment, so as one system goes through evolutionary changes, the ‘fitness landscape’ for those other systems also changes, favouring further evolutionary change on their part. System and environment co-evolve together. A single point mutation in one system can potentially trigger a ‘co-evolutionary avalanche’ of adaptations in its environment (Thurner, Hanel, and Klimek 2018, 254), which in turn may favour further evolutionary change in the system, and so on.

It’s worth remembering that the concept of ‘system’ can apply to any level of scale, from the capitalist mode of production in its totality to individual nation-states, corporations, social movement organizations, informal community networks, individual practices, and even smaller-scale relations. So if we

imagine, for instance, a network of trade unions and other worker organizations as a mesoscopic system whose environment consists of a slightly more macroscopic assemblage of state and corporate actors, it’s very easy to see how dialectical and co-evolutionary theories overlap around the basic insight that the two class formations transform each other through their mutual struggle (Levins and Lewontin 1985). In keeping with Marx’s relationality, we can further observe that these formations emerge out of the struggle or contradiction between them. Therefore, although we are certainly interested in how the concrete social formations evolve, once we understand social formations and even practices in relational terms, we can in principle theorize history as the evolutionary transformation of relations through their encounters (Althusser 2006) with other relations.

This returns us to the issue of what goal theories of socialist futurity should aim at. If the concept of state spaces encourages us to imagine socialism less as any one particular institutional structure and more as a macroscopic *range of possible structures* defined by a common quality of non-alienated labour, a radically relational theory of the coevolution of complex systems encourages us to think about the potential microscopic dynamics of capitalist versus socialist relations of production. Capitalism is at the same time a macroscopic, totalizing, global system of relations, a dynamic multiplicity of mesoscopic institutional structures, and a species of microscopic social relation comprised of even more microscopic practices/relations. Socialists have theorized and continue to theorize capitalism at the genetic level, capitalism as a virus that has injected its genetic material throughout social bodies everywhere (to use a slightly creaky metaphor). We could do more than we have done to also theorize *socialism* at the genetic level, socialism as a system of micropractices or microrelations that could spread virally through the capitalist body.

The Adjacent Possible

Evolution is formidably complex. Thurner *et al.* write that “it seems impossible to predict future events in evolutionary systems. This, however, is not the goal

of the science of evolutionary processes. The challenge there is to understand the underlying statistics” (Thurner, Hanel, and Klimek 2018, 309). At this time, complex systems theorists are still just beginning to develop statistical models of evolutionary dynamics; we are a long way from being able to use their models to guide action in any effective way. But even if and when those models will become available, mathematical discourse is inherently esoteric, and therefore not well suited (to say the least) as a vehicle for radically democratic deliberation. An immediately available alternative to statistical modeling as a means to collectively deliberate on social transformation is the concept of the *adjacent possible*.

First proposed by Stuart Kauffman, (Kauffman 1999), the ‘adjacent possible’ refers to the set of all possible states that a system could occupy in the next increment of time, given the present state of the world (Thurner, Hanel, and Klimek 2018, 15).

In other words, the adjacent possible is the subset of all possible worlds that are reachable within the next time step and depends strongly on the present state of the world. In this view, evolution is a process that continuously ‘fills’ its adjacent possible. (Thurner, Hanel, and Klimek 2018, 15)

For very simple systems, the adjacent possible can be a line or a curve. For instance, if I throw a stone, then the moment the stone leaves my hand, its position from one moment to the next (ignoring air resistance and relativistic effects) is completely determined by Newton’s laws of motion and can be graphed as a parabolic trajectory.³

If I flip a perfectly fair coin n times, the total possible sequences of heads and tails can be graphed as a tree that branches n times and ends with 2^n equally likely outcomes. And if the coin isn’t perfectly fair, for instance if it lands heads 60% of the time and tails 40% of the time, this too can easily be mapped.

While it’s nice to be able to use precise mathematical models to map the adjacent possible, it’s not necessary. We can still map possibility space

³ Note that for this extremely simple system, the adjacent possible maps directly onto the state trajectory; in other words, the state trajectory can be predicted because there is only one possibility in the adjacent possible at any given time.

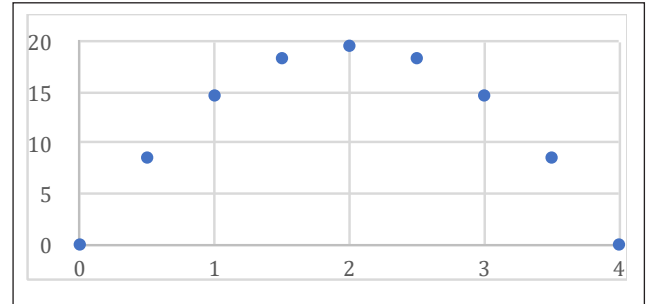


Figure 5. This scatterplot showing the height in meters at half-second intervals of a ball thrown upwards at 19.6 m/s also doubles as a map of its developmental trajectory through the adjacent possible (also measured in half-second increments). This is possible because for a simple deterministic system the adjacent possible only has one possibility at any given time.

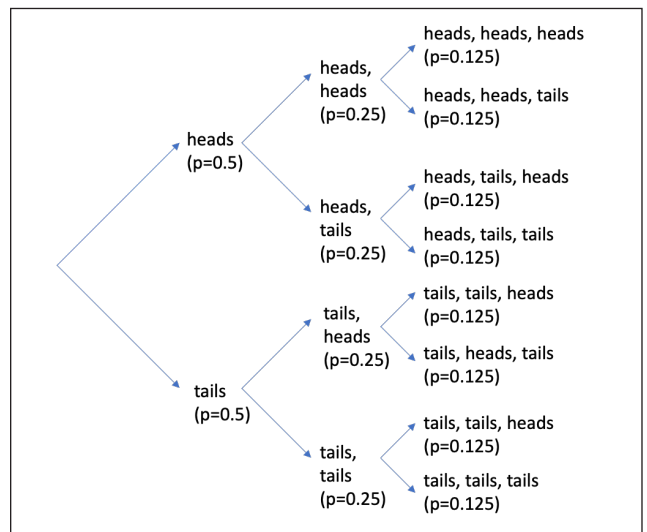


Figure 6. Possibility space of a fair coin flipped three times

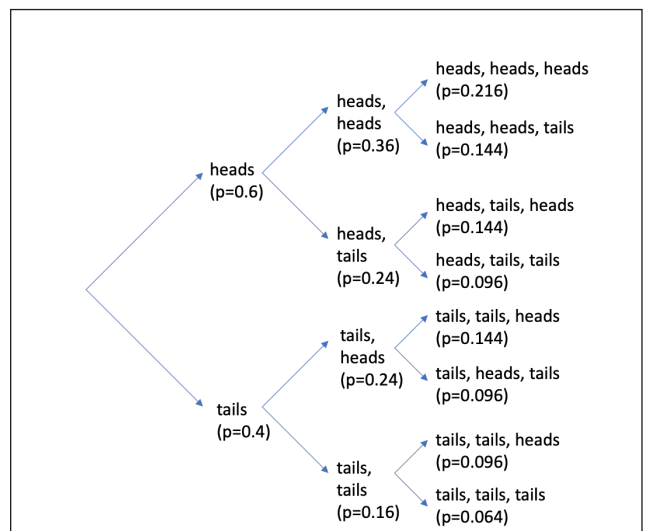


Figure 7. Possibility space of a weighted coin flipped three times.

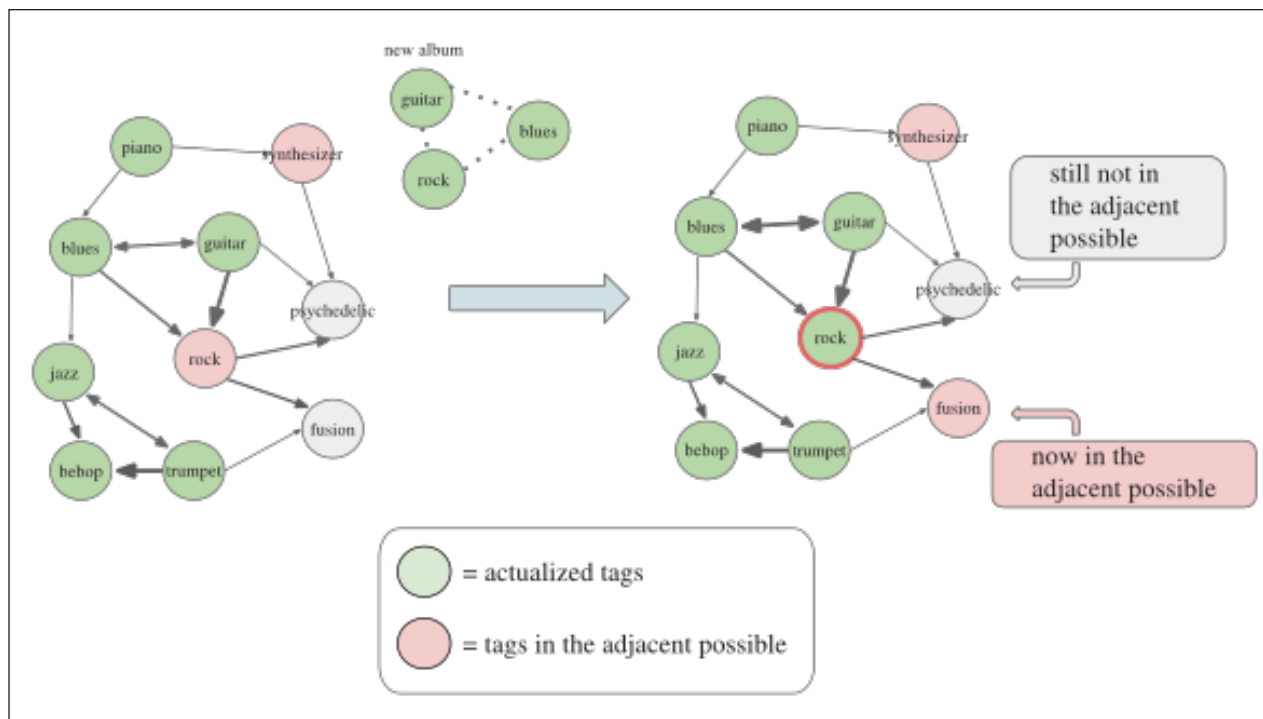


Figure 8. Adjacent possible. Cartoon illustrating the structure and growth of the adjacent possible space after the release of a new album labelled with the three tags *guitar*, *rock* and *blues*" (Monechi et al. 2017, 6)

using purely qualitative knowledge. For instance, Monechi et. al. (2017, 6) graph the adjacent possible for a newly released album receiving user-generated tags on an online music platform.

The graph from Monechi *et al.* still represents a very simple system. But like the quantitatively based graphs above, it illustrates the process of system change, the movement of a system from one state to another, as a movement into one adjacent possible after another. We can call this the movement of a system through its possibility space or, equivalently, movement through 'the' adjacent possible.

The concept of the adjacent possible emphasizes the materiality of systems. Every change in system state involves the expenditure of available energy to reconfigure some relation or relations in the system. Every possible new form the system could take, i.e. every evolutionary change of the system, requires some expenditure of energy to recombine the existing elements of the system and/or to connect the system to new elements. *Emergence*, the appearance of qualities in a complex system not found in its simpler components, does not supersede this basic fact. Any

possible system transformation, including socialist revolution, can only happen through the production of new relations among elements available in the system and its environment, including available energy.

The concept of the adjacent possible emphasizes the *historicity* of complex systems. Every system, without exception, has reached its current state through a series of incremental transformations from one current state into a state in its adjacent possible. (Here, 'incremental' does not necessarily refer to *small* changes in the system, only to the arbitrarily small increments of time over which the system changes from one state to another; even large, sudden changes, like revolutions, happen incrementally in this sense.) At the same time, every possible future for a system exists as one or more incremental 'steps' through a series of adjacent possibles, i.e. through the possibility space that surrounds it. So, for instance, supposing that a system currently exists in some state S_0 , and we would like to transform it into a different state indicated by S_x . Unless S_x is in the adjacent possible for that system, then for the system to reach S_x , it must pass through some series of states S_1, S_2 , etc.,

until it reaches a state S_{x-1} for which S_x is in the adjacent possible. In other words, there must be an evolutionary path through possibility space from S_0 to S_x . If not, then S_x is unreachable and does not exist as a possible future state for S_0 , even if S_x is a possible viable system on its own terms. If there is no way to ‘get there from here’, so to speak, then our desired state does not exist as a possible future. Intentional change, directed change – such as transforming capitalist society into socialist society, or even any modest reform such as changing a neoliberal policy into a social-democratic policy – gets much easier if we can theorize an evolutionary path from here to there. Without such a theory, we can succeed only through blind luck.

What’s more, change in *complex* systems is non-Markovian and non-ergodic (Turner, Hanel, and Klimek 2018, 337-338, 350-351). A Markovian process is one in which the probabilities of the system at S_0 of changing into any one of its adjacently possible forms S_a, S_b, S_c , etc. depends only on the current state S_0 . Markovian processes can be modeled by synchronic theories. The moves in a game of chess are an example: the strategic implications of a move at any stage of the chess depend only on the current state of the board, and not at all on past states of the board. In non-Markovian change, on the other hand, the probability of transformation in any particular direction is influenced not only by the current state of the system (S_0) but by its past states (S_{-1}, S_{-2} , etc.). Conversations, for instance, are non-Markovian. An ergodic system is one that will eventually visit all points in its possible state space, evenly and randomly. A fair-six sided die being rolled repeatedly will eventually assume all of its possible states (every one of its six faces will face up) with equal frequency. A non-ergodic system will move through its state space unevenly, visiting some states more than others and some not at all. A cat patrolling the neighbourhood, for instance, behaves non-ergodically. Non-Markovian, non-ergodic systems are path-dependent; their current and future behavior depends on the evolutionary path they have traversed to reach their current state. In this sense, a complex system contains within itself the entire history of its

transformation up to the present. And the future of a complex system is not a line or a curve, but a tangled profusion of branching pathways of various thickness, spreading outwards in many (but not all) directions.

The non-Markovian, non-ergodic movement of complex systems through possibility space is made even more complex by coevolution: any change in the state of a system changes both its own adjacent possible, and the adjacent possibles of all systems in its environment, and vice versa. So, for instance, as workers form self-conscious and radical workers’ movements, the adjacent possibles for private firms, state authorities, families, churches, and so on change in response, with new possibilities opening up for them in potentially unforeseen ways. Capitalism changes as we struggle with it. Revolutionary theory also has to reckon with this basic likelihood.

Implications

Complex system theory in itself does not provide a theory of socialist transformation, or any one particular theory of social change. (In practice, most complex systems theorists today either pursue a neoliberal politics, or social democracy, or no coherent praxis at all.) What this theory provides are a set of tools that potentially could augment radical socialist praxis, if used critically and carefully. That being said, I would argue that we can extrapolate certain insights even from the rudimentary concepts that I have presented here.

The first has to do with intersectionality. Intersectional theorists, like standpoint theorists, reject what Amin would call the ‘false universalism’ of assuming that any competent observer can *objectively* model the entire social world. As Smith (1990) argues, the only way to know a social world is from some location in it, and different forms and aspects of oppressive relations are only *directly* observable to those who experience them first-hand. Intersectionality theorists (e.g. Crenshaw 1989, 1991; Collins 2000) further argue that the combination of multiple forms of oppression produce specific conditions of struggle, that for instance the conditions faced by Black American women are qualitatively distinct from Black men or white women, and so on. However, it is easy to interpret these arguments

as essentially moralistic and even as tied to a liberal rather than a socialist praxis. Certainly, they are open to (neo-)liberal appropriations, and it's not obvious how to incorporate the multiple incommensurate knowledges of different intersectionally constituted standpoints into a unified socialist project.

The concept of the adjacent possible may help to overcome this difficulty and commensurate the incommensurate. We can say that workers who experience multiple forms of oppressive relations are thereby presented with *different immediately adjacent possibility spaces*. White supremacy, settler colonialism, gender, disability, and so on all change the adjacent possible for the people oppressed by them. To speak a bit metaphorically, the boundary between compliance and struggle in capitalist society is as infinitely ragged and infinitely detailed as the boundary of the Mandelbrot set. At the same time, this infinite detail is grounded in a single ubiquitous system, the capitalist mode of production, whose vast complexity emerges out of relatively simple underlying relations. The epistemological task of socialism is to commensurate these differing adjacent possibles, integrating their complexity into a coherent praxis oriented to a relatively simple relational transformation. This is necessarily a *collective* project, one that must include as many different situated knowledges as humanly possible.

Complexity has a further implication as regards the relation between objective and subjective forms of knowledge. A system can be modeled 'objectively' to the extent that one can define a model in terms that mean the same thing, or can be used according to the same rules, by many different actors. But the most rigorously objective model in this sense is still only *valid* in relation to subjectively defined values. This is because a sufficiently complex system cannot be modeled in its totality, but instead can always be modeled in many different ways.

The number of system elements of the real system and of their functional connections is extremely high; in addition, the mutual dependencies are generally complex and rarely linear. The total system which has to be considered consists of a multitude of subsystems and decision units, of flows and levels of information,

matter, energy and organisms in constantly changing configurations. A description only becomes possible through radical reduction of complexity which requires the distillation of important components and connections. From this fact follows the unavoidable subjectivity of model construction. The degree of subjectivity increases with a growing degree of complexity. (Bossel 2007, 55, emphasis added)

As a result, "we therefore do not speak of the 'correctness' of a model but only of its validity relative to the model purpose." (Bossel 2007, 23; Cilliers 2005). And while the *ultimate* purpose of modelling can be defined in terms of socialist revolution (for example, as the production of a socialist state space), the *immediate* purpose of modelling will vary for different actors according to the specific adjacent possibles.

This line of thinking might seem to take us further away from our goal: from the complexity of conditions of struggle we derive a complex profusion of theoretical standpoints. However, this actually is a good problem, because it anticipates (one might say, it prefigures) the problems that will be faced by working people making decisions about production in a socialist society. Consider again the issues raised by Gindin that I cited near the beginning of this paper: how workers in, say, an appliance plant would decide how much aluminum to use, how to allocate their year-end surplus, how many hours per week they should work, and so on. These kinds of decisions are just as complex as decisions about how to struggle against oppression in a capitalist society, and the adjacent possible for differently situated actors are just as complexly variable in both instances. Therefore, *how to make collectively beneficial decisions in the face of complexity is one of the fundamental problems of socialist theory*.

This is a difficult problem to solve. We all know from abundant historical experience that establishing a viable radical democracy even on a small scale, let alone on any large scale, is not as simple as giving everyone a voice or a vote or a veto. But I think there is something reassuring, when faced with a seemingly intractable practical problem, in finding a very difficult intellectual problem at its root. This suggests an untapped potential, a useful contribution for specialized intellectual labour that is still waiting to be made.

Epistemic Toolmakers

One way to think about this contribution is in terms of the processes or tools through which individuals know one another. Imagine an (impossible) ideal society in which every human person's primary goal is the egalitarian well-being of all. The ability of people to achieve this goal in practice would depend on more than the purity of their intentions. It would depend on their knowledge of each other's 'objective' and 'subjective' conditions and needs. It would depend on knowledge of how resources are allocated throughout the social system. It would also depend on knowledge of the *emergent* dynamics of systems, the way that feedback loops, network topologies, combinatorial evolution, and so on produce material effects *independently of human intentionality*, many of which can thwart human attempts at egalitarianism. We could call this type of knowledge, knowledge of the totality (Jay 1986), or knowledge of the monads (Latour *et al.* 2012), or simply system knowledge.

Historically, radical intellectuals have worked to help people acquire system knowledge in a variety of ways: through critique (e.g. Horkheimer and Adorno 2002), as interpreters (e.g. Bauman 1987), through reconnaissance (McKay 2005), and so on. What these labours have in common is that, to some extent, they involve the intellectual 'going out' and mapping or modeling the system, and then offering the fruits of their labours to everyone else, or, one might say, to the general intellect (Krasavin 2020). At the same time, of course, everyone is always trying to map the system for themselves. So intellectual labour of critique or interpretation or reconnaissance is, to some extent, doing people's work for them. This is valuable, necessary work, and will continue to be for the foreseeable future. But it does involve reproducing, however benignly, the distinction between intellectual and non-intellectual labour engendered by capital (Gramsci 1971, 115).

Therefore, to the established forms of radical intellectual labour we can add one more: toolmaking. The toolmaker does not primarily aim to critique or interpret or reconnoitre society on behalf of other workers. Rather, the toolmaker analyzes the emergent dynamics of social systems that produce either

hierarchical or egalitarian relations and, instead of trying to solve the problem of hierarchy themselves, translates their analysis into terms that anyone can use, to aid people in their own efforts to mitigate hierarchy and strengthen equality. The goal of this labour is to facilitate the broadest possible distribution of intellectual labour, what in computer science is called a distributed system, and thereby facilitate a radically democratic deliberation over the productive forces of human society.

Conclusion

I framed this demonstration within the need for positive models of how a socialist society might actually function: not its superstructure, but the actual form of non-alienated, non-exploitative relations of production. Rather than offer such models, however, I present an analysis of why it is so difficult to formulate them. This analysis begins by introducing the concept of systems and the distinction between simple and complex systems. From there, the concept of systems state and state space helps us to conceptualize socialism as a range of possible institutional structures rather than any one particular institutional structure. The transformation of capitalist state space into socialist state space will necessarily be an evolutionary process, which we can more fruitfully theorize if we bear in mind three considerations from complexity theory: that evolution unfolds not through smooth gradual transformation but through intermittent and sudden punctuations; that evolutionary development does not follow a single line from 'lower' to 'higher' but branches profusely into diverse niches; and that all evolution is coevolution, making evolution a relational and dialectical process. This process unfolds through the adjacent possible, the range of possible states a system can reach from its current state. For capitalism to transform into socialism, socialists must find a developmental path consisting of a series of incremental variations through successive adjacent possibles. However, the adjacent possible for any subsystem of capitalism, e.g. for groups experiencing different intersectional oppressions, is highly complex and context-dependent, making it effectively impossible to map the

adjacent possible for the whole system from any one social standpoint. Formulating a developmental path to socialism requires that socialist deliberation be distributed as broadly as possible. The complexity of this task prefigures the complexity of actually managing a socialist economy, which makes theorizing complexity one of the core challenges for socialist praxis.

This vision of socialist politics as a distributed system, and of intellectuals as humble toolmakers, may seem utopian and may or may not seem plausible or desirable. But my primary goal in this paper has not been to argue for this particular vision of socialist praxis. Rather, I hope to have shown that complex systems theory speaks to important questions of radical social transformation in ways that offer new hope for addressing long-standing obstacles to superceding capitalism.

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Revisiting Marx's Theory of Crisis During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT: The Covid-19 pandemic has caused millions of deaths and the most devastating economic crisis since the Great Depression. Although it seems clear and straightforward to regard the current capitalist crisis as the direct result of external destructive factors, this interpretation does not touch on the internal essence of the capitalist mode of production, nor can it explain the recurrence of crises throughout the history of capitalism. By contrast, this paper analyses the three dimensions, possibility, necessity and reality, of Marx's theory of crisis, demonstrates that capital accumulation is an internally contradictory process and that the process has been accelerated by time-space compression, and argues that the current economic crisis is the result of the virus passing through accelerated capital accumulation rather than the virus by itself. This analysis demonstrates that 'severity' serves as a crucial fourth dimension of crisis theory.

KEYWORDS: Crisis Theory, The Covid-19 Pandemic, Marxism

Introduction

In the 14th century, the Black Death first broke out in Central Asia and spread to the continent of Europe through the expansion of the Mongol Empire and the prosperous Silk Road trade-route. This long-lasting and far-reaching pandemic not only resulted in a large reduction in the population of Western Europe but also paved the way to the crisis of the feudal mode of production and the rise of the capitalist mode of production. However, six centuries later, when the capitalist world was satisfied with its great progress in economic development, public health and medical science, the new coronavirus has dealt the capitalist mode of production a head-on blow. "COVID-19 caused a global recession whose

depth was surpassed only by the two World Wars and the Great Depression over the past century and a half. ... In all, the global economy is estimated to have contracted 4.3 percent in 2020." (World Bank 2021, 3). The Nobel laureate economist, Joseph E. Stiglitz, pronounced that "in many ways it's far worse than 2008" (Goodman 2020).

Nevertheless, what we have to clarify is whether the crisis caused by COVID-19 has some particularity, which will in turn cause some structural change within the capitalist mode of production, or whether it is, so to speak, just another economic recession. If the former is the case, what is the relationship between a virus and the crisis of a mode of production

in human society? If the latter appertains, what will be the future of capitalism? Will it be, as Goldman Sachs has predicted, that current share values provide an opportunity to slowly add to the risk levels of a portfolio? For those who may be sitting on excess cash and have staying power, with the right strategic asset allocation, this is the time to start incrementally adding to S&P equities (Mossavar-Rahmani *et al.* 2020); or will we witness, in Marxist terms, a sudden and immediate collapse?

In order to address these questions, this article interrogates crisis theory from a Marxist perspective. Concurring with Bukharin (1972, 264), the paper sees that “capitalist society is a ‘unity of contradictions.’ The process of movement of capitalist society is a process of the continual reproduction of the capitalist contradictions.” In agreement with Habermas (1992, 30), the paper considers that the capitalist economic crisis is “‘a system crisis’ marked by ‘dialectical contradiction’ that ‘comes to pass *in terms of* structurally insoluble system contradictions or steering problems.” However, the paper takes an approach that is much closer to Marx’s original formulations and argues that the theory of crisis should be understood as a part of historical-geographical materialism. In other words, although the crisis is indeed triggered by Covid-19, it is the internal contradiction of the capitalist production process and its various manifestations that determine the possibility, necessity, reality and severity of the crisis. Indeed, that everything stopped because the Covid-19 virus attacked only illustrates the fragility of the contradictory capitalist mode of production. The crisis is thus essentially not “Covidian” but capitalist. The intention of this paper is thus not to explain the “Covid crisis” from a Marxist perspective but to offer a new critique of the capitalist mode of production in the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, although the programme of vaccination, including booster vaccines, and the appearance of specific medicines will surely alleviate the pangs to which the capitalist mode of production has been subjected, it will at same time exacerbate the spatial inequalities of the capitalist global system and thus deepen the contradictions.

Theories of Capitalist Crisis

A World Bank (2020, xiii) report stated that the “COVID-19 recession is the first since 1870 to be triggered solely by a pandemic.” This view is very much in line with that of many mainstream economists. From their perspective, “it can be argued that in principle crises need never occur; that they do in fact occur may then be attributed to factors which are external to the normal functioning of capitalist reproduction” (Shaikh 1978a, 220). Sunspots, climatic changes, crop failures, and human activities such as war and revolutions are variously conceived as factors responsible for breaking the normal economic cycle. For example, W. Stanley Jevons (1878, 334) argued that the “cause [of a crisis] can only be found in some great and wide-spread meteorological influence recurring at like periods.” In this way, the World Bank’s report is just adding the deadly virus pandemic to the long list of external factors contributing to capitalist crises.

Although it seems clear and straightforward to regard capitalist crises as the direct result of external destructive factors, this interpretation does not touch on the internal essence of the capitalist mode of production, nor can it explain the recurrence of crises throughout the history of capitalism. In consequence, “theories trying to explore the economic crisis from the endogenous factors of capitalist economy emerged. Keynes and Neo-Keynesianism’s cycle theory belongs to this kind of explanation” (Wang and Cheng 2018, 1). Keynes believed that, as a result of changes in human psychological conditions, it was perfectly possible for the aggregate demand for consumption and investment to be insufficient or suboptimal, resulting in “involuntary unemployment.” The market mechanism itself has no inbuilt capacity to keep the economy in a balanced state of supply and demand with full employment (cf. Liu 2010, 178). When the market fails to operate by itself and the state fails to implement effective intervention policies, economic crisis can arise. After World War II, a form of liberalism based on Keynesian theory came to be embedded in developed capitalist states, serving to promote the rapid recovery and growth of the economy (Harvey 2007, 10–11).

Nonetheless, “by the end of 1960s, embedded liberalism began to break down, both internationally and within domestic economies.... Unemployment and inflation were both surging everywhere, ushering in a global phase of ‘stagflation’ that lasted throughout much of the 1970s” (Harvey 2007, 12). Under such circumstances, Keynesian policies, especially fiscal policy and government intervention in the economy, are considered to be no longer effective in stimulating economic development and maintaining the economic and class status of capitalists. As a result of discontent arising from the crisis of capital accumulation, social movements became widespread. A conspiracy of capitalists desperate to rescind government ‘interference’ and quash the powers of trade unions, in favour of a neoliberal doctrine that emphasized individual freedom and the inviolability of private property, is an expected result of this economic and historical circumstance (Harvey 2007, 14–15). “Individual freedom of choice is seen as the fundamental basis of human welfare, with market relations understood as the institution that allows individual choice to drive the economy. The state, by contrast, is seen as an enemy of individual liberty” (Kotz 2015, 11). In this theory, from the perspective of this neoliberalist political economy, the crisis is generated by extensive government intervention in the market.

Both neoliberalist and Keynesian economic theories discuss the economic crisis, or at least “economic fluctuation” (given that some economists deny that there is a crisis tendency in the capitalist mode of production) and the capitalist reproduction cycle, on the premise of not changing the existing market economic institution, which is based on capitalist private ownership of means of production, and restrict themselves to offering policy suggestions to manage the economic cycle and periodic crises (Wang and Cheng 2018, 2). In other words, mainstream economists hold that crisis or “fluctuation” is an abnormal moment of capitalist reproduction. By contrast, Marxists maintain that policies that are implemented to tackle capitalist crises “serve only to postpone the crisis, at the price of intensifying it” (Clarke 1994, 31). For Marxists, “crises are essential

to the reproduction of capitalism” (Harvey 2014, ix). Crisis must be regarded as “the real concentration and forcible adjustment of all contradictions of bourgeois economy” (Marx 1989, 140). However, Marx did not elaborate a “final presentation of his theory of crisis.... Instead, there are various approaches to explain crises” (Heinrich 2013, 15). Among these approaches, theories of overproduction, underconsumption, disproportion, and the falling rate of profit are the most influential. The remainder of this section will consider each of these in turn to explore how a Marxist crisis theory could contribute to the analysis of the current crisis.

Although Karl Kautsky’s theory of crisis is labelled as proto-Keynesian in that it regards crisis as a normal phase in the economic cycle (cf. Clarke 1994, 27), Kautsky argued that overproduction and disproportion lead to crisis. He stated that “the great modern crises which convulse the world’s markets arise from overproduction, which, in its turn, arises from the planlessness that inevitably characterizes our system of commodity production” (Kautsky 2000). This ‘planlessness’ appears as the asymmetry of the total production of society. “The total production of society is not carried on in a systematic way; on the contrary, it is left to each producer to estimate for himself the demand there may be for the goods which he produces” (Kautsky 2000). Later, Kautsky added that the asymmetry appears in not only production and consumption but also different branches of production, “because within a specific zone the capitalist mode of production tends to develop much more quickly in the industrial than in the agricultural sector” (Kautsky 1970, 41).

“Kautsky’s belief in a secular tendency to overproduction as the basis of a general economic crisis” (Clarke 1994, 29) is the main target at which Eduard Bernstein took aim. Bernstein argued that “the secular tendency to overproduction and crisis was countered by” such factors as “the growth of the domestic market,” “the opening of foreign markets,” “the rise of joint-stock companies and the formation of cartels,” “the modern credit system” (Clarke 1994, 29), and the expansion in food production (Bernstein 1993, 96). Therefore, for Bernstein, a “general crisis” will only

come into being as a result of “unforeseen external events,” citing an absence of reasons to believe “that such a crisis is imminent” (Bernstein 1993, 96). This position was generally seen as revisionist, including by Rosa Luxemburg: “Bernstein began his revision of the social democracy by abandoning the theory of capitalist collapse. The latter ... is the cornerstone of scientific socialism. Rejecting it, Bernstein also rejects the whole doctrine of socialism” (Luxemburg 2008, 96).

Luxemburg criticized Bernstein’s betrayal of the working class and historical materialism adeptly: “the phenomena that are said by Bernstein to be the means of capitalist adaptation” – diverse developments such as cartels, the credit system, trade unions, etc., all of which attenuate the contradictions of capitalism and allow capitalism’s continued functioning – are simultaneously held to be “the preconditions and even in part the germs” of socialism, to the extent that they express the “social character of production” (Luxemburg 2008, 46). Bernstein’s argument is, however, contradictory, Luxemburg points out, in that precisely these “same factors render superfluous ... the transformation of this socialized production into socialist production” (Luxemburg 2008, 46) since the transformation from capitalism to socialism, in Bernstein’s eyes, is autonomous. Moreover, they “appear ... as a determined phase of capitalist development, which in the last analysis aggravates the anarchy of the capitalist world and expresses and ripens its internal contradictions” (Luxemburg 2008, 51).

Luxemburg’s own views, however, are not beyond criticism. They essentially appeal to underconsumption – “a general lack of sufficient effective demand to soak up the growth in output that capitalism generates” (Harvey 2003, 138) – to explain the causation of crisis, a view (hardly unique to Luxemburg) that has itself been roundly criticized. On the one hand, Luxemburg held that underconsumption arises “because workers are exploited and by definition receive much less value to spend than they produce, and capitalists are at least in part obliged to reinvest rather than to consume” (Harvey 2003, 138). On the other hand, she argued that the contradiction between productivity and exchange will inevita-

bly lead to crisis because the world market cannot expand without limit and productivity is constantly improving (Luxemburg 2008, 53). It is unsurprising that Luxemburg’s underconsumptionism should be echoed in Paul Sweezy’s emphasis on the role of the market as a critical factor in the transformation of modes of production. There is, in Sweezy’s (1946, 183) opinion, “an inherent tendency for the growth in consumption to fall behind the growth in the output of consumption goods”, which “may express itself in crises or in stagnation, or in both.” Michal Kalecki criticised Luxemburg’s approach. He argued that exports to the non-capitalist external market are offset by imports, which absorb purchasing power in the capitalist market (Kalecki 1991, 456). Bleaney (1976, 187) denied that Luxemburg is an underconsumptionist theorist. He, however, pointed out, that there is a fundamental mistake in underconsumption theories since they “consistently underestimate the role of investment expenditure” (Bleaney 1976, 209). The force of Bleaney’s critique has been lent enormous credibility by the process of capitalist urbanization, especially since World War II. This is the essence of contemporary Marxist geographical and spatial analysis such as that supplied by Henri Lefebvre and David Harvey. Although massive infrastructure construction postpones rather than eliminates crisis, it can indeed absorb surplus capital.

One of the most influential counterarguments to underconsumptionism is disproportionality theory, represented by Tugan-Baranowsky and thence Rudolf Hilferding (cf. Shaikh 1978a, 228; Wang and Cheng 2018, 4). Hilferding (1981, 241) argued that the term underconsumption “has no sense in economics except to indicate that society is consuming less than it has produced,” which would not happen if production were to carry on proportionally. Likewise, as Clarke (1994, 34) elucidates, “the conclusion which Tugan drew was that capital would not face any barriers to the realization of its expanded product, provided only that the appropriate proportional relations between the various branches of production were maintained.” Although Tugan-Baranowsky (2000, 86) admitted that underconsumption is “an obstacle for the realization of social production”, he thought that it is “the

lack of proportionality” that ultimately caused this underconsumption. This is because “total demand for commodities is independent of the ultimate total volume of social consumption” (Miliotis and Sotirpoulos 2007, 232). In other words, overproduction could be absorbed by the expanding demand of the means of production sector rather than consumption by the immiserated proletariat. Therefore, Tugan-Baranowsky’s explanation of Marx’s theory of crisis adopted a Keynesian approach, “according to which a constantly increasing investment demand may always compensate for the lacking demand for consumer goods” (Miliotis and Sotiropoulos, 2007, 227; Vouldis, Michaelides and Miliotis 2011, 440). In this way, from the perspective of disproportionality theory, the reason for crises is the anarchy of capitalism while the ways of eliminating crises is “the parliamentary path to State control” (Shaikh 1978a, 228). However,

crises of this kind, arising exclusively from the disproportionalities of the system, are only an expression of the anarchy of capitalism and not of the exploitative character of the relations of production that underlie this anarchy; they are resolved, therefore, by the redistribution of surplus value, without the production of additional surplus value. (Mattick 1974)

Another counterargument to the underconsumption thesis became popular in the 1970s. Its proponents insisted that “at the very centre of Marx’s account of the crisis-prone nature of capitalism stands what he called ‘the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall’” (Harman 1999, 16). For Dobb (1946, 108), for instance, it seemed “clear that Marx regarded this falling profit-rate tendency as an important underlying cause of periodic crises, as well as a factor shaping the long term trend: as a fundamental reason why a process of accumulation and expansion would be self-defeating in its effects, and hence would inevitably suffer a relapse.” This fall in the rate of profit “is caused not by a fall in aggregate demand, but rests, instead, on two different mechanisms: (a) the rising organic composition of capital ... and; (b) the profit squeeze” (Basu 2017, 7) – to which we may add a third, (c) a labour-force

deficit. Scholars tend to pay more attention to the impact of advanced capital on the profit rate, but in fact the profit rate is also related to the rate of surplus value. When a worker’s ability to provide surplus labour falls, for example, when he catches COVID-19, the profit rate decreases as the rate of surplus value decreases.

The earliest and the most common explanation of the theory of falling profit rate held that the main reason for this tendency is the rise in the organic composition of capital, a viewpoint presented by Henryk Grossmann. “Grossmann’s approach gave the Marxian law a mechanistic, determinist interpretation” (Miliotis 1994, 189). He initially accepted Tugan-Baranowsky’s argument that, “if only the proportions laid down by the formula as to the distribution of accumulated capital were observed, accumulation could be infinitely prolonged without crises” (Grossmann 1922). However, he later “abandoned this argument in favor of an account based on Marx’s law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall” (Kuhn 1995, 176). He distinguished four conditions that influence the number of years until “the absolute crisis”: 1) the level of the organic composition (“The higher this is the smaller the number of years”); 2) the rate of accumulation of constant capital (again, a higher rate accelerates the onset of crisis); 3) the rate of accumulation of variable capital (“whose impact is ... ambivalent”); whilst 4) the level of the rate of surplus value has a “defusing impact,” such that a higher rate postpones the onset of crisis (Grossmann 1992, 98).

Some variation on the theme of a falling rate of profit or idea of a ‘profit squeeze’ had become the main alternative to underconsumptionist theories by the last quarter of the twentieth century (Weeks 1979, 259). This school of thought has its origins in Dobb’s (1946) work, which held that “it is rising wages which ultimately cause crises; a rising organic composition appears in this analysis as an offsetting factor to an already falling rate of profit, not as a cause of the fall itself” (Shaikh 1978b, 246). For Dobb, when the organic composition is fixed, the demand for labour will increase wages. High wages will make capitalists seek out machinery to replace labour, which will

increase the organic composition. This conception of the profit squeeze was well developed in the 1970s by Glyn and Sutcliffe (1972), who argued that organized trade unions in Britain had increased the bargaining power of the working-class, resulting in wage growth outpacing productivity growth. However, as a result of international competition, it is impossible for the capitalist to pass on the increased wage cost by increasing product price, which results in the company's profit-margin being squeezed (Wang and Cheng 2018, 7). Erik Olin Wright summarized the essential argument of the profit squeeze thus:

The relative share of the national income going to workers and to capitalists is almost entirely a consequence of their relative strengths in the class struggle. There is therefore no intrinsic reason for wage struggles to be limited, even in the long run, to demands that real wages rise as rapidly as productivity. To the extent that the working class develops a strong enough labor movement to win wage increases in excess of productivity increases, there will be a tendency for the rate of profits to fall (to be "squeezed" by rising wage bills). Such a decline in profits results in a corresponding decline in investments and thus in even slower increases in productivity. The end result is economic crisis. (Wright 1999, 127–128)

Following in the footsteps of Kozo Uno (1953), Makoto Itoh rebutted profit-squeeze theory, arguing:

If the power of the trade unions to squeeze the rate of profit through class struggle is generalized into the basic factor causing crisis ... it may become difficult to explain the cyclical and acute character of crisis. This basic principle of cyclical crisis should be clarified on the empirical basis of the mid-nineteenth century, when trade unions were not yet generally established (Itoh 1980, 133–134).

To conclude, although all these accounts clearly owe something to Marx and often claim to be a faithful rendering of his ideas, they typically (or tend to) emphasize whatever they think is the most important factor, while other factors are relegated to having only a secondary role. Accordingly, Marxist crisis theory

is fragmented. Perhaps this is because Marx's crisis theory is too scattered, or because Marxists adopt different strategies facing different accumulation structures in different periods, or simply because different authors' subjective understanding of Marx's original work varies – but, whatever the case may be, there is virtually no consensus on what Marx's crisis theory actually entails. Therefore,

for a long time, the discipline of economics could not solve the problem of crisis because economists only looked for the cause of the crisis from a particular field of social economy – production, exchange or distribution. The crisis is generated on the basis of the overall social and economic phenomena, so the crisis cannot be limited to a specific area of the social economy. (Tugan-Baranovsky 1989, 682)

In consequence, we are better advised to consider Marx's own writings carefully.

Marx's Theory of Crisis

Although Marx himself did not have time to systematically elaborate his theory of crisis, there are reasons to believe that the theory of crisis plays a particularly important role in his understanding of the operation of capital and the capitalist mode of production. Marx (1973, 108) regarded crisis, in conjunction with the world market, as one of five sections of his political economy. As we know, Marx's *Capital* is the explanation of the law of operation of the capitalist mode of production. Thus, a Marxist theory of crisis should abandon the insufficiently dialectical character of accounts of the declining profit rate, insufficient consumption, overproduction and disproportion, and analyse the cause of crisis phenomena in the overall process of the capitalist mode of production. From this perspective, the causes of crisis in Marx's theory have three dimensions: possibility, necessity, and reality.

The first premise in considering why crisis is possible is to recognize that capital is a constantly moving process. Marx (1968, 503) stated that "the crisis is precisely the phase of disturbance and interruption of the process of reproduction." Since the

crisis represents the interruption of the process, the normal reproduction of either a single capitalist firm or capitalist social production as a whole is therefore a process. “Value is here the active factor in [this] process, in which, while constantly assuming the form in turn of money and commodities, it at the same time changes in magnitude, differentiates itself by throwing off surplus value from itself; the original value, in other words, expands spontaneously” (Marx 1996, 165). “Value therefore now becomes value in process, money in process, and, as such capital” (Marx 1996, 166). Value alternately takes the form of money and commodity, which means that whether it is expressed as $M-C-M'$ or $C-M-C'$, it must go through two moments of buying and selling. Only by buying variable capital, including living labour, and constant capital such as raw materials and machinery, can more value be produced. At the same time, only after this kind of value is put back on the market can the capitalist really obtain (realize) his part of the value.

Marx believed that the possibility of crisis came from commodity exchange mediated by money. Unlike barter, commodity exchange urges capitalists first to exchange their goods for money, and then use the money to buy materials for reproduction. This dichotomy of purchase and sale arouses what Keynes termed ‘liquidity preference.’

At a given moment, the supply of all commodities can be greater than the demand for all commodities, since the demand for the general commodity, money, exchange-value, is greater than the demand for all particular commodities, in other words the motive to turn the commodity into money, to realise its exchange-value, prevails over the motive to transform the commodity again into use-value. (Marx 1968, 505)

At the same time, in this further development of the separation of buying and selling, “the appearance of the two equivalents, commodities and money, at the two poles of the process of sale, has ceased to be simultaneous” (Marx 1996, 146). At this time, money not only functions as a means of circulation but also as “a measure of value in the determination

of the price of the commodity sold” (Marx 1996, 146). Moreover, the “imaginary or ideal money” (Marx 1996, 105) usually establishes the relationship between claims and debts between buyers and sellers through securities, to perform the function of a means of payment. In this way, the buyer can obtain the required good first and then pay the money. The seller can again purchase the raw materials needed for reproduction from other capitalists through the securities. However, in a crisis, if a capitalist in the payment process fails to sell his goods to consumers to obtain money, the disruption of the capital circulation process will interrupt the turnover of all capitalists exchanging through the same securities at the same time. Thus, the “possibility of crisis is ... demonstrated, and further developed, by the disjunction between the (direct) process of production and the process of circulation” (Marx 1968, 507). In short, the possibility of crisis is embodied in “the metamorphosis of the commodity itself, the falling asunder of purchase and sale” and “the function of money as a means of payment” (Marx 1968, 510). However, the possibility of crisis does not explain the uniqueness of crisis under the capitalist mode of production, which differs from other modes of production; nor does it explain the cause of the crisis: if there is merely a possibility rather than a necessity, the occurrence of the crisis is accidental.

Marx believed that the capitalist mode of production makes crisis not just possible but inevitable.

The contradictions inherent in the movement of capitalist society impress themselves upon the practical bourgeois most strikingly in the changes of the periodic cycle, through which modern industry runs, and whose crowning point is the universal crisis. (Marx 1996, 20)

From the perspective of dialectics, “the fundamental cause of the development of a thing is not external but internal; it lies in the contradictoriness within the thing” (Mao 1965, 313). In general, Marx (1998, 248) thought that the contradiction of the capitalist mode of production involves, on the one hand, “a tendency towards absolute development of the productive forces, regardless of the value and

surplus value it contains, and regardless of the social conditions under which capitalist production takes place; while on the other hand, its aim is to preserve the value of the existing capital and promote its self-expansion to the highest limit.” Therefore, on one side of the contradiction is a growth in productivity accompanied by the continuous development of the division of labour and continuous improvement of the instruments of production; on the other is the increasing poverty of the proletariat, which has become relative surplus population under the mode of production due to the extraction of surplus value being the basis of the preservation and self-expansion of capital. As distinct from Engels’ deployment of the concept of the ‘anarchy of production’ in *Anti-Dühring* and the falling rate of profit in editing Marx’s manuscript of the third volume of *Capital* to explain capitalist crises, Marx explained the inevitability of the crisis as being caused by the contradictory movement of the forces of production and relations of production under the capitalist mode of production at the most abstract level.

But the problem is that this overly abstract explanation tends to slide towards either Messianism or Revisionism. It is still necessary to explain the reality of crisis, that is, “why the phases of the process come into such conflict that their inner unity can only assert itself through a crisis” (Marx 1968, 502). Contemporary Marxists have conceived explanations centred on the historical-geographical specificities of different capitalist modes of production by embedding economic accumulation into particular social structures. David M. Kotz (2010, 364) adheres to this social structure of accumulation theory and has argued that, “in individual capitalist countries and in global capitalism as a whole, a sequence of relatively durable institutional structures can be identified, each lasting for several decades” (Kotz 2010, 364). Similarly, Bob Jessop (2000, 327), in his articulation of a “doubly heterodox regulationist viewpoint,” stated that “specific accumulation regimes and modes of regulation are typically constructed within specific social spaces and spatio-temporal matrices.”¹ Because the contradiction between capitalist forces of produc-

tion and relations of production will have different manifestations at different stages of production based on different actual conditions, it forms the real cause of crises, such as a falling rate of profit, disproportion, underconsumption, and overproduction.

Engels and Lenin both interpreted this contradiction as the conflict between socialized production and capitalist appropriation. Engels and Lenin correctly described the main features of capitalist contradiction, but in a one-sided way. Although the improvement of the instruments of production, division and cooperation of labour all promote the development of the forces of production, the expansion of division and cooperation is a change in the scope of the relations of production. On the one hand, division and cooperation qua relations of production rely on the level of development of the forces of production. “With the introduction of machinery the division of labour inside society has increased, the task of the worker inside the workshop has been simplified, capital has been concentrated, the human being has been further dismembered” (Marx 1976, 188). On the other hand, their role in promoting productivity is the effect of relations of production. Marx held that the “division of labour and private property are, after all, identical expressions: in the one the same thing is affirmed with reference to activity as is affirmed in the other with reference to the product of the activity” (Marx and Engels 1975, 46). Meanwhile, social production itself is synonymous with the division of labour and collaboration. “The need for exchange and for the transformation of the product into a pure exchange value progresses in step with the division of labour, i.e. with the increasingly social character of production” (Marx 1973, 146).

Therefore, socialized production and capitalist appropriation are twin contradictory aspects of capitalist relations of production. This means that, on the one hand, with the expansion of the division of labour and exchange, the labour process itself transforms private labour into social labour, and, on the other hand, the products of this social labour are privately owned by the capitalists. Therefore, the production process manifests itself as a single capital turnover controlled by the capitalist in a particular enterprise and the

1 For the difference between social structure of accumulation theory and regulation theory, see Kotz, 1994, pp. 85–97.

exchange of the capitalist's products in society as a whole that is beyond the control of any individual capitalist. Since the capitalist can only control and organize his own production, he does not know the exact situation of enterprises competing with him in society. Therefore, "the contradiction between socialized production and capitalistic appropriation now presents itself as an antagonism between the organization of production in the individual workshop, and the anarchy of production in society generally" (Engels 1987, 260–261).

This opposition between the organization of production in individual factories and the anarchy in the capitalist mode of production as a whole implies the first reality of the capitalist crisis: the disproportion in different sectors (Tugan-Baranovsky 1982, 288–289). What makes Marx's conception of disproportion different from Tugan-Baranovsky and others is that Marx thought disproportionality is one of the appearances of capitalist contradiction. In other words, Marx regarded the disproportion and anarchy as the internal character of capitalism which caused an abnormal equilibrium process.

By contrast, "Tugan sees equilibrium as the norm and crises a deviation from it, albeit recurring and periodical" (Besomi 2006, 147). Due to the development of the forces of production and the expansion of the division of labour, capitalist production is increasingly divided into departments. Since production is anarchic in the entire capitalist system and the output of various production sectors is constantly disproportional, Marx believes that the process of compulsory balancing of this disproportion leads to crisis. "Under capitalist production the proportionality of the individual branches of production springs as a continual process from disproportionality, because the cohesion of the aggregate production imposes itself as a blind law upon the agents of production, and not as a law which, being understood and hence controlled by their common mind, brings the production process under their joint control" (Marx 1998, 255–256). This is effectively the point Hilferding (1981, 256) seizes upon in stating that "the proportional relations between the capital goods and the consumer goods industries as a whole must also prevail in each separate branch of production. ... A crisis can

occur even in the case of simple reproduction if the proportions are violated."

A crisis may be explained not only as "the result of a disproportion of production in various branches of the economy and as a result of a disproportion between the consumption of the capitalists and their accumulation," but also with respect to "the consuming power of the non-producing classes" (Marx 1998, 482–483). The improvement of the instrument of production or the adoption of machines not only enabled medieval craftsmen to be replaced by more replaceable wage labour but also promoted the replacement of workers by machines. On the other hand, the worker depends on the production system of modern mechanical industry and the capitalist who survives by extracting the worker's surplus value. Under such conditions, wage labourers' consuming power is restricted. First, as the productivity of means of subsistence improves, the socially necessary labour to produce these necessities will decrease and the real wages of workers will also decrease. Second, due to the substitution of machines for workers, more and more workers have become relatively surplus. Third, "for an extraordinarily large number of branches of production – all those that do not supply articles for direct consumption – the mass of those who participate in production are entirely excluded from the purchase of their own products" (Marx, 1863/1968, 518). "The under-consumption of the masses is therefore also a prerequisite condition of crises, and plays in them a role which has long been recognised"; "the under-consumption of the masses ... is not a new phenomenon. It has existed as long as there have been exploiting and exploited classes" (Engels 1987, 272). On the one hand, underconsumption causes crisis under the capitalist mode of production as determined by the mode of extraction of surplus value. On the other hand, it needs to be connected with overproduction. "It is the unconditional development of the productive forces and therefore mass production on the basis of a mass of producers who are confined within the bounds of the necessary means of subsistence on the one hand and, on the other, the barrier set up by the capitalists' profit, which [forms] the basis of modern over-production" (Marx 1968, 528). Therefore, the overproduction of

capital and commodities and the insufficiency of labour's consumption capacity, as the realistic manifestation of contradiction between productive force and production relation, provides the possibility for capitalist crises.

Not only is there a real manifestation of contradiction between forces and relations of production and within the relations of production, but the contradictory development of productive forces also has its real manifestation. The "limitations of the capitalist mode of production come to the surface," Marx (1998, 257) says, "in that the development of the productive power of labour creates out of the falling rate of profit a law which at a certain point comes into antagonistic conflict with this development and must be overcome constantly through crises." Marx had a clear account of the falling rate of profit:

It is a law of capitalist production that its development is attended by a relative decrease of variable in relation to constant capital, and consequently to the total capital set in motion. This continual relative decrease of the variable capital vis-à-vis the constant, and consequently the total capital, is identical with the progressively higher organic composition of the social capital in its average. (Marx 1998, 210).

Therefore, the organic composition of capital, c/v , also rises with increases in productivity, while, on the premise that the rate of surplus value remains unchanged, the profit rate $p=m/c+v$ will decrease accordingly. What needs to be clarified is that some versions of the theory of the falling rate of profit describe this tendency as the result of the rise of technical composition (Lebowitz 2009, 134). However, in Marx's view, the organic composition and technical composition of capital have subtle differences (see Table 1).

When Marx discusses the rising organic composition of capital and the falling rate of profit, he presupposes that the rate of surplus value remains unchanged. As long as the rate of surplus value remains unchanged, the technical composition does have the same tendency as the organic composition and the opposite tendency to the profit rate. However, when the increase in organic composition is fixed, as the increase in the rate of surplus value expands, the increase in technical composition will gradually decrease until it is less than the original technical composition. Therefore, the varying of technical composition and organic composition are not exactly the same. At the same time, the tendency of technical composition cannot determine the change of profit

Constant Capital: c	Variable Capital: v	Surplus Value: s	Organic Composition: c/v	Rate of Surplus value: s/v	Technical Composition: $c/v+s$	Profit Rate: $s/c+v$
300	100	100	3.00	100.00%	1.50	25.00%
500	150	150	3.33	100.00%	1.67	23.08%
500	250	250	2.00	100.00%	1.00	33.33%
500	150	250	3.33	166.67%	1.25	38.46%
500	250	150	2.00	60.00%	1.25	20.00%
500	150	140	3.33	93.33%	1.72	21.54%
500	150	180	3.33	120.00%	1.52	27.69%
500	150	190	3.33	126.67%	1.47	29.23%
600	150	180	4.00	120.00%	1.82	24.00%

Table 1 The Varying of Profit Rate in Relation to the Organic and the Technical Composition of Capital and the Rate of Surplus Value. Source: The Author.

rate since it is affected by the two variables of organic composition and rate of surplus value. The effect of the increase or decrease of technical composition compared with the initial ratio on the tendency of the profit rate is arbitrary. The varying direction of the rate of profit depends on the ratio of the change in the organic composition and the rate of surplus value when the rate of surplus value is no longer unchanged. Therefore, when discussing the falling rate of profit, the technical composition and the organic composition cannot be used as synonyms.

The question is, if the decline in the profit rate is an inevitable result of the increase in productivity, does the decline of the profit rate necessarily lead to crisis? Marx thought that the crisis caused by the contradiction between the forces and relations of production is an abstract necessity, but the decline in profitability as a real trend may not always be apparent as a result of certain countervailing influences: there are “some counteracting influences at work, which cross and annul the effect of the general law, and which give it merely the characteristic of a tendency” (Marx 1998, 230). These factors include the increasing intensity of exploitation, depression of wages below the value of labour-power, cheapening of elements of constant capital, relative overpopulation, foreign trade and the increase of stock capital. Therefore, only when capital's aforementioned means of maintaining profitability fails does the downward trend of the rate of profit become a realistic possibility.

The Contemporary Capitalist Mode of Production and Its Crisis

After experiencing a huge recession caused by the pandemic, the world economy began to show an overall but internally uneven recovery in the first quarter of 2021. Using Marx's crisis theory to examine this process requires two issues to be addressed. One is the correlation between the recession caused by the pandemic and the capitalist system, and the other is the contradiction and unsustainability of this recovery, namely the reason why this economic growth still contains the possibility of crisis. The World Bank is right to say that this economic crisis

is triggered by the pandemic. COVID-19 is indeed a cause of the current crisis as a factor external to capitalism, comparable to the meteorological influence cited by Jevons. However, the virus per se could not cause a global economic crisis. The pandemic is the result of the virus passing through the accelerated capitalist mode of production and its world system. David Harvey stated that

for Marx, economic instability and crises are primarily produced by the ever-present contradictions between different ‘moments’ within the economic system. External shocks can and do occur, of course. ... But it is internal blockages at any point in the circulation of capital ... that directly spawn crises of accumulation, resulting in sometimes massive devaluations of capital. (Harvey 2020, 113)

The dichotomy of purchase and sale mediated by money and securities provided the possibility of the crisis while the lack of demand due to unemployment, reduction of wages and lockdown provided the reality, which eventually leads to a slump in the financial market, and the bankruptcy of enterprises. It is true that the stock markets, at least in the U.S., were basically back to their pre-Covid levels at the end of the second quarter of 2020. However, this revitalization is driven by the central banks' ceaseless money printing and the bond issuance of the corporate sector and government, adding to the already high stock of debt. Although all states have adopted fiscal policies to provide subsidies to labourers, this is still chicken feed compared to the loss of unemployment. As Harvey (2018) argued, value created in production is potential value, the “value is lost if there is no demand for it in the market.” Therefore, as soon as governments stop their quantitative easing policies, the financial market will face a greater possibility of crisis. Moreover, in addition to the three dimensions of crisis theory that Marx elaborated, the current capitalist mode of production and the economic recession caused by the Covid-19 pandemic confirm the fourth dimension of crisis theory: severity. In this sense, it is still a crisis within a specifically capitalist mode of production, as the particular way in which

economy and human life are determined is capitalist rather than of feudal or Asiatic, and the way in which equilibrium has been sought is very clearly capitalist, too. This is, therefore, a world capitalist economic crisis that has been caused by those triggers such as crop failures, plagues, and natural disasters, more commonly regarded as causes of pre-capitalist crises. Although the above factors did not disappear from the face of the earth after capitalism became the dominant global mode of production, they have never arisen in such a way as to present a challenge of this magnitude to the capitalist world system.

Due to the high infectivity of the virus, the relatively high fatality rate, and the lack of effective treatment and vaccine in the early stage of the pandemic, governments around the world have effectively had to attempt to prevent the spread of the disease through long-term quarantine measures to prevent the death of the population. These measures have caused the inevitable interruption of the capitalist production process. “Capital is value in motion and any pause or even slowdown in that motion for whatever reason means a loss of value” (Harvey 2017, 74). The quicker the capital accumulation process is, the more vulnerable the process is, as the contradiction in the capitalist mode of production will be realized more rapidly in a given period of time. In this way, the global extent of the impact of the crisis is related to capital’s annihilation of space with time. Moreover, when capital accelerates the spatial circulation of capital and labour through improved transportation and communication methods, the spread of viruses throughout the world is also accelerated.

The contradictions within the capitalist mode of production are certainly the fundamental cause of the economic crisis, but the motion of value and the reproduction process of capital do not happen in a vacuum. Most classic Marxist interpretations of crisis abandon the dimension of space, only describing the continual self-proliferating and self-destroying process of capital accumulation over the duration of time. The theory of imperialism represented by Rosa Luxemburg may be an exception, but this view was quickly submerged in the attack on under-consumptionism. In other words, discussion of the spatial process is separate from the social process

among classical Marxists. This dualistic tendency is also consistent with the non-Marxist mainstream views of the time. Human geography was defined as “the explanation of spatial structure by intrinsically spatial processes” while classical sociology after Durkheim is defined as “the explanation of social structures by intrinsically social processes” (Gregory and Urry, 1985, 2). Marx did not give spatiality special treatment any more than did his contemporaries and epigones. As Harvey observed, “Marx, Marshall, Weber, and Durkheim all have this in common: they prioritise time and history over space and geography and, where they treat of the latter at all, tend to view them unproblematically as the stable context or site for historical action” (Harvey, 1985, 141). Marx (1996, 251) quoted from Reports of the Inspectors of Factories for the half year when he said of the working day that “moments are the elements of profit.” By contrast, space is the barrier of value realization that capital attempts to demolish. “While capital must on one side strive to tear down every spatial barrier to intercourse, i.e. to exchange, and conquer the whole earth for its market, it strives on the other side to annihilate this space with time, i.e. to reduce to a minimum the time spent in motion from one place to another” (Marx 1973, 539).

Nonetheless, this kind of thesis, that time annihilates space, already contains a kind of time-space structure of capital and of the dialectical relationship between time and space. On the one hand, the construction of production facilities, the transportation of raw materials, the flow of labour, the production and circulation of commodities, all these events involved in the capitalist production process share a portion of time and space. The annihilation of space with time is not to eliminate space, which is an impossible task, but to accelerate the production and circulation of capital through the construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of space. In recent decades, capitalism has become more and more proficient in continuously increasing productivity, accumulating and preserving surplus value, and attenuating (if not resolving) its internal contradictions through continuous occupation, production and creative destruction of space (Lefebvre 1976, 21). On the other hand, the process of capital accumulation is wrapped in the

larger flow of time and space. From the perspective of process philosophy, every event, or process, “extends over other events, and every event is extended over by other events” (Whitehead 2015, 39). As a result, narrowing the extension of events or process can only obtain smaller events or process. The smallest limit of the event, which is abstract rather than real, is called the event-particle by Alfred North Whitehead. This kind of event-particle is an abstraction that occupies a moment in time and a certain position in space. Therefore, the epistemologically computable time and space are abstracted from the extension and duration that essentially follow the unfolding of the process. In this way, “time and space are not separate from the processes by which the physical and social worlds operate and the very relations between objects (and subjects)” (Urry 2000, 107). Not only that, but the events of the capitalist production process also change the time-space extension that subsequent events will occupy due to the changes in the forces and relations of production. As Harvey (2017, 131) states, “the circulation and accumulation of capital occurs in a specific organisation of space and time even as it simultaneously defines and redefines the time and spaces within which it moves.”

That time eliminates space not only shows that capital has a certain time-space structure, but also that time and space are variable. In an abstract sense, the annihilation of space with time is achieved through an acceleration of the pace of social processes and the speed of society as such. Bauman (2000, 9) agreed that “the very idea of speed (even more conspicuously, that of acceleration), when referring to the relationship between time and space assumes its variability.” Whitehead (2015, 123) likewise explained that “our congruence determination embraces both times and spaces in one universal system, and therefore if two arbitrary units are chosen, one for all spaces and one for all times, their ratio will be a velocity which is a fundamental property of nature expressing the fact that times and spaces are really comparable.”

People in Marx's era experienced the acceleration in their daily lives in a concrete sense. Such acceleration was the result of developments in transportation and communication, in particular. “‘Annihilation of time and space’ was the topos which the early nine-

teenth century used to describe the new situation into which the railroad placed natural space after depriving it of its hitherto absolute powers” (Schivelbusch 1986, 10). As a result of the invention of the steam engine and the improvement of communication technology, commuting, travel and cargo transportation via railways and steamships have all become possible. From human legs to horse-drawn carriages, from steam locomotives and steamships to jet airliners, traversing the same distance requires less and less time. Phileas Fogg, the protagonist in the novel by Jules Gabriel Verne, took 80 days to complete a round-the-world trip in 1872. Today, taking into account the transfer and rest issues, it would not take more than 80 hours to travel around the earth in a civil aircraft. Modes of rapid transportation such as the railway, which arose with the development of capitalist productive forces, “did not appear embedded in the space of the landscape the way coach and highway are, but seemed to strike its way through it” (Schivelbusch 1986, 37). As one contemporary commentator put it: “Space is killed by the railways, and we are left with time alone” (Heine, 1854, in Schivelbusch 1986, 37).

This sense of time-space is referred to as time-space compression by Harvey. “Time and space are compressed and fused as a consequence of transnational economic and technological developments, which produce and are dependent on the speedy transfer of goods and information” (Kaufmann, Bergman and Joye 2004, 746). In terms of the capitalist accumulation process, the acceleration is manifested in the circuit of capital. In the sphere of production, the annihilation of space with time is reflected in the decentralization of production, particularly since the 1970s. In Marx's era, production was often carried out at a fixed location, and the use of new technologies only brought about temporal changes, that is, shortened the necessary labour time for production. However, since the 1970s, capital has been able to adopt a more flexible spatial organizational form, as a consequence of the development of transportation and information technology. Due to the increase in the spatial mobility of raw materials, labour, and information, the space occupied by a production process has expanded on the one hand. On the other

hand, the distance between plots of space organized by production is reduced due to the shortening of the time of movement. “Speed up was achieved in production by organisational shifts towards vertical disintegration – sub-contracting, outsourcing, etc.” (Harvey 1989, 284). By contrast, the phase of value realization is when and where the annihilation of space by time to which Marx referred happened. “The nineteenth century’s preoccupation with the conquest and mastery of space and time had found its most general expression in the concept of circulation, which was central to the scientific social notions of the epoch” (Schivelbusch 1986, 194). The logic is very simple. If the product can be sold faster, the value produced can be realized faster, thence the capitalist can obtain the pre-invested capital and surplus value to re-invest them in the next capital circuit. Therefore, the shorter the value-realization process, the more capital turnover is completed in a year, and the more surplus value is obtained. Today, this dream of the capitalist has come true owing to the development of high-speed railways and aviation, the transition from the commodity consumption to service consumption, the purchase and sale of internet virtual products, and the abundance of financial tools. The distance between the place of production and the place of consumption is no longer a problem. Products and services can reach their markets at an unprecedented speed. In this sense, the turnover of capital has been much accelerated. It not only creates more surplus value for capitalists but also provides greater possibilities for the outbreak of a capitalist crisis.

The economic recession in 2020 seems to have passed away in 2021, at least in advanced economies due to the massive programme of vaccination, according to the IMF projection published in April 2021. However, the tendency towards crisis still lies in the world capitalist mode of production. Firstly, the recovery is remarkably uneven. States like the US, the UK, Canada, China and Israel enjoy economic recovery while smaller and poorer countries, including many in South and Southeast Asia suffering from the delta variant of Covid-19, could not secure sufficient vaccines through COVAX, due to their lesser use-value to the capitalist global system

and lower ownership of value. Although vaccines are generally regarded as common wealth and shared by all humanity, the companies that owned the vaccines listed by the WHO for emergency use are based in the world’s major economies. They either make profits by selling vaccines, or gain political benefits through neo-imperialist means of vaccine diplomacy. This uneven economic recovery and pandemic mitigation will have a counter-effect on the success of major economies, including but not limited to the endless emergence of new variants that may cause immune escape and other infections that may erupt in the future in underdeveloped countries. India, despite having experienced two decades of economic boom and becoming the sixth largest economy in the world, is swallowing the bitter fruit yielded by its dense population, huge gap between rich and poor and fragile public health management system. The delta variant not only hindered the economic recovery of India projected in the first quarter of 2021 but also affected the whole of South and Southeast Asia. Secondly, the economic recovery of advanced economies is unsustainable. The economic recession caused by the Covid-19 pandemic has occurred in the context of an already contradictory capitalist mode of production. “Average profitability was already very low before the pandemic, and in some countries, it was the lowest level since the end of the Second World War” (Roberts 2021b); a consequence of the capitalist economy having been largely financialized and rentierised. “Over the past few decades, several analysts have observed a relative shift in capital accumulation strategies, from the primacy of production of surplus value by expanded reproduction ... toward increased foregrounding of the circulation of money and profit through non-productive forms of value appropriation” (Andreucci *et al.* 2017, 1). In this sense, the so-called increased wage of the labourer is snatched back through energy and credit card bills, mortgage payments or housing rent, while a large portion of surplus value produced in the production sector is taken away in the form of debt interest, dividends and land rent. During the pandemic, the shift from actual social interaction to online interaction enhanced the power of Internet giants such

as Google, Amazon and Microsoft (cf. Pirone 2021, 2), who can use their monopoly on cyberspace and intellectual properties to obtain more rent than ever before. Therefore, the tendencies of the falling rate of profit and underconsumption have been underlying factors in the current capitalist mode of production that will emerge at some point in the future. Under such circumstances, it is not surprising that

the money injections by the Federal Reserve and other central banks, mainly achieved by 'printing money' and purchasing huge quantities of government and corporate bonds, as well as making loans and grants, have ended up, on the whole, not in the hands of businesses and households to spend, but in the deposits of banks and other financial institutions. (Roberts 2021a)

Massive reconstruction of infrastructure by government may mitigate the tendency toward crisis. However, this demands a particularly strong government, something along the lines of the Roosevelt administration, which is impossible in the near future, with the possible exception of far-right neofascist authorities, due to the 40-year development of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism has created an unprecedentedly active market and 'negative government,' which is only active in terms of assisting the normal operation of the market: such negative government is the culprit responsible for the severity of the crisis globally. As Richard Wolf stated in conversation with Lyon-Callo (2020, 573), "even in a capitalist country, if you have a culture that says the government isn't some kind of fundamental evil, ... it can come in and make the compensation for capitalism's failure." Besides, the failure of capitalist governments to deal with the pandemic before vaccines are proved effective has revealed itself to be ineffective in dealing with the crisis of economy and public health. Herd immunity, a Malthusian response to COVID-19, appeared to have been adopted by the Trump administration in the US, after the UK's initial moves in this direction were aborted. This anarchistic attitude to dealing with the epidemic is mainly reflected in the lack of rigorous implementation of

isolation measures and weak detection.² An age-old principle can be invoked to slow down the spread of unknown infectious diseases today. In 1976, Dr Jean-Francois Ruppel recommended to residents of the Ebola outbreak area the local experience of dealing with smallpox for many years. "Whenever there was an epidemic of smallpox, people who were suspected of having the disease, and their young children, were placed in a hut that was constructed outside the village. The hut was stocked with a supply of water and food, while any physical contact with the victims was forbidden" (Preston 2019, 198). In 1976, this method effectively prevented Ebola from spreading as widely as it did in 2014. In relation to COVID-19, after the panic of the first few weeks, China quickly established two new hospitals in Wuhan and coordinated existing hospital beds to treat critically ill patients, establishing further field hospitals by using stadiums, convention centres, and other places to treat mildly ill patients, rather than leaving the infected people at home to accelerate community and family transmission. These measures quickly and effectively reversed the epidemic in Wuhan and even the country as a whole. The ancient rule relies on large-scale testing today, because the symptoms of some infected people are not obvious, and they are easily confused with the symptoms of influenza and other diseases. In some countries, the application for testing requires that the symptoms have been severe to some extent, and even those who are detected as infected are still released to return home. In this sense whether the governments could slow down capital circulation and create more distance between bodies and commodities is critical to saving not only lives but also the capitalist system. Reopening the capitalist economy before the crisis could be controlled is like taking drugs. Moreover, the abandoned proletariat should not forget Marx's words that the capitalist state is the instrument of class domination, which will be overturned by communist revolution. In this sense, no matter whether

² At the time of writing, the original strain and the delta variant prevail. Their transmissibility and pathogenicity are significantly different from the Omicron variant, requiring more stringent measures.

the government economic stimulus works or not, the hallucination generated by the temporary recovery of the stock market and employment rate will probably be followed by either a chronic recession or a sudden strike by the revolution of the abandoned proletariat.

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Building Societies in Which All Can And Do Prosper

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We can fight for the idea that history is what you make of it.

Allen Marcus and Charles Menzies

The epigraph is drawn from Allen Marcus and Charles Menzies's introduction to the first issue of *New Proposals*, published fifteen years ago in May 2007. Indeed, it is the closing words of a remarkable essay which surveys the status and concerns of academic Marxism at the crest of neo-liberalism. At the time, most policymakers believed the window for fundamental political development had passed. What remained was merely efficient reform, that if not entirely beholden to the market nevertheless took great inspiration from it. And why not, these technocrats shrugged. In the United States, the real GDP had grown by more than 230% in nearly a quarter century; from US\$6.759tn in 1980 to US\$15.626tn in 2007. Aside from ordinary recessions in the business cycle in 1990 and 2001, growth rates had peaked at 7.2% in 1984, and stayed consistent at around 4.5% in the late 1990s (see Amadeo 2022). "As the 20th century drew to a close" Marcus and Menzies wrote:

those of us who managed to take hold of the dream of a classless society found ourselves gradually pushed to the sidelines as market-mechanisms and acquisitive individualism became ever more triumphant. (2007, 1)

Yet informed by anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist struggles before, and prepared to use the yardstick of centuries, Marcus and Menzies were unwilling to bend to capitalist realism. If the intensification of accumulation impulses was an automatic social good, why then were reactionary forces frequently beckoned to safeguard the flanks of this process?

If appearances were on the side of capitalists, facts were not. In a prescient inversion of the grammar of financialization, Marcus and Menzies wrote "we believe that Marxism is at an all time low and has the possibility for good long term growth" (Marcus and Menzies 2007, 2). The 2008 Great Recession was a material proof that 'reality always

asserts itself.' Unencumbered by disciplinary strictures, *New Proposals* was well positioned to capture the renewed interest in Marxism as the ramifications of the Great Recession spread across the globe. The turmoil prompted renewed discussions about the irreconcilability of democracy and capitalism. And just like that, what seemed impossible years before was up for grabs as movements like Occupy Wall Street crafted a succinct vocabulary to describe the totality of alienation and misery under capitalism. While undoubtedly committed to scholarship of the finest quality, more importantly *New Proposals* provided a venue for experimentation with Marxism, using this global body of knowledge as the starting point for conceptualizing (and revolting against) the failed project of capitalism.

Like any piece of intellectual work, *New Proposals* reflects its place and time. As the covers of the various issues show, this was British Columbia, Canada, a geography I have happened to traverse too. In the late 2000s and early 2010s, there were several clusters of concern. In urban areas these were homelessness, underemployment, and increasing rents, all telltale signs of growing social inequality. For a while it seemed that the only people not duly worried about a pressed public transportation network were the land developers who had the ears of municipal politicians with foreign direct investment from the Asia-Pacific region eager to assist in gentrifying the local real estate market (Ley and Dobson 2008; Ley 2017). Another matter was civil friction as new migrants integrated in Canada. Too often this took the form of vulgar interpersonal racism, but institutional racism played a not insignificant role as well. Activists sought to build solidarity between new-migrants and Indigenous groups, albeit somewhat unsuccessfully.

Rural areas had similar problems with gentrification as the wealthy bought second or third homes, leaving locals unable to live in the towns they were born in. Concurrently many towns built around resource extraction had to reinvent themselves, oftentimes becoming sites for weekend leisure or the creative economy. Proverbially, mountain guides replaced loggers while shipping clerks became pottery makers. The changing occupational composition was

reflected in local government, and factions emerged to safeguard old and new interests. Squamish, a town north of Vancouver, is the quintessential example of a town that sought to square the circle of extractive industries with environmental tourism. Finally, due to the consequences of uneven and combined development conservative politics took on new attributes, like intense resentment of 'distant metropolitan elites.' But if anything linked urban and rural British Columbia it was the prevailing belief that profiting from nature was a right; resource extraction or green capitalism were simply two different methods to achieve that goal.

The task of countering the many of the aforementioned developments is being made more difficult due to what we might describe as the great project of anti-critique. It is a truism that universities across the world are besieged by various pressure groups forces from the political right, far right, alt-right, and intellectual dark web. One common semiotic tactic has been to portray social science and humanities faculty as treasonous because they supposedly proselytize and indoctrinate young adults into becoming budding Bolsheviks. When taking power, the political right typically prioritizes dismantling the humanities. Whether Stephen Harper, in the wake of a 2013 terror threat, claimed that "this is not the time to commit sociology" (Toronto Star, 2013), Jair Bolsonaro's 2019 Twitter declaration of a state project to "descentralizar investimento em faculdades de filosofia e sociologia"¹ or the current manufactured outrage over Critical Race Theory in the United States, the underlying message is clear: "All scholars, regardless of how benign they think they are, are a clear political threat." Sadly, few friends are to be found inside the university as administrators view themselves as accountants. This is not to claim that administrators can never be allies in the politics of universities. Only that their goodwill will only ever go so far. If egalitarian progress is to be made, students and scholars must be the drivers. And in addition to the classroom, there needs to be venues to openly share analysis and thought, commentary and critique.

1 The English translation is to 'decentralize investment in faculties of philosophy and sociology.'

Given the place of *New Proposals*, it has always aspired to productively deploy Marxist and Indigenous social critique. As Volume 3(3) suggests, this was an “ambivalent relationship” with many failed efforts. Still Menzies proposed, “it does seem that the analytic reach of Marxist inspired theoretical concepts and frameworks should have some salience for navigating a path toward decolonization autonomy” (Menzies 2010, 5). With Indigenous peoples taking an active and visible leadership role in British Columbia fisheries unions, as but one example, in addition to a history of labour activism, Marxist analysis can assist people to understand the kinds of subordination set in motion by property ownership, and how that ownership is tied to (neo)colonial dis-possession. This is an area of work that *New Proposals* is a world leader in, and a concentration I hope the journal maintains as it further matures.

The introduction to this collection will be Charles Menzies’s last. Over the fifteen years he has been the editor he has embodied the ideal of ‘being a good ancestor.’ I acknowledge with gratitude his handing over the editorial reins of *New Proposals*. I will work hard and strategically to advance the project of *New Proposals* so that it can continue to be an incubator for the diversity of Marxist thought, showing it to be living political and scholarly tradition. The other commitment I make to keep the main thread that ties all of Menzies’s work together. This is his insistence on the variability of human life; his conclusion is empirically supported by decades of anthropological scholarship and field studies. Humans can build societies in which all can and do prosper. I invite authors and readers to join the project for there is a world to win. And maybe, if we are fortunate, perhaps we too might even be able find some satisfaction in the work itself.

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