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HISTORY, HISTORICISM, AND THE TEMPORALITIES OF THE AVANT-GARDE

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The avant-garde today is more than a space for the continuing extension of art into the 'expanded field' and post-conceptual modes of practice, it is, rather, the renewed site of the debate on capitalist temporality and reproduction, history and time. Indeed, it is the double articulated character of the avant-garde – on the one hand its revolutionary function as that which presses beyond or in advance of the present, and, on the other, its role as the revolutionary critic of the modernizing present and modernity – that makes it crucial to the debate on art, emancipation and temporality today. In the following, therefore, I want to look at how a defense of the avant-garde in art, enables another kind of thinking on modernity, one not beholden to the abstract universality and temporal compression of the value form, and, therefore, one not subordinate to the unilinearity of capitalist developmentalism. In this sense, to understand the continuing revolutionary value and valence of the avant-garde, we need to look again at its defining relationship with anti-historicism and the critique of the philosophy of history. For it is here that the problems and dilemmas of contemporary culture will be foregrounded, in as much, as it is the ways in which artists and theorists are able to *think* the relationship between past, present and future as an anti-historicist 'relation of non-relation', that will determine a workable politics in art.

Begriffsgeschichte and anti-historicism

Historicism, derived from positivistic historiography and the evolutionary and development models and schemas of the bourgeois social sciences and what remains of social democratic progressivism, has two key components: an assumption that history unfolds on the basis of the incremental development of the achievements of the past; and the notion that the past is freed from the present, in order to render the present transformable into the future. This is underwritten, in positivism proper, by three autonomizing definitions of the social subject, that, in a sense, provide, the machinery for a working ideology of change and developmentalism: namely, a subject, whose self-possessive identity is divorced from the divisions of subjectivity; a subject whose relationship to the world is based on the simple instrumental reorganization of an external world; and a subject whose agency 'transcends' the causal efficacy of social relations. Now, of course, the critique of this intellectual apparatus - or Capitalist Discourse as Jacques Lacan once called it¹ - continues to define the long emancipatory struggle in thought derived from Freud and Marx in the modern period, in which the autonomous subject has been destroyed again and again in theory over the last 150 years. But theory-as-practice has its limits; indeed what is assumed to be destroyed in theory, finds itself, in turn, destroyed as practice. In other words, under the abstract universality of the commodity form the logical relations that support capitalist social reality continue to reproduce themselves, irrespective of the intellectual or ideological critique of these relations. This is the ontological *irrealism* of Capitalist Discourse.² The fact that: the abstract universality of the commodity form is not *imposed* on everyday relations and appearances, so to speak, but structures the real as the result of commodity exchange. One of the

¹ Jacques Lacan, 'Du discours psychanalytique', *Lacan in Italia 1953-1978*, La Salamandra, Milan, 1978

² For a discussion of irrealism, see Roy Bhaskar, *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom*, Verso, London and New York, 1992. See also Nick Hostettler, 'Dialectic and Explaining Eurocentrism: The Dialectics of the European Problematic of Modernity', *Journal of Critical Realism*, Vol 12, No 1, 2013, pp45-71.

reasons, that Lacan talks, therefore, about historicism and positivism as the socio-subjective props of Capitalist Discourse, is that, their function, precisely, is to act, in the interests of this social continuum, and the foreclosure of both subject and history.

The attack on historicism, then, over the last 40 years, has operated on two fronts simultaneously: the historicization of the subject as a condition of the critique of the autonomy of the subject, of the 'strong ego', and, in a comparable temporal move, the 'returning' of the contemporaneous to the non-contemporaneous and the non-contemporaneous to the contemporaneous, as a condition of breaking free of the present as the unfolding gateway to the future. Thus, in psychoanalytic terms, if the autonomous subject, refuses the reality of castration, in the theory of history, the release of the past from the present in order to render the present transformable into the future, separates past and present from the multiplicities of historical time. This is why, certainly since the reception of Walter Benjamin in the 1970s, the overwhelming role of anti-historicism in historical materialism, has been to link the experience of the non-contemporaneous in the contemporaneous to a multi-causal account of historical change and the asynchronic conditions of development, and, therefore, to the transformative pull or explosive charge of the multi-temporal valency of the past in the present.³ In these terms anti-historicism, is expressly a critique of Sufficient Reason. The past does not *explain* the nature of the present and, therefore, presupposes that the future is the evolutionary or rational consequence of the present, but, on the contrary, *inhabits* and negates the present as the transformative condition of the present's non-identitary relationship to itself and to the past. History, therefore, is not the domain of achieved facts subject to

³ This revitalized anti-historicism covers a wide range of thinkers: Tony Negri (1973), Alain Badiou (1988), Roy Bhaskar (1992), Giorgio Agamben (1993), Peter Osborne (1995), Daniel Bensaïd (1995), Paulo Virno (1999), Fredric Jameson (2002), Fredric Jameson (2002), Michael Löwy (2006), Kevin Anderson (2010), Jarius Banaji (2010), Slavoj Žižek (2012), Massimiliano Tomba (2013), Nick Hosteller (2013), Samo Tomšič (2015). Some of this repositioning derives from Benjamin, some from Spinoza (as against Hegel), some from Hegel and Marx, and some from Ernst Bloch.

interpretation, but of retroactively achieved concepts. This is why the notion of *Begriffsgeschichte* (conceptual-history) has been one of key critical building blocks of an anti-historicist temporality and historical practice, since Benjamin. For, under its interventionist logic the re-construction and re-reception of the historical event is wrenched from its settled historicist place within chronological time, displacing the self-sufficiency of both facts and interpretations.

Accordingly, this has had enormous implications for understanding the avant-garde, whose repeated historicist foreclosure since the 1970s has been based on the assumption that, its meanings and agency have been superseded by the present and therefore claims for its extension are merely a formalist or stylistic repetition of its origins. This is a crucial point. For historicists don't deny that past events might speak to the present, but they do reject that they have any causal efficacy; whatever we might reclaim from the past is confined to the past; interpretations do not generate agency. *Begriffsgeschichte*, in contrast, treats interpretative intervention into the past as an actively prospective move, insofar as the truth of the event establishes itself *through* the process of intervention, changing past and present as a consequence. Indeed, until the intervention is made, we are not able to see the event at all, or see its continuing significance in the same way. Thus, *Begriffsgeschichte* is not just the work of recovery or redemption (of reclaiming the past from the dead hand of condescension, of recovering the overlooked), but of the conceptual production of the event in the present as an intervention into the present. In other words, *Begriffsgeschichte* is precisely *form-giving*, insofar as the 'event' in the process of its historicization is conceptually reconfigured, and, therefore, epistemologically, indivisible from the process of intervention itself. But, this is not a speculative process: for the event to have efficacy in the present the truth-claims of the event must possess a non-contemporaneous-contemporaneous capacity to shape the present and open up a space for future praxis; the 'event' can only be reconstructed from that which has determinate historical efficacy, it cannot be rebuilt on supposition alone. But,

in turn – crucially – the process of intervention is itself conceptually mediated. There are no pure or non-historically determined returns or interventions from the present, so to speak, insofar as the point from which the return is made also exercises a privileged perspective on the past. So for example: the re-functioning of the avant-garde today is only possible, through the political reception of the post-revolutionary and post-Thermidorian history of its original destruction and reception; there is, therefore, no non-traumatic recovery of its critical horizons, no neutral recovery of the avant-garde as such. Hence, what we make from the revolutionary truth-claims of the avant-garde is made from the truth of this post-Thermidorian history; they are inseparable. Consequently, if the avant-garde is irreducible to its origins (that is, if the conceptually produced 'avant-garde' is supplementary to the originary event), this irreducibility is mediated by its historical conditions of possibility. Or, rather, to put it another way: the avant-garde's conditions of emergence are determined by its suspensive/contingent conditions of possibility.

Thus there is a fundamental dialectical understanding of the afterlife of the original avant-garde at play here, derived from the asynchronic and non-contemporaneous conditions of *Begriffsgeschichte*-as-method. Under the changed social, economic and political circumstances the would-be core programme of the avant-garde undergoes a process of transformation and qualification subject to these changed circumstances. Thus, after the Second World War, the entry of the ideals and horizons of the avant-garde into post-revolutionary or post-Thermidorian space, radically alters, what might or might not be advanced in the name of these ideals and horizons. Accordingly what is produced and named by the avant-garde in this period as key avant-garde aims and strategies – the dissolution of art into life, the deconstruction of the monadic artist, the distribution of artistic skills into production and across social classes, the extension of artistic form beyond painting and sculpture – are subject to multiple extensions, re-functioning, and re-positionings, that dissolve any sense

of this work as an extension of an 'unchanged core'. This is why the avant-garde is not 'reclaimed' or rediscovered in this period, it is re-functioned in response to (and in resistance to) the prevailing post-revolutionary and late Cold War conditions. Fundamentally, then: the political claims of the research programmes of the original avant-garde change as a result of the gap *between* what the avant-garde originally named as a revolutionary sequence – or hoped to name - and the radically constrained conditions of this process of nomination in the post-war world. As such, the avant-garde's re-functioning of its programme is itself the outcome of the new social ontology of art in this period: namely, the assimilation of art into the new cultural industries and the growing calendrical pressures of the art market in the pursuit of renewable 'novelty'. The post-war avant-garde, of course, draws off this dynamic – one should not forget this - but nevertheless, the determining logic of the avant-garde's critique of modernity – its revolutionary production of places and spaces and forms agency of art beyond the modernist canon - is subject to a striking compression. Artists in this period, still operate in response to these ambitions (think of Wolf Vostell and Robert Smithson's extraordinary extra-gallery projects in the 1960s), but there is no direct relationship between art, cultural form and the transformation of the sensible; no alignment between art, the collective subject, general social technique and the environment; and, in turn, no re-functioning of the technical and social division of labour under the non-instrumental demands of art. Rather, there is a fragmented interpolation of the 'avant-garde horizon' within the mediating realm of a newly expanding art-world and the newly conquering institutions, particularly in the USA. Thus the avant-garde's sphere of intervention and influence retains a twofold identity in this period: firstly, it foregrounds the socially delimited character of the new institutions, and secondly, defends a critique of the quasi-amnesiacal identity of the prevailing 'return' to modernist painting, the canon, and the monadic artist. Admittedly, both of these strategies are little more than small-scale countermoves, in lieu of the weight of their historic avant-garde precedents,

yet, nevertheless they remain profoundly enabling, in terms of how art in the present continues to retain its link with the past.

The avant-garde, or rather more precisely the neo-avant-garde in this period (1950-), then, operates, accordingly, in response to a temporality not derived from the evolutionary or linear continuity of the modernist painterly canon. That is, irrespective of the neo-avant-garde's assimilation into the new institutions of art and the international circuits of production and reception, and the pluralising historical framework of the new modernism (and later postmodernism), its claims to extend the claims of the historic avant-garde, acts as an *asymmetrical rupture and disaffirmative presence* within this new regime. By this I mean that, even though much neo-avant-garde practice is historicized as radically extending the 'great tradition' of modernist accomplishment, its motive force, remains attached to the unassimilable rupture of the historic avant-garde with bourgeois culture, irrespective of this motive force's weak or attenuated presence in actual works and internal to the social relations of artists. This is why Peter Bürger's *Theorie der Avant-garde* (1974) (*Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1984)),⁴ muddies the water historically and historiographically, by adopting a version of revolutionary historicism, rather than revolutionary *Begriffsgeschichte*, in his assessment of the post-war avant-garde. That is, he fails to think the avant-garde beyond its – unfinished – conditions of production, reducing the neo-avant-garde to a failed echo of its heroic early years. The consequences of this are twofold: the *essentialization* of the revolutionary content or core programme of the avant-garde separate from its unfolding historical production, repositioning and re-functioning; and the blurring of the fundamental temporalizing difference between the avant-garde and modernism as such. That is, the avant-garde, as it is defined and theorized in the early Soviet Union, Berlin and in Paris under Surrealism, is not the heightened and incantatory subordination of art and the

⁴ Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avant-garde*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt-am-Main, 1974, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, translated by, Michael Shaw, foreword by Jochen Schulte-Sasse, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984

social world to a process of modernization, but precisely its opposite: the freeing of social creativity, artistic form, and artistic identity, from the calendrical turn-over of the commodity, and the valorization of the monadic self or 'strong ego'. In this sense between 1917-1927 the avant-garde breaks through the process of capitalist modernization to identify an alternate kind of modernity, in which the production of the 'new' shifts horizontally; that is, through the critique of artistic labour, artistic form and the art institution there is a move externally towards a new collective culture. Now, of course, art's relationship to technological modernization plays a crucial part in this – Constructivism and Productivism, derive their momentum and idealism from what art and the artist might make of the advanced relations of production. In this sense there are no avant-garde research programmes without the interface between technique, technology and the advanced relations of cultural production. Yet, even in the writing of the most partisan and technologist adherents of the machino-technical transformation of art in the 1920s, the fundamental struggle was always to produce a new subjectivity *in art, in labour, in labour-as-art, in art-as-labour*, not beholden to the calendrical order of the commodity form. In this sense, then, the avant-garde passes through the fires of modernity as its critic and not its celebrant, whereas the anti-technological defenders of modernist aestheticism, concerned with the imagined freedoms of contemplation and sensuous form (principally painting), are the willing, indeed, ardent, accomplices of art's commodified exchange.

Thus even, if at the heart of the new commodified conditions of artistic production in the post-war world, the neo-avant-garde as a remnant or residual avant-garde retains this temporal link to the historic avant-garde's critique of modernity. There may have been no stable and progressive links between art and transformative forces 'from below', but nevertheless, as placeholder, for other ways of doing and being, or other ways of organizing creativity outside of the market, the attenuated conditions of avant-garde production and reception, played the role in Ernst Bloch's sense of the non-contemporaneous

contemporary.⁵ This means, ontologically, therefore, that the avant-garde is not to be confused with those forms of historicism, like Bürger's and other since, that would, identify the avant-garde either with a failed event, or with a past set of stylistic resources, that are now freely available for semiotic or symbolic recovery. On the contrary, in the prevailing post-Thermidorian space that we still live and work in, the atemporality of the avant-garde as a research programme, represents an important stake in that range of social experiments that Alain Badiou has identified with, "another order of time";⁶ "a different *durée* to that imposed by the law of the world".⁷ This means that the avant-garde has a special part to play in a new politics of time, particularly in the light of the growing crisis of capitalist reproduction, and the overwhelmingly comprehensive and claustrophobic character of the 'permanent now' of the new network culture and its variously thinned-out virtual solidarities.

Thus in liberating the avant-garde, from its historicist death, it is possible to see how an emancipatory politics of time in the current period, breaks with the enforced linearity of the 'new' as 'other'. As such, before we return to our discussion of the 'contemporary-non-contemporary' character of the avant-garde, and its extension and re-functioning today, it is, therefore worth looking at how an anti-historicist understanding of *Begriffsgeschichte*, links to various other post-historicist, retroactive, post-linear models of capitalist modernity and world history. For, despite, the overwhelming dominance of lived time by what Badiou calls the unending fetishisms of commodity exchange, we are actually living through an extraordinary period of philosophical counter-historicizing that, obviously, includes the work of Badiou himself. Some of this writing focuses directly on the critique of philosophy of history, other work on the critique of evolutionary models of progress borrowed from the bourgeois social sciences.

⁵ See Ernst Bloch, *Ernst Bloch Werkausgabe*, Vol 12, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt, 1969

⁶ Alain Badiou, 'The Communist Hypothesis', *New Left Review*, No 49, Jan/Feb 2008, p41

⁷ Alain Badiou, *ibid*, p41

The Becoming of Necessity

The notion of *Begriffsgeschichte*, of course, comes from Reinhart Koselleck's *Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten*, (*Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*) first published in 1979, and translated into English in 1985. What is transformative about Koselleck's book is that, *Begriffsgeschichte*, operates as a de-temporalizing and denaturalizing force against the tendency in both radical and conventional historicisms to conflate historical chronology with actuality (or the ontic), and historical truth. But this isn't simply a post-chronological understanding of how the past can speak to the present (as in the classical historiography of the Greeks in which the lessons of the past are reinstated in the present). Rather, this is a thoroughly post-Thermidorian temporality in which the present and the future are forged anew from the re-articulation of what links the present to futures past – hence Koselleck's title. Thus if both bourgeois and radical historicism submit the past and the 'event' to a flat iterability in the present (recovery of that which has been superseded, lost to the historical process and 'progress'), Koselleck's de-temporalizing *Begriffsgeschichte* understands the present as a space of *productive iterability* (of futures past as 'unfinished' historical labour, that sets questions, and provides a prospective theoretical encounter with the problems of the present). Productive iterability clearly bears close historiographical relationship to Benjamin's temporal recovery of the histories of the vanquished as aborted futures past. And, of course, Benjamin's own anti-historicism, undergirds, most of the post-Thermidorian anti-historicist work of the last fifty years on the philosophy of history and evolutionary models of progress. But, Koselleck is no utopian theorist, no matter how much he might borrow indirectly from Benjamin and from Bloch's 'contemporaneous non-contemporary' model (*Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen*). On the contrary, his commitment to the productive notion of futures past is a way of introducing a *pluralizing* account of the past and the past in the present in order to break the notion of the present as the necessary

gateway to progress and modernity. In other words the present offers no guarantee of the future, and therefore, those who presume to know the future on the basis of the present and past, what he calls revealingly “the voluntaristic self-assurance of utopian planners of the future,”⁸ substitute historical thinking for prophecy and eschatology. Indeed, he identifies this mode of historiography, if not directly with the works of Hegel and Marx themselves (his historical methodology owes a passing debt to the Marx of the *Grundrisse*), then certainly, with the politics and history, that have claimed their provenance and legacy. This is deeply ironic of course, for since the publication of *Futures Past*, the received and reactionary notion of Hegel and Marx, as unreconstructed historicist thinkers (with implicit or explicit eschatological tendencies) has been subject to the most thoroughgoing critique.⁹ Indeed, the retroactive transformation of the past (as the ‘unfinished’ past) that is evident in Hegel’s philosophy and the ‘anti-progressivist’ and anti-evolutionary character of Hegel’s dialectic is fully, reinstated in Marx - or the later Marx - as for instance in Daniel Bensaïd’s *Marx l’intempestif* (1995) (*Marx for Our Time*, 2002), Jarius Banaji’s *Theory as History: Essays on Modes of Production and Exploitation* (2010), Massimiliano Tomba’s *Marx’s Temporalities* (2013) and Slavoj Žižek’s writing generally, particularly his massive book on Hegel, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (2012). As Žižek elaborates in *Less Than Nothing*, the retroactive understanding of the past in the present as a transformation of past and present represents the very core relationship between Hegel and Marx. Indeed this is the main reason why today “one should return from Marx to Hegel and enact a “materialist reversal” of Marx himself.”¹⁰ And this centres, first and foremost, given both thinkers respective critiques of Sufficient Reason, in their rejection of

8 Reinhardt Koselleck, *Futures Past*, p114

9 As such, one the striking characteristics of this counter-historicizing work is its own counter-historicizing account of anti-historicism. Hegel and Marx, are themselves subject to the re-conceptualizing move of *Begriffsgeschichte*, in order to finally release both thinkers from the clutches of a post-Deleuzian and poststructuralist anti-dialectical post-historicism, and from the use of Benjamin’s Marxist anti-historicism against both Marx and Hegel.

10 Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, p207

necessity as predetermination. Far from historical development being an inevitable consequence of the past, becoming is the becoming of necessity itself, that is, the claims of necessity are themselves indivisible from the claims made in its name. Necessity, therefore, is radically contingent, and consequently, ‘becoming’ retroactively engenders its own conditions of possibility: “the process of becoming is not in itself necessary, but is the *becoming* (the gradual contingent emergence) of necessity itself.”¹¹ Crucially, then, the past is not simply assimilated into the present as a given or lost prehistory; but, through its retroactive *re*-determination, it begins a new causal chain in the present. As Žižek says of Hegel’s dialectic in these terms: “the Self to which Spirit returns is produced in the very movement of this return, or, that to which the process of returning is produced by the very process of returning.”¹² And as he says of Marx’s anti-historicist reflections on anthropology and historical development: “it is precisely because of the passage from ape to man is radically contingent and unpredictable because there is no inherent “progress” involved, that one can retroactively determine or discern the conditions (not “sufficient reasons”) for man in the ape.”¹³ So, for Hegel and Marx the critique of Sufficient Reason, releases the historical present from a mechanical sequence of effects and causes: “the present retroactively alters the past, which in turn, determines the present”.¹⁴

Stratification and Struggle

But if Hegel and Marx are conjoined philosophically in Žižek as anti-historicists, it is the radical historiography of Bensaïd, Banaji and Tomba, that provides Hegel and Marx’s critique of Sufficient Reason, with a political and global *raison d’être*,

11 Slavoj Žižek, *ibid*, p231

12 Slavoj Žižek, *ibid*, p235

13 Slavoj Žižek, *ibid*, p230-32

14 Samo Tomšič, *The Capitalist Unconscious*, Verso, London and New York, 2015, p26

aligning the retroactive production of the past and *Begriffsgeschichte*, with a historical materialist theory of asynchronic development and multiple temporality.¹⁵ “Present and future history is not the goal of past history,” says Bensaïd.¹⁶ Indeed, in this group of writers, there is an explicit link between the *spatialization* of time and anti-historicism, which puts us in mind not only of Bloch, but also of Badiou’s own spatialized understanding of time in the *Logics of Worlds* (2012), in which the past [becomes] the “amplitude of [the] present,” in a radical telescoping of past and present.¹⁷ “The only real relation to the present is that of incorporation: the incorporation into this immanent cohesion of the world which springs from the becoming-existent of the eventual trace, as a new birth beyond all the facts and markers of time.”¹⁸ But, in Bensaïd, Banaji and Tomba, the spatialization of time, is not so much attached to notion of the present as the non-identitary opening up of the past in the past, in a formal or conceptual sense, than the material outcome of the non-synchronous ‘modernizing’ temporalities internal to the capitalist mode of production itself, what was once called ‘combined and uneven development’. In this sense the ‘non-contemporaneity of contemporaneity’ of the present is the outcome of uneven and stratified levels of development, of residual and dominant temporalities, albeit operating interdependently, within an open, unfinished ‘totality’. The openness of the present, therefore, is not just a consequence of the retroactive force of *Begriffsgeschichte* on the present, but of the struggles of the oppressed, that are

15 Bensaïd and Tomba derive their anti-historicist models from the introduction to the *Grundrisse*, in which Marx stresses the notion of uneven development and the need for a ‘composite representation’ of historical time. In the introduction there is rejection of the convergence between the flow of time (supersessive, diurnal time) and meaning, which Marx clearly derives from Hegel. In this respect this is the point where Marx begins to develop a critique of modernity from *within* modernity. Two issues derive from this: different forms of production internal to the capitalist mode of production do not proceed at the same pace and rhythm of development; and the past always haunts the present. As such, a constellational and multi-temporal account of capitalism emerges as Marx begins to distance himself from his earlier unilinear model of development. Koselleck’s notion of *Begriffsgeschichte* is close, at one level, to Marx’s ‘composite’ model of representation.

16 Daniel Bensaïd, *Marx For Our Time: Adventures and Misadventures of a Critique*, translated by Gregory Elliot, Verso, London and New York, 2002, p15

17 Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event 11*, translated by Alberto Toscano, Continuum, London, p510

18 Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, p508

immanent to and the shape the outcome the conflict of these temporalities. Indeed it these struggles over temporality, that will decide the becoming of necessity as an emancipatory opening in the present, shifting futures past to an active mode. As Tomba argues: “What needs to be grasped are the historical stratifications of modernity, produced by the struggles of the oppressed class, not the false image of modernity, an undifferentiated, smooth surface.”¹⁹ Or as Banaji argues in a similar vein, inflexibly uniformitarian or monist theories of the capitalist mode of production have to be “stripped of [their] evolutionism and refurbished to allow more *complex trajectories*.”²⁰ In this sense *Begriffsgeschichte*, the retroactive production of the past in the present, and a model of stratified and uneven capitalist development, can be variously combined, as the basis for a politics of time in which the unilinear time-of-measure of the value form and of an “undifferentiated” modernity, are denaturalized, in practice and thought. A new politics of time, consequently, requires a twofold understanding of capitalist modernity under the demands of anti-historicism: a revolutionary recognition of what is ‘newest in what is oldest’, as Marx put in a letter to Engels at the end of his life in his reflections on the legacy of the premodern commune in Tsarist Russia,²¹ and, as such, the notion that the encounter between conflictual and interdependent temporalities on a global basis, can produce new temporal conjunctions and beginnings and therefore ‘new openings’ for collective subjectivity and agency. This sense of the production of a new temporality, out of the struggles below internal to the asymmetrical vectors of temporalities globally, produces, I would argue, a *subjunctive* moment of futurity, from the dialectic of past, present and future, that avoids the current fetishism of the present as recovered futures past. Thus, for

19 Massimiliano Tomba, *Marx’s Temporalities*, p19

20 Jarius Banaji, *Theory as History*, p6

21 Karl Marx, Letter to Engels, 1868, in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol 42, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1987, p557. See also Marx, ‘First draft of letter to Vera Zasulich’, 1881, in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, Lawrence & Wishart, Vol 24, London, 1989. “There is something of the future encapsulated in the past that can be freed from the contemporaneity of the archaic...”

example, in Paulo Virno's post-Benjaminian anti-historicist political remodelling of the past as the future, in *Il Ricordo Del Presente* (1999) (*Déjà Vu and the End of History* (2015)), the lacuna of the present as Virno calls (or what I've been calling its non-identitary form), can only ever be 'filled in' by the potentiality of the past or futures past. Hence although we should remain faithful, as he says, to "Benjamin's impulse and conceptual lexicon" this should be qualified. The past enters into constellation with the present "precisely because the present moment itself entails the past-in-general-potential – as one of its intrinsic components."²² This is true, of course, yet futurity is sacrificed here to the assumption that the future can *only* pass through the potentiality of the past; is *only* conditioned by the past. "It is only in order to realize the (potential) past that we construct the future."²³ The dialectic of what is 'newest in the oldest', therefore, becomes that which Marx warned against in his critique of modernity and developmentalism in his late Russian writings: the future may be in constellation with the past-as-potential but it cannot take its measure solely *from* the past; there is no secure path back to the past, whether its dressed up in the imagined finery of the future or not. In the absolutizing of the retroactive move, therefore, the link of futures past to the present fails to provide an image of the future that is also anticipatory, 'unbidden', 'unnamed'. Yet, to call on the figure of anticipation here is not to call on a bland utopianism, a position Virno and other anti-historicists rightly reject as providing a premature and abstract resolution of an emancipated future; anticipation is not a ideal projection of futures past into the future; neither is it an indeterminate image of hope. This is just futurism in a new form. Rather, anticipation in its subjunctive mode, is that living, if uneven and fractured, expectation of "another order of time" – the progressive atemporal freeing of the 'new' from the modern and modernization - as guide to action in the here and

²² Paulo Virno, *Déjà Vu and the End of History*, translated by David Broder, Verso, London and New York, 2015, p144

²³ Paulo Virno, *ibid*, p145. For a discussion of Virno's 'emptying' out of the future, see Peter Osborne, 'Futures Present: Lite, Dark and Missing', *Radical Philosophy*, No 191, May/June 2015.

now. As Fredric Jameson says, in *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (2002) if the future is to be emancipated from the compulsions and compressions of the value-form, then, a politics of time – or ontology of time as he calls it - has to operate outside the "conceptual field governed by the word 'modern.'" ²⁴

The atemporal freeing of the 'new'; or the avant-garde and trauma

In these terms, we might talk about the avant-garde as the 'new-old', retroactively repositioned as the 'old-new'. Obviously the historic, avant-garde no longer exists, or is able exist in its specific, Soviet, German and Parisian forms; there are no futurist returns here as a pure redemption of the past. Consequently, if the present is in constellational tension with the past-as-mediated-potential, and, as such, the present's openness to the future is retroactively formed out of the determining conditions of the past in the present, then the revolutionary potential of the avant-garde is ontologically grounded in two ways: it is irreducible to its original conditions of production – the 'avant-garde' is supplementary to the avant-garde, as we have asserted - but also, in a converse move, its potentiality is irreducible to the notion the present is freely available as an act of pure creativity. In other words, if the original avant-garde in a sense did not exist in a given finite form – that is, was not ever self-present to itself; was produced as a category in the process of its conflictual emergence – nevertheless, the labour of *Begriffsgeschichte* as the Hegelian labour of the avant-garde's future historicization, cannot substitute the re-functioning of its potentiality for that inherited historical absence. To do so, of course, is enact precisely that abstract exercise of the historical will, that Badiou warns us about in *Being and Event*, and that tends always to haunt the edges of anti-historicism. Indeed we see this in Kosselleck when he fails to address how, paradoxically, the denaturalization of

²⁴ Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present*, Verso, London and New York, 2002

historical temporalities, opens up a space, as much for the possibility of History as simply Story Telling, as it does for revolutionary *Begriffsgeschichte*. That is 'speaking contrawise' in the name of the past-as-potential, can just as easily destroy the *causal connection* between *Begriffsgeschichte* and the material determinations of event as multiple-site, as it can release counter-histories and counter-meanings from a predetermined causal chain. In fact, if the present assumes a "stagnant immobility", a "sterile agitation" and a "violently imposed atonicity", to quote Badiou from *Logics of Worlds*,²⁵ then, the speculative imposition of *Begriffsgeschichte* is always a radical temptation under these conditions; a remaking of an idealized present on the basis of an idealized past.

This is why the gap between the historic avant-garde and its post-war post-Thermidorian conditions of possibility in the present, then, remains a *traumatised* encounter with its past, and not a semiotic or historiographically redemptive one. That is, if the avant-garde cannot remake itself freely in the world via its inherited revolutionary image in the present, this is because the causal determinations of the past in the present hold its potentiality in the present in torsion with its unrealized potentiality in the past. But this traumatic encounter with its own past though is precisely that which determines the avant-garde's revolutionary relationship to its truth in the present. That is, in its atemporal recovery of the past, and horizontalized distribution of its techniques, virtual and participatory forms, collective strategies and non-aestheticized modes of judgement as the anti-historicist reconceptualization of the past, it operates as the *via negativa* of modernist linearity and the sanctification of the art object. And this is what we see significantly today in the emergence of extensive body of new avant-garde activity.

The re-functioning of the avant-garde today represents an extraordinary disordering of the intellectual and cultural and economic machinery that holds

²⁵ Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, p510

conventional forms of commodity exchange on the art market in place. That is, with the exponential rise of temporal, participatory and research-based activities, produced largely outside of the primary market of private galleries and major museums, the re-functioned avant-garde provides a very different set of social relations, spatial conditions, and subjective identifications, usually associated with the production of artistic dry goods for this primary market. This is not to say that this kind of work does not inhabit commodity culture or operate within the market for intellectual goods, or requires approbation at some level from governing institutions, or is engaged in sales. Art under capitalism is art under capitalism, irrespective of the dissident and self-negating forms it adopts; there are no pure exit points from commodity relations, and consequently much of this work continues to operate inside what we know as the 'art world'. Yet, the forms of labour, the modes of non-aesthetic engagement, and research-intensive strategies, developed in this art, produces various modes of disinvestment from the primary market, that stand athwart or in non-compliance with the primary market and its rigid conflation of consumable artistic form and individualized artistic identity. The rise of the artist group or collective globally, the reliance on networked forms of exchange, the incorporation of non-instrumental extra-artistic research into artistic practice, and the temporal character of much of the work, produces a determinate swerve or even break in the means and ends of artistic subjectivity and therefore how artists define their labour and artistic identity. Consequently, the production of the 'new' is lodged in a transformative, even revolutionary encounter, with the situation and condition of art-as-idea, rather than with the market's veneration of generic difference centred invariably on medium specificity. Indeed, research, artistic praxis, artistic form, and artistic subjectivity, form a shifting constellational framework within a larger extra-artistic research framework, that mediates this encounter with the means and ends of art: namely art's place within the *totalizing critique of capitalism*. The politics of this work, then - and there is a lot of work to chose from globally Raqs Media (India), to Future Farmers (USA), to Chto Delat (Russia) - rests not simply on

manifest critiques of political iniquities or inequalities, but on the space and time of artistic provision as points of negation with the temporal compression of production and experience under the commodity form. That is, the opening out of practice to a temporally extended and centrifugal non-instrumentalized research model, creates a non-calendrical encounter with the 'new' that is at odds with the narrative of the modern and modernization, pushing what artists do into direct confrontation with the market's limited account of artistic change and creativity. In other words, such work establishes a non-compliant and non-identitary set of relations with commodity relations, in which the collective exchange of skills and affects and the production of knowledge *overflow* the fixed form of the art object and its exchange value. And this is crucial for any sense of the avant-garde as a research programme. For these forms of free exchange establish an important centrifugal dynamic for art in the present period: namely, the development of an art after 'art in the expanded field' in which the collective forms of participatory production and reception becomes constitutive of art's open-ended research interests. We might call this reflective process, then, a split within the *time-as-measure* of the commodity form, in which the drive to instrumentalize and entrepreneurialize as an expression of the individual creativity associated with the production of artistic dry goods for the primary market are suspended. Thus by acting collaboratively or collectively in order to establish a 'thinking community' or alternatively, in order to produce a transformation of a given state of affairs based on work with a group of individuals in a given locale, such models - at least when they are successful - are 'out of joint' with the heteronomous conditions of commodity production from which they emerge; and thus the value of such artworks lies in their autonomy as actions or interventions, irrespective of their actual political efficacy or transformative outcomes. For in the end, their value lies in their capacity to engage in non-instrumentalized forms of learning and exchange, which in turn, may lead to other non-instrumentalized forms of engagement and exchange.

Thus the claims for the 'new' in art here stand to be made realizable in advance of *capitalism*, not simply in advance of art. And, consequently, there is an atemporal-temporal order at play here, that traverses both the logic of the value form and artistic futurism, and that connects the re-functioned avant-garde of today with the historic avant-garde, even though this re-functioned avant-garde is limited in its transformative reach; exists in a "suspensive state", as I have put it. That is, the generalized shift to participatory and collaborative and research-intensive practice today represents a quite extraordinary *collective negation* of capitalist culture in this epoch of capitalist stagnation, or neoliberal non-reproduction, and therefore invites for consideration, in its various and inventive rejections of *time-as-measure* and the introduction of a gift-culture, the central part art might play in the transformation of the relationship between free labour and productive labour in post-capitalist world. And this is why the anti-historicist avant-garde is so significant in defining the question of temporality and futurity. In its manifestation as the 'old-new' in the 'new-old', the re-functioned avant-garde provides a working space of experimentation and exchange, that is both 'in time' and 'out of time', both contemporary and non-contemporary. Consequently, the 'newest in the oldest', is not the reinsertion of the old into the new, but the first move in the post-historicist opening up of the past-in-the-present to the future.