



THE EXCESSIVE SUBJECT

A New Theory of Social Change

MOLLY ANNE ROTHENBERG

With a foreword by Slavoj Žižek



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*Molly Anne Rothenberg*  
*Tulane University*  
*June 2009*

## List of Abbreviations



BTM	Judith Butler, <i>Bodies That Matter</i>
E	Ernesto Laclau, <i>Emancipations</i>
ES	Judith Butler, <i>Excitable Speech</i>
IBK	Slavoj Žižek, <i>Iraq: The Broken Kettle</i>
ID	Simon Critchley, <i>Infinitely Demanding</i>
LP	Pierre Bourdieu, <i>Logic of Practice</i>
MR	Félix Guattari, <i>Molecular Revolution</i>
MWE	Giorgio Agamben, <i>Means Without End</i>
OC	Alain Badiou, “On the Connection between Adorno’s <i>Negative Dialectics</i> and a Particular Assessment of Wagner”
OSP	Jacques Rancière, <i>On the Shores of Politics</i>
OWB	Slavoj Žižek, <i>Organs Without Bodies</i>
PEL	Michel de Certeau, <i>The Practice of Everyday Life</i>
PV	Slavoj Žižek, <i>The Parallax View</i>
RG	Slavoj Žižek, <i>Revolution at the Gates</i>
WDR	Slavoj Žižek, <i>Welcome to the Desert of the Real</i>

## Foreword

# With the Keen Edge of a Knife

Slavoj Žižek



Molly Rothenberg’s book opens with a reference to Italo Calvino’s “A Beautiful March Day,” a story about the death of Julius Caesar. In his idiosyncratic description of the conspiracy, Calvino focuses on the unintended consequences of the act of killing Caesar: while the conspirators wanted to kill a tyrant and thereby restore Rome to its republican glory, their act effectively abolishes the very conditions which sustained its intended meaning. As Rothenberg explains:

The very world in which it made sense to get rid of Caesar also vanishes with those dagger strokes – not because Caesar held that world together, but because the assassins could not foresee that their act would also transform the way the act itself would later be judged, even by themselves. They could not factor in the historicity of their action; neither they nor anyone else could predict or govern how the future would interpret the assassination. Put another way, we could say that there was simply no way for them to take into account the *retroversive* effect of future interpretations.

What we encounter here is the key feature of the Symbolic: this passage renders the fundamental “openness” the Symbolic introduces into a closed order of reality. Once we enter the Symbolic, things never simply are, they all “will have been”; they as it were borrow (part of) their being from the future. Rothenberg evokes a wonderfully cruel example of a tender statement – “Carl smiled as he gently stroked the velvety skin of his lover...” – completed by a supplement which brutally changes the meaning of the first part: “...with the keen edge of a knife.” And,

as Rothenberg points out, the cause of this irreducible “openness” of the Symbolic is not its excessive complexity (we never know in what decentered context our statement will be inscribed), but the much more refined, properly dialectical impossibility of taking into account the way our own intervention will transform the field. The speaking subject cannot take into account the way it is itself “counted” in the signifying series; with regard to its own inclusion, it is irreducibly split, redoubled; or, to quote a joke often mentioned by Lacan: “I have three brothers, Paul, Robert and myself.”

This “retroversive effect” concerns the very core of the relationship between Hegel and Marx: it provides the main reason why, today, one should return from Marx to Hegel and enact a “materialist reversal” of Marx himself. To approach this complex issue, let me begin with Gilles Deleuze’s notion of a *pure past*: not the past into which present things pass, but an absolute past “where all events, including those that have sunk without trace, are stored and remembered as their passing away,”<sup>1</sup> a virtual past which already contains also things which are still present. A present can become past because in a way it is so already, it can perceive itself as part of the past (“what we are doing now is [will have been] history”); as Deleuze puts it: “It is with respect to the pure element of the past, understood as the past in general, as an a priori past, that a given former present is reproducible and the present present is able to reflect itself.”<sup>2</sup> Does this mean that the pure past involves a thoroughly deterministic notion of the universe in which everything still to happen (to come) – all actual spatio-temporal deployment – is already part of an immemorial/ atemporal virtual network? No, and for a very precise reason: because “the pure past must be all the past but must also be amenable to change through the occurrence of any new present.”<sup>3</sup> It was none other than T. S. Eliot, the great conservative, who first clearly formulated this link between our dependence on tradition and our power to change the past:

[tradition] cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity.

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. I mean this as a principle of æsthetic, not merely historical, criticism. The necessity that he shall conform, that he shall cohere, is not one-sided; what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new. Whoever has approved this idea of order, of the form of European, of English literature, will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past. And the poet who is aware of this will be aware of great difficulties and responsibilities. ...

What happens is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality. There remains to define this process of depersonalization and its relation to the sense of tradition. It is in this depersonalization that art may be said to approach the condition of science.<sup>4</sup>

When Eliot writes that, in judging a living poet, “*you must set him among the dead,*” he formulates precisely an example of Deleuze’s pure past. And when he writes that “the existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted,” he no less clearly formulates the paradoxical link between the completeness of the past and our capacity to change it retroactively: precisely because the pure past is complete, each new work re-arranges its entire balance. Recall Borges’ precise formulation of the relationship between Kafka and his multitude of precursors, from old Chinese authors to Robert Browning: “Kafka’s idiosyncrasy, in greater or lesser degree, is present in each of these writings, but if Kafka had not written we would not perceive it; that is to say, it would not exist. ... each writer *creates* his precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future.”<sup>5</sup> Hence the properly dialectical solution of the dilemma, “is it really there, in the source, or did we just read it into the source?,” is thus: it is there, but we can only perceive and state this retroactively, from today’s perspective.

Here, Peter Hallward falls short in his otherwise excellent *Out of*

*This World*,<sup>6</sup> where he stresses only that aspect of the pure past as the virtual field in which the fate of all actual events is sealed in advance, since “everything is already written” in it. At this point, where we view reality *sub specie aeternitatis*, absolute freedom coincides with absolute necessity and its pure automatism: to be free means to let oneself freely flow in/with the substantial necessity. This topic reverberates even in recent cognitivist debates on the problem of free will. Compatibilists like Daniel Dennett have an elegant solution to the incompatibilists’ complaints about determinism:<sup>7</sup> when incompatibilists complain that our freedom cannot be combined with the fact that all our acts are part of a great chain of natural determinism, they secretly make an unwarranted ontological assumption: they first assume that we (as the Self, or the free agent) somehow stand *outside* reality, and then go on to complain how they feel oppressed by the notion that reality with its determinism controls them totally. This is what is wrong with the notion of our being “imprisoned” by chains of the natural determinism: we thereby obfuscate the fact that we are *part of* reality, that the (possible, local) conflict between our “free” striving and an external reality resisting to it is a conflict inherent in reality itself. That is to say, there is nothing “oppressive” or “constraining” about the fact that our innermost strivings are (pre) determined: when we feel thwarted in our freedom by the constraining pressure of external reality, there must be something in us, some desire or striving, which is thus thwarted, but where should this striving come if not from this same reality? Our “free will” does not then in some mysterious way “disturb the natural course of things,” it is part and parcel of this course. For us to be “truly” and “radically” free, this would entail there being no positive content imposed on our free act – if we want nothing “external” and particular or given to determine our behavior, then “this would involve being free of every part of ourselves.”<sup>8</sup> When a determinist claims that our free choice is “determined,” this does not mean that our free will is somehow constrained, that we are forced to act *against* our free will. What is “determined” is rather the very thing that we want to do “freely,” i.e., without being thwarted by external obstacles.

So, back to Hallward: while he is right to emphasize that, for Deleuze, freedom “isn’t a matter of human liberty but of liberation *from* humanity,”<sup>9</sup> of fully submerging oneself in the creative flux of absolute Life, the political conclusion he draws from this seems too hasty: “The immediate political implication of such a position ... is clear enough: since a free mode or monad is simply one that has eliminated its resistance to the sovereign will that works through it, so then it follows that the more absolute the sovereign’s power, the more ‘free’ are those subject to it.”<sup>10</sup> But does Hallward not ignore the retroactive movement on which Deleuze also insists, namely, how this eternal pure past which fully determines us is

itself subjected to retroactive change? We are thus simultaneously both less free and more free than we think: we are thoroughly passive, determined by and dependent on the past, but we have the freedom to define the scope of this determination, that is, to (over)determine the past which will determine us. Deleuze is here unexpectedly close to Kant, for whom, though I am determined by causes, I (can) retroactively determine which causes will determine me – we, subjects, are passively affected by pathological objects and motivations; but, in a reflexive way, we ourselves have the minimal power to accept (or reject) being affected in this way. In other words, we may retroactively determine the causes allowed to determine us, or, at least, the *mode* of this linear determination.

“Freedom” is thus inherently retroactive: at its most elementary, it is not simply a free act which, out of nowhere, initiates a new causal link, but is a retroactive act of endorsing which link or sequence of necessities will determine me. Here, one should add a Hegelian twist to Spinoza: freedom is not simply “recognized/known necessity,” but recognized/assumed necessity, the necessity constituted/actualized through this recognition. So when Deleuze refers to Proust’s description of Vinteuil’s music that haunts Swann – “as if the performers not so much played the little phrase as executed the rites necessary for it to appear” – he is evoking the necessary illusion: generating the sense-event is experienced as ritualistic evocation of a pre-existing event, as if the event was already there, waiting for our call in its virtual presence.

What directly resonates in this topic is, of course, the Protestant motif of predestination. Far from being a reactionary theological motif, predestination is a key element of the materialist theory of sense, on condition that we read it along the lines of the Deleuzian opposition between the virtual and the actual. That is to say, predestination does not mean that our fate is sealed in an actual text existing from eternity in the divine mind; the texture which predestines us belongs to the purely virtual eternal past which, as such, can be retroactively rewritten by our act. This, perhaps, would have been the ultimate meaning of the singularity of Christ’s incarnation: it is an *act* which radically changes our destiny. Prior to Christ, we were determined by Fate, caught in the cycle of sin and its payment; but Christ’s erasing of our past sins means precisely that his sacrifice changes our virtual past and thus sets us free. When Deleuze writes that “my wound existed before me; I was born to embody it,” does this variation on the theme of the Cheshire cat and its smile from *Alice in Wonderland* (the cat was born to embody its smile) not provide a perfect formula of Christ’s sacrifice: Christ was born to embody his wound, to be crucified? The problem is the literal teleological reading of this proposition: as if the actual deeds of a person merely actualize their atemporal-eternal fate inscribed in their virtual idea:

Caesar's only real task is to become worthy of the events he has been created to embody. *Amor fati*. What Caesar actually does adds nothing to what he virtually is. When Caesar actually crosses the Rubicon this involves no deliberation or choice since it is simply part of the entire, immediate expression of Caesarness, it simply unrolls or "unfolds something that was encompassed for all times in the notion of Caesar."<sup>11</sup>

However, what about the retroactivity of a gesture which (re)constitutes this past itself? This, perhaps, is the most succinct definition of what an authentic *act* is: in our ordinary activity, we effectively just follow the (virtual-fantasmatic) coordinates of our identity, while an act proper is the paradox of an actual move which (retroactively) changes the very virtual "transcendental" coordinates of its agent's being – or, in Freudian terms, which not only changes the actuality of our world but also "moves its underground." We have thus a kind of reflexive "folding back of the condition onto the given it was the condition for":<sup>12</sup> while the pure past is the transcendental condition for our acts, our acts not only create new actual reality, they also retroactively change this very condition. This brings us to the central problem of Deleuze's ontology: how are the virtual and the actual related? "Actual things express Ideas but are not caused by them."<sup>13</sup> The notion of causality is limited to the interaction of actual things and processes; on the other hand, this interaction also causes virtual entities (Sense, Ideas). Deleuze is not an idealist; Sense is for him always an ineffective sterile shadow accompanying actual things. What this means is that, for Deleuze, (transcendental) *genesis and causality are totally opposed*, they move at different levels: "Actual things have an identity, but virtual ones do not, they are pure variations. An actual thing must change – become something different – in order to express something. Whereas, the expressed virtual thing does not change – only its relation to other virtual things, other intensities and Ideas changes."<sup>14</sup>

How does this relation change? *Only through the changes in actual things which express Ideas, since the entire generative power lies in actual things*: Ideas belong to the domain of Sense which is "only a vapor which plays at the limit of things and words"; as such, Sense is "the Ineffectual, a sterile incorporeal deprived of its generative powers."<sup>15</sup> Think about a group of dedicated individuals fighting for the Idea of Communism: in order to grasp their activity, we have to take into account the virtual Idea. But this Idea is in itself sterile, has no proper causality: all causality lies in the individuals who "express" it.

The lesson to be drawn from the basic paradox of Protestantism (how is it possible that a religion which taught predestination sustained capitalism, the greatest explosion of human activity and freedom in history)



is that freedom is neither grasped necessity (the vulgata from Spinoza to Hegel and traditional Marxists) nor overlooked (ignored) necessity (the cognitivist and brain science thesis: freedom is the “user’s illusion” of our consciousness, unaware of the bio-neuronal processes that determine it), but *a necessity which is presupposed and/as unknown/unknowable*. We know that everything is predetermined, but we do not know *which* is our predetermined destiny, and it is this uncertainty which impels us into incessant activity.

This is how one should differentiate historicity proper from organic evolution. In the latter, a universal Principle is slowly and gradually differentiating itself; as such, it remains the calm underlying all-encompassing ground that unifies the bustling activity of struggling individuals, the endless process of generation and corruption that is the “cycle of life.” In history proper, on the contrary, the universal Principle is caught in an “infinite” struggle with itself; that is, the struggle is each time a struggle for the fate of the universal itself. This is why the eminently “historical” moments are those of great collisions when a whole form of life is threatened, when reference to established social and cultural norms no longer guarantees a minimum of stability and cohesion. In such open situations, a new form of life has to be invented. It is at this point that Hegel locates the role of great heroes, operating in a pre-legal, stateless zone: their violence is not bound by the usual moral rules, they enforce a new order with a subterranean vitality that shatters all established forms. According to the usual *doxa* on Hegel, these heroes follow their instinctual passions, their true motifs and goals remain unclear to themselves, since they are unconscious instruments of the deeper historical necessity of giving birth to a new spiritual life form. However, as Gerard Lebrun points out, one should not here impute to Hegel the standard teleological notion of a hidden Reason pulling the strings of the historical process, following a plan established in advance and using the passions of individuals as the instruments of its implementation. First, since the meaning of their acts is a priori inaccessible to the individuals who accomplish them, heroes included, there is no “science of politics” able to predict the course of events: “nobody ever has the right to declare himself depositary of the Spirit’s self-knowledge,”<sup>16</sup> and this impossibility “spares Hegel the fanaticism of ‘objective responsibility’.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, there is no place in Hegel for the Marxist-Stalinist figure of the communist revolutionary who understands historical necessity and posits himself as the instrument of its implementation. However, it is crucial to add a further twist here: if all we do is assert this impossibility, then we are still “conceiving the Absolute as Substance, not as Subject” – i.e., we still assume some pre-existing Spirit imposing its substantial Necessity on history, we just accept that insight into this Necessity is inaccessible for us. From a

consequent Hegelian standpoint, one should go a crucial step further and insist that historical Necessity does not pre-exist the contingent process of its actualization, i.e., that the historical process is also in itself “open,” undecided – this confused mixture “generates sense *insofar as it unravels itself*”:

It is people, and they only, who make history, while Spirit explicates itself through this making. ... The point is not, as in a naïve theodicy, to find a justification for every event. In actual time, no heavenly harmony resonates in the sound and fury. It is only once this tumult recollects itself in the past, once what took place is conceived, that we can say, to put it briefly, that the “course of History” is a little bit better outlined. History runs forward only for those who look at it backwards; it is linear progression only in retrospect. ... The Hegelian ‘providential necessity’ has so little authority that it seems as if it learns from the run of things in the world which were its goals.<sup>18</sup>

This is how one should read Hegel’s thesis that, in the course of the dialectical development, things “become what they are”: it is not that a temporal deployment merely actualizes some pre-existing atemporal conceptual structure – this atemporal conceptual structure itself is the result of contingent temporal decisions. Let us take the exemplary case of a contingent decision whose outcome defines the agent’s entire life: Caesar’s crossing of the Rubicon:

It is not enough to say that crossing the Rubicon is part of the complete notion of Caesar. One should rather say that Caesar is defined by the fact that he crossed the Rubicon. His life didn’t follow a scenario written in the book of some goddess: there is no book which would already have contained the relations of Caesar’s life, for the simple reason that his life itself is this book, and that, at every moment, an event is in itself its own narrative.<sup>19</sup>

But why shouldn’t we then say that there is simply no atemporal conceptual structure, that all there is is the gradual temporal deployment? Here we encounter the properly dialectical paradox which defines true historicity as opposed to evolutionist historicism, and which was formulated much later, in French structuralism, as the “primacy of synchrony over diachrony.” Usually, this primacy was taken to indicate structuralism’s ultimate denial of historicity: an historical development can be reduced to the (imperfect) temporal deployment of a pre-existing atemporal matrix of all possible variations/combinations. This simplistic notion of the “primacy of synchrony over diachrony” overlooks the (properly dialectical) point, made long ago by (among others) T. S. Eliot (as quoted above) on how each truly new artistic phenomenon not only designates a break

from the entire past, but retroactively changes this past itself. At every historical conjuncture, the present is not only present, it also encompasses a perspective on the past immanent to it – after the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, say, the October Revolution is no longer the same historical event; no longer the beginning of a new progressive epoch in the history of humanity, but (from the triumphant liberal-capitalist perspective) the beginning of a catastrophic mis-direction of history which reached its end in 1991. Or, to return to Caesar, once he crossed Rubicon his previous life appeared in a new way, as a preparation for his later world-historical role, that is, it was transformed into part of a totally different life story. This is what Hegel calls “totality” and what structuralism calls “synchronic structure”: a historical moment which is not limited to the present but includes its own past and future, i.e., the way the past and the future appeared to and from this moment.

The main implication of treating the Symbolic order as such a totality is that, far from reducing it to a kind of transcendental *a priori* (a formal network, given in advance, which limits the scope of human practice), one should follow Lacan and focus on how gestures of symbolization are entwined with and embedded in the process of collective practice. What Lacan elaborates as the “twofold moment” of the symbolic function reaches far beyond the standard theory of the performative dimension of speech as developed in the tradition from J.L. Austin to John Searle: “The symbolic function presents itself as a twofold movement in the subject: man makes his own action into an object, but only to return its foundational place to it in due time. In this equivocation, operating at every instant, lies the whole progress of a function in which action and knowledge alternate.”<sup>20</sup> The historical example evoked by Lacan to clarify this “twofold movement” is indicative in its hidden references: “in phase one, a man who works at the level of production in our society considers himself to belong to the ranks of the proletariat; in phase two, in the name of belonging to it, he joins in a general strike.”<sup>21</sup>

Lacan’s (implicit) reference here is to Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness*, a classic Marxist work from 1923 whose widely acclaimed French translation was published in the mid 1950s. For Lukács, consciousness is opposed to mere knowledge of an object: knowledge is external to the known object, while consciousness is in itself “practical,” an act which changes its very object. (Once a worker “considers himself to belong to the ranks of the proletariat,” this changes his very reality: he acts differently.) One does something, one counts oneself as (declares oneself) the one who did it, and, on the base of this declaration, one does something new – the proper moment of subjective transformation occurs at the moment of declaration, not at the moment of action. This reflexive moment of declaration means that every utterance not only transmits

some content, but simultaneously *renders how the subject relates to this content*. Even the most down-to-earth objects and activities always contain such a declarative dimension, which constitutes the ideology of everyday life.

However, Lukács remains all too idealist when he proposes simply to replace the Hegelian Spirit with the proletariat as the Subject-Object of History: Lukács is here not really Hegelian, but a pre-Hegelian idealist.<sup>22</sup> One is even tempted to talk here about Marx's "idealist reversal of Hegel": in contrast to Hegel, who was well aware that the owl of Minerva takes flight only at dusk, after the fact (i.e., that Thought follows Being – which is why, for Hegel, there can be no scientific insight into the future of society), Marx reasserts the primacy of Thought: the owl of Minerva (German contemplative philosophy) should be replaced by the singing of the Gallic rooster (French revolutionary thought) announcing the proletarian revolution. In the proletarian revolutionary act, Thought will precede Being. Marx thus sees in Hegel's motif of the owl of Minerva an indication of the secret positivism of Hegel's idealist speculation: Hegel leaves reality the way it is. Hegel's reply is that the delay of consciousness does not imply any naive objectivism, so that consciousness is caught in a transcendent objective process. What is inaccessible is the impact of the subject's act itself, its own inscription into objectivity. Of course thought is immanent to reality and changes it, but not as fully self-transparent self-consciousness, not as an Act aware of its own impact. A Hegelian thus accepts Lukács's notion of consciousness as opposed to mere knowledge: the latter is external to its object, while the former is an act which changes its object. What one should add is that self-consciousness itself is unconscious: we are not aware of the point of our self-consciousness.

If there was ever a critic of the fetishizing effect of fascinatingly dazzling "leitmotifs" it was Adorno. In his devastating analysis of Wagner, he tries to demonstrate how the Wagnerian leitmotifs serve as the fetishized elements of easy recognition and thus constitute a kind of inner-structural commodification of his music.<sup>23</sup> How, then, can one not but admire the supreme irony of locating traces of this same fetishizing procedure in Adorno's own writings? Many of his provocative one-liners do effectively express a profound insight or at least touch on a crucial point (recall his "Nothing is more true in psychoanalysis than its exaggerations."); however, more often than his partisans care to admit, Adorno gets caught up in his own game, enamored of his own ability to produce dazzlingly "effective" paradoxical statements at the expense of theoretical substance (recall the famous line from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* on how Hollywood's ideological manipulation of social reality realizes Kant's idea of the transcendental constitution of reality). In such cases, where the dazzling "effect" of the unexpected short-circuit

(here between Hollywood cinema and Kantian ontology) effectively overshadows the immanent line of argumentation, the brilliant paradox works precisely as does the Wagnerian leitmotif (according to Adorno): instead of serving as a nodal point of the complex network of structural mediations, it generates idiotic pleasure by focusing attention on itself. Adorno was undoubtedly unaware of this unintended self-reflexivity: that his critique of Wagnerian leitmotifs amounted to a critique of his own writing. Is this not an exemplary case of the unconscious reflexivity of thinking? When criticizing his opponent Wagner, Adorno was effectively deploying a critical allegory about his own style of writing – in Hegelese, the truth of his relating to the Other was a self-relating.

Let us then conclude with a reference to another story by Calvino, “A King Listens,”<sup>24</sup> where one should apply “the keen edge of a knife” to generate a strong retroversive effect that makes Calvino’s own weakness palpable. “A King Listens” focuses on the sense of hearing: in an anonymous kingdom, the royal palace becomes a giant ear and the king, obsessed and paralyzed by fears of rebellion, tries to hear every fragile sound that reverberates through the palace – the footsteps of servants, whispers and conversations, fanfare trumpets at the raising of the flag, ceremonies and riots, the sounds of the city outside, etc. He cannot see their source, but is obsessed by interpreting the meaning of the sounds and the destiny they are predicting. This state of interpretive paranoia only seems to halt when he hears something that completely enchants him: through the window the wind brings the voice of a woman singing, a voice of pure beauty, unique and irreplaceable. For the king it is the sound of freedom; he steps out of the palace into the open space and mingles with the crowd... The first thing to bear in mind here is that this king is not the traditional monarch, but a modern totalitarian tyrant: the traditional king doesn’t care about his environment, he arrogantly ignores it and leaves the job of preventing plots to his ministers. It is the modern Leader who is obsessed by plots – “to rule is to interpret” is the perfect formula of Stalinism, *the* system of an endless paranoid hermeneutics. So when the king is seduced by the pure feminine voice of immediate life-pleasure, this is obviously (although unfortunately not for Calvino himself) a fantasy: precisely the fantasy of breaking out of the closed circle of representations and re-joining the pure outside of the innocent presence of the voice – a voice which is in excess of the self-mirroring prison-house of representations, that is, which needs no interpretation but merely enjoys its own exercise. What is missing here is the way this innocent externality of the voice is itself already reflexively marked by the mirror of interpretive representations. This is why one can imagine an alternative ending for the story, missing in Calvino’s narrative: when the king exits the palace, following the voice, he is immediately arrested; the

beautiful voice was simply an instrument of the plotters to lure the king out of the safety of the palace. One can be sure that, after a thorough police interrogation, the woman would have sung a different song . . .

Is the ultimate consequence of Rothenberg's outstanding book then a negative one? Should we refrain from large social actions since, for structural reasons, they always lead to unintended (and as such potentially catastrophic) results? A further distinction has to be drawn here: between the "openness" of the ongoing symbolic activity caught in the "retroversive effect" (whereby the meaning of each of its elements is decided retroactively) and the act in a much stronger sense of the term. In the first case, the unintended consequences of our acts are due simply to the big Other, to the complex symbolic network which overdetermines (and thus displaces) their meaning. In the second case, the unintended consequences emerge from the very failure of the big Other, that is, from the way our act not only relies on the big Other, but also radically challenges and transforms it. The awareness that the power of a proper act is to retroactively create its own conditions of possibility should not make us afraid to embrace what, prior to the act, appears as impossible. Only in this way will our act touch the real. It is around this traumatic point that Rothenberg's book circulates, and this is what makes reading it not only worthwhile, but a necessity.

## Notes

- 1 James Williams, *Gilles Deleuze's Difference and Repetition: A Critical Introduction and Guide*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2003, p. 94.
- 2 Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, London: Continuum Books 2001, p. 81.
- 3 Williams, *Gilles Deleuze's Difference and Repetition*, p. 96.
- 4 T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," originally published in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*, London: Methuen 1920.
- 5 Jorge Luis Borges, *Other Inquisitions: 1937–52*, New York: Washington Square Press 1966, p. 113.
- 6 See Peter Hallward, *Out of This World: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Creation*, London: Verso 2006.
- 7 See Daniel Dennett, *Freedom Evolves*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books 2003.
- 8 Nicholas Fearn, *Philosophy. The Latest Answers to the Oldest Questions*, London: Atlantic Books 2005, p. 24.
- 9 Hallward, *Out of This World*, p. 139.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid., p. 54.
- 12 Williams, *Gilles Deleuze's Difference and Repetition*, p. 109.
- 13 Ibid., p. 200.

- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, p. 156.
- 16 Gerard Lebrun, *L'envers de la dialectique. Hegel a la lumiere de Nietzsche*, Paris: Editions du Seuil 2004, p. 40.
- 17 Ibid., p. 41.
- 18 Ibid., pp. 41–4.
- 19 Ibid., p. 87.
- 20 Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, New York: Norton 2002, pp. 72–3.
- 21 Ibid., p. 73.
- 22 See Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1972.
- 23 See Theodor W. Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, London: Verso 2005.
- 24 Italo Calvino, “A King Listens,” in *Under the Jaguar Sun*, London: Vintage 1993.





## Introduction: The Excess of Everyday Life



*... withdrawing my dagger I'm overcome by a sort of vertigo, a feeling of emptiness, of being alone, not here in Rome, today, but forever after, in the centuries to come, the fear that people won't understand what we did here today, that they won't be able to do it again, that they will remain distant and indifferent as this beautiful calm morning in March.*

Italo Calvino, "A Beautiful March Day"<sup>1</sup>

The senators who damned Julius Caesar as a tyrant argued that killing him was the only way to liberate Rome. In their logic, we find the most common gesture of every political program and every call for social change: identify a problem, locate its cause, and then eliminate that cause to solve the problem. This logic seems so self-evident as to be virtually tautological. But Calvino exposes its flaw. Killing Caesar not only eliminates the tyrant, it changes the conditions by which that action acquires its meaning. The very world in which it made sense to get rid of Caesar also vanishes with those dagger strokes – not because Caesar held that world together, but because the assassins could not foresee that their act would also transform the way the act itself would later be judged, even by themselves. They could not factor in the historicity of their action; neither they nor anyone else could predict or govern how the future would interpret the assassination. Put another way, we could say that there was simply no way for them to take into account the *retroversive* effect of future interpretations.

“Retroversion” is one of the most common but least acknowledged forces in human social relations. We encounter it in every use of language. When you read that “Carl smiled as he gently stroked the velvety skin of his lover,” you may find your initial picture of this apparent love scene altered irrevocably by the next phrase: “with the keen edge

of a knife.” Using language means making constant adjustments as the field of meaning widens, narrows, and then circles back on itself. The opportunity and the need for such adjustment is ever-present but has unpredictable effects. One person may be jolted out of a chain of associations, forced to re-evaluate the beginning of that chain by a word that has no particular effect on another person. It is easy enough to imagine a reader who would not read the first phrase as a love scene but rather as the opening of a horror story: such a person may not be vulnerable to the kind of blunt retroversion that would otherwise strike at the mention of the knife. At the same time, we could imagine another reader for whom every word in the first clause works backward to warp or inflect the words that precede it, even before the knife makes its appearance. For example, the reader might at first imagine “velvety skin” to be referring to Carl’s own body, and would then re-work the whole scene – from auto-stimulation to interpersonal sexual relations – at the moment of encountering the word “lover.” But once the jolt occurs, the opening of the sentence, the opening that sets us up for the jolt down the line, will be transformed permanently in this retroversive movement. In a kind of *Back to the Future* scenario, the original causes – words such as “smile” and “stroked” – are altered in their significance by the effects they produce. Time seems to loop back on itself.

Were we to consider the difference between the way a heterosexual and a homosexual reader might imagine this scene, we could explore another set of possible retroversive effects. In other words, the very conditions by which these sentences acquire their meaning shift not only as we add words and phrases but also as the particularities of the people involved are taken into account. When we read or talk with each other, we make just such (often minute or unconscious) adjustments to the fantasmatic dimension of our associative chains and to those we postulate as operating in our interlocutors. One of the great pleasures of learning to read attentively, of course, is to register such micro-adjustments, even to imagine ourselves as having different concerns, interests, and personal histories. But if we are in the business of trying to promote social change, things become more difficult once we acknowledge that retroversion is constantly in play as a function not only of individual signifying acts but also of interactions among individuals.

So, Calvino’s story points to a double problem facing contemporary theories of social change. In the first place, we are used to conceiving of change in a linear way: I strike a stationary billiard ball with a cue and it rolls into the corner pocket. First comes the cause, then the effect. But retroversive causality challenges that linearity, as if the act of striking the ball into the pocket could loop backward in time to change the initial position of the ball on the table. Of course, physical forces at human

scale rarely exhibit retroversive causality, although physicists describe the quantum world as a phantasmagoria of such phenomena. On the other hand, social forces seem always to exhibit retroversive causality, precisely because they necessarily involve signification, meaning, or interpretation. As soon as we have a social situation, we are in the world of signifiers: the signifier is always subject to the law of retroversion. Clearly then, once we notice the phenomenon of retroversion and try to take it into account, we face the difficulty of defining the concept of “change.” For if our social interactions necessarily operate with retroversion, then our everyday ideas about generating change come into question. If we identify a problem, as Rome’s senators did, and then act to change it, how should we model the operation of retroversive causality? Indeed, can it be modeled at all?

In the second place, by describing sociality as saturated with the unpredictability of retroversive signification, we call into question some familiar ideas about what we mean by social interaction. As we shall see, the usual sorts of interpersonal activities – joining a club, going to church, bringing a lawsuit, attending university – that we typically conceive in terms of individual units engaging in delimited actions for specifiable ends start to look incredibly complicated. The very idea of the “social” has to be revisited once retroversion enters the picture. How is it possible to address the concept of social change when we seem to be talking about a fluctuating social field formed from the mutually constitutive interactions of retroversive effects?

To a person dedicated to trying to make the world a better place, such reflections might seem beside the point. After all, can’t we identify real problems that exist at a material level rather than at the level of language or interpretations? What difference does retroversion make when we’re trying to abolish hunger? Why consider the social field as a congeries of forces in flux when people around the world are subjected to oppression, violence, and death? Let’s attempt to solve the practical problems, and leave the theoreticians to their ivory tower cogitations. Without a doubt this approach has its appeal. Yet the history of efforts to change the world for the better indicate forcefully how poorly it has worked. Violence, poverty, oppression – this familiar litany of woe begs the question as to why we have failed to cross a single item off the list. For despite our best efforts to identify and address their causes, such serious problems seem to be permanent fixtures of every modern society.

We have laid the blame at many doors, including lack of sympathy and common values, human propensities for greed and power, the rhizomatic properties of global capitalist institutions, the weakness of political systems, the strength of hegemonic ideologies, the micro-fluctuations of power, and the madness of individual rulers. No one would argue that

identifying the causes of these problems is easy. Think for a moment of the difficulties facing anyone who wants to address poverty. What causes poverty? It seems unlikely that every poverty-stricken person is poor for the same reason, given the myriad different circumstances of poor people on the planet. Some have their land taken away, some fall ill; some manage their money poorly, some lose their jobs; some are victims of disaster, some are victims of hoaxes. How should we group these people in order to best address poverty? By psychological type? By urban or rural setting? By skill set? By country? By degree of agency? By economic system? For example, if we think that poverty has its roots in a worldwide economic system, then we have to figure out how that system works (and works differentially) on individuals, groups, industries, and governmental processes, and then design a new system that would not only enrich the present poor but also would not impoverish hosts of other people in the process. How do we decide what is the proper scale for our focus? How do we handle the mass of variables at every scale as well as the complexity of their interactions?

Attempts to handle these factors (among many others) have generated a demand for new disciplinary methods to bring analytic clarity to such chaos. Yet, because every analysis takes its orientation from some model of the structure and operations of social interactions, and because every model inevitably reduces social complexity in order to manage it, these analyses necessarily produce a distorted picture of the complexities of the social field. In modern times, discourses of social change have struggled with these twin difficulties of empirical multiplicity and theoretical reduction. These discourses tend either to emphasize the importance of studying interactions among particulars to arrive inductively at a sense of relevant causes, or they begin with a framework that distinguishes cause from effect in an *a priori* way (e.g., economic base, ideological superstructure). A good example of the first type is statistical analysis; a good example of the second is Marxist theory.

As a consequence of this shared inheritance of fundamental approaches, when it comes to theorizing social change, no matter which approach is being used, we repeatedly encounter familiar but apparently insoluble questions about the forces generating social forms and the counter-forces that might be marshaled to check or change them. The literature is littered with such puzzles. How is the social field structured? Is it generated by dominant forces or by aggregates of chance activities? Do we produce society or does it produce us? If they are mutually constitutive, how do we distinguish the contribution of each? If social forces perpetuate themselves by producing social subjects pre-programmed to follow their dictates, how do we achieve agency? How can power be created, husbanded, distributed, channeled, or governed? Should we form political

groups based on universal characteristics or particular identities – or on something else? What group forms and activities will create the greatest political traction? If we desire change, should we place our bet on pragmatic political action, which might involve violence and inequities, or on ethical principle, which might hamstring us and leave the status quo intact? These questions – well known to anyone who has tried to model the causes of social effects with a view to promoting change – seem constantly to shift focus from the trees to the forest and back again, without offering much in the way of new prospects, new models, or new approaches.

Now, however, something new has made an appearance. This book tells the story of a new theory of social change that challenges standard concepts of causality and traditional definitions of the “social” in large part by taking account of the retroversion that permeates social interactions. This new theory of social change has been developing in the work of cultural theorists, sociologists, philosophers of science, and psychoanalytic thinkers. No single author articulates the theory as a whole. However, by putting eminent theorists, such as Pierre Bourdieu, Michel de Certeau, Judith Butler, Theodor Adorno, Slavoj Žižek, Emmanuel Levinas, Giorgio Agamben, Bruno Latour and Alain Badiou into conversation with one another, in this book I have presented the fundamental features of this theory and demonstrated its innovations and limitations for thinking through social change in a political as well as ethical register. In order to help the reader appreciate the innovations on offer, I want here to outline its starting point and define some key terms.

## Articulating the Cause of the Social Field

Any theory of social change with political aspirations faces an apparently insurmountable task. On the one hand, it must provide a credible causal analysis that targets the source of social problems. On the other hand, achieving such credibility seems impossible in the face of the complexity of the interactions among social actors and contingent conditions. Only from God’s perspective can the sheer number of interrelated variables within the complex social space resolve themselves into neat bundles making it possible to differentiate cause from effect. And we can add further difficulties. To construct a plausible scenario of social change, we would have to have some means of following effects through time, in all their manifold concatenations, to discover their origin in a significant cause. We would also have to have some means of judging which effects are most significant and for which period of time. How, for example, are

we to analyze the determinants of any given social fact – say, the poverty of children in America – in the face of a plethora of possible historical, economic, ideological, biological, familial, personal, and environmental factors if we cannot isolate, at least provisionally and theoretically, a domain of causes prior to and independent of the effects they produce? Distinguishing cause from effect scientifically seems to be the *sine qua non* of a politically relevant theory of social change.

Marx's signal achievement in this respect was his description of a social field split into two tiers, base and superstructure, allowing for the "scientific" disentanglement of cause from effect, and thus addressing the problem of causes being indistinguishable from effects. But in the absence of some transcendental position from which to make that distinction, the sequestration of causes from the effects they produce creates a fatal separation, such that nothing remains to guarantee the very connection one has set out to explain – namely, the link between the cause and the field of effects. For if the cause is radically other than its effects, if it is not *in some way* part of the field it produces, then it cannot be seen in relation to that field *as its cause*. In fact, the field itself threatens to fall apart, since nothing holds its elements together in relation to each other.

In response to this problem, later Marxist theorizing takes on the task of articulating plausible mechanisms by which a cause might be brought back into touch with its effects. In Marxian theories, such mechanisms include the intellectual's role in transforming class consciousness, Althusser's emphasis on overdetermination, Gramsci's invention of hegemony, and Williams' attempts to rethink the base. As we shall see in chapter 3, Pierre Bourdieu invents the concept of the *habitus* – an embodied set of durable predispositions installed by external conditions – explicitly to serve this purpose. But perhaps the effort best known to North American readers is Michel Foucault's theory of immanent power relations:

It seems to me that power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them; as the support which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or a system, or on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another; and lastly, as the strategies in which they take effect, whose general design or institutional crystallization is embodied in the state apparatus, in the formulation of the law, in the various social hegemonies.<sup>2</sup>

By this means, Foucault links causes directly with their effects. Unfortunately, in this model, cause and effect are brought so closely