

DIALECTIC OF BARBARISM

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As I am writing this, Gaza has been reduced to rubble. The horrific Hamas attack of October 7, 2023 has legitimized a war that pushes the destruction of the fabric of Palestinian life into overdrive; Nakba 2.0. Moving from the register of tragedy to that of tragicomedy, university campuses across the US and Europe have become battlegrounds. In Germany, more extremely than elsewhere, criticism of Israel in academic and cultural institutions has largely been silenced through a McCarthyite weaponization of “anti-antisemitism.”¹ By using a definition of antisemitism that is monolithic and essentialist as well as expansive, including any analysis of Israel as a colonial project, inquisitors level accusations that are virtually impossible to counter, since essential critical concepts such as that of settler colonialism have themselves been branded antisemitic. The so-called *antideutsche* current has pushed the left into an alliance with liberals and the right based on the premise that the defense of Israel, come what may, is German *Staatsräson* (“reason of state”).² With a push to force cultural institutions to adhere to the IHRA’s working definition of antisemitism as an article of faith, many artists and intellectuals find themselves in an impossible position, between blackmail and blacklisting, as bio-German potatoheads keep *deutschsplain-ing* the world to them.³

For years, the art world has been busy decolonizing, at least on the level of discourse and in terms of diversity and representation. When actual neocolonial occupations and wars are foregrounded, things can get hairy. What doesn’t exactly help is that curatorial discourse eagerly packages Mignolo-style decolonization, with its “modernity/coloniality” trope, as a linear project of *demodernization* that is indistinguishable from a called-for “end of the contemporary.”⁴ In contrast to conceptualizations of contemporaneity as a condition marked by a “disjunctive synthesis of present times,” here the contemporary is simply folded back into the modern, and modernism is equated with modernity.⁵ In what appears to be a kind of irresistible catnip for European liberal academics and curators, Mignolo has been pushing an epistemo-cosmological take on colonialism in which the decolonial value of thinkers is measured by the extent to which they disconnected themselves from the colonial matrix, which means that Ayatollah Khomeini and Sayyid Qutb

become the bedfellows of Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon.⁶ Ultimately, a covertly modernist *tabula rasa* conception of historical change underpins everything, which is precisely why it's a perfect form of salon radicalism: Everything must go. Once modernity has been shorn of all its contradictions and complexity, it can and must be disposed of. The result is a denial of contemporaneity that takes the form of a rejection of engagement, of dialogue, of critique. Rather than explicitly saying "you are not my *Zeitgenosse*, I am not your 'comrade in time,'" decolonial advocates of demodernization tend to ignore the other's position, and their arguments favor the fortification of their own bubble.

If this is a sign of the intellectual bankruptcy of this particular decolonial cottage industry, it also suggests that critical theories of contemporaneity have remained niche.⁷ Their traction is in no way comparable with, Fredric Jameson's diagnosis of postmodernism as the cultural dominant of late capitalism, which remained anchored in somewhat rarified discussions of contemporary visual art. Theorists of decolonization as "demodernization" feel in no way obligated to address such accounts of contemporary art. The contemporary is folded back into the modern, modernism is equated with modernity, and modernity is presented as one vast and fairly undifferentiated regime that started in 1492.⁸ The undeniable fact of modernity's profound implication for colonialism, or "coloniality," makes differentiation superfluous and even suspicious, and discourages any engagement with critical (alter-)modernisms, or with contemporaneity as anything but the latest incarnation of a modernity that was always and exclusively about the denial of coevalness and about (epistemic and actual) genocide. In the process, "aesthetics" need to be replaced by a "decolonial aesthesis."⁹

Beyond para-academic ploys and curatorial stratagems, a more forceful and compelling obituary of modernity was penned in late 2023 by Hakan Arslanbenzer, who called the destruction of Gaza the "end of every possible modernity."¹⁰ Noting that, as a Turkish intellectual, he is in fact "that universalist, humanist, modern, democratic and autonomous intellectual who expresses ideas and acts freely with my own free will," Arslanbenzer addresses a reader who, "with [their] education, acquired manners and beliefs restructured in the modernity machine, form the other end of this connection. And we both wonder the same thing. How is it possible what's happening in Gaza?"¹¹ In what reads like a blog post in the problematic guise of an op-ed for the pro-AKP newspaper, *Daily Sabah*, the author

then asserts that “Modern history ended on Oct. 7,” and goes on to present a kind of hybrid notion of the modern that appears to have been filtered through concepts of contemporaneity: “Modernity means not only being in the present moment but also being in multiple moments at the same time. From now on, those on earth will not be able to experience the same moment.”¹²

To be sure, theories of contemporaneity as a “disjunctive synthesis of present times” already leave room for doubt regarding the degree to which we are talking about a meaningful coexistence, a real sharing of space-time.¹³ Thus, the divergence that Arslanbenzer senses may be seen as intensifying a tendency that was already immanent to the contemporary: When he claims that “From now on, those on earth will not be able to experience the same moment,” he seems to both exacerbate and explode a certain concept of contemporaneity. This diagnosis was already prefigured in the proliferation of artistic and theoretical bubbles that no longer speak to each other, not even through negation; as tragedy, it plays out on the ground in Gaza, to be mediated by a tragicomic register through cultural warfare that disrupts political movements, collaborations, and coalitions in the cultural field, sinking magazines and rocking art schools. It is not so much that we are facing a unilaterally decreed end of the contemporary, a.k.a. the end of modernity, but that the violence of modernity’s contradictions is making itself increasingly felt in the cultural sphere, and in the old heartlands of empire.

To be clear, I’m not interested in some kind of Habermasian defense of “modernity,” or even of “modernism.” Nor do I in any way seek to deny or sugarcoat the implication of modern aesthetic theory and practice through a logic of racialization that amounts to forms of aesthetic biopolitics, and indeed, necropolitics.¹⁴ What I reject are undialectical abstract negations of historical formations that have been reduced to caricatures. Modernity certainly had a lethal teleological drive, which dissipated traditional realities into thin air, and forged new forms of life while extirpating others, and liberated productive potential through extractivist violence. It also yielded counter-modernisms and alter-modernities: conceptually, aesthetically, and socially. Modernity’s linear path was shot through with temporal impurities and deviations, with anachronisms and potential histories.¹⁵ What I propose here is a series of sideways steps to explore and demonstrate the (potential) use value, even of problematic modern tropes.¹⁶

In a passage that I will return to, Aslanbenzer asks whether Adorno, “if he were alive today,” would say that writing poetry after Gaza is barbarism.¹⁷ The quintessential modern move of contrasting civilization, Enlightenment, or modernity with barbarism has been executed over and over again during the “War on Terror,” and now in the wake of the Hamas attack. Benjamin Netanyahu has called “the civilized world to arms against the ‘forces of barbarism,’” with Hamas conveniently standing in for Palestinians as such.¹⁸ As aesthetic as it is political, the concept of barbarism is part of the toolkit of the racial regime of aesthetics, yet this is one of those tools that may have been used to make some dents in the master’s house, to break some windows, or to construct secret doors.

BARBARISM BEGINS AT HOME

For much of its existence, the discipline of art history has been suffused with the trope of the barbarian invasions. Of fundamental importance here is a cascade of conceptualizations of Germanic tribes by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French and German historians and theorists. In Mark Antliff’s summary, “Critics of the French monarchy routinely identified the proletariat of France as a Gallic people subjected first to Roman rule and then to subsequent domination by the Franks, a tribe of supposed German origin who came to constitute the French aristocracy.”¹⁹ In the words of one historian that Antliff quoted, “by 1789 the assimilation of Franks and ruling class was so common that, in his seminal pamphlet, Abbe Emmanuel Sieyes called on the Third Estate, descended from the Gauls, to send the aristocrats packing back to their Germanic forests.”²⁰

Michel Foucault has done much to trace the foregoing genealogy. In Foucault’s account of the trope of race war by conservative historians of the Ancien Régime, he discerns in Boulainvilliers’s characterization of the invading Franks—who imposed their reign on the Gauls and became the progenitors of the French nobility—the beginnings of “the famous great portrait of the ‘barbarian’ which we will go on finding until the late nineteenth century, and, of course, in Nietzsche.”²¹ Herder and the German romantics would add crucial formulations of *völkische* differences between Germany and France, pitting German *Kultur* against French *Zivilisation* in an act of auto-exoticism. By the late nineteenth century, it was a potent mix indeed, and interpretations of art in racial and *völkische* terms were hegemonic.

Éric Michaud's *The Barbarian Invasions* is a critical, decolonial re-reading of art history that traces the racialization of art through its "barbarization": in Michaud's account, the discipline of art history largely constituted itself by positing a dialectic of classical or Latin art, and its barbarian other. Again, going back as far as the eighteenth century and historians' use of the trope of the Frankish/Germanic invasions to characterize French art as fundamentally Germanic in nature, Michaud presents a *Geschichte der Kunstgeschichte* that amounts to an impressive catalogue of horrors, with sundry treatises that other and dehumanize non-white races, and place their art outside of art history, properly speaking.²² The trope of the barbarian invasions has unquestionably done genuine damage, to put it mildly, with Nazi Germany using the imaginary of barbaric communist hordes from the east to justify its genocidal war. However, it seems to me that Michaud's magisterial study does too little justice to the dialectical twists and turns of the trope(s) of the barbarians and the barbarian invasions: to its ambiguous valences and contradictions, to its alter-modern appropriations and détournements.

Here, a counterpoint is offered by Maria Boletsi's insistence that "Although barbarism is traditionally viewed as the negative offshoot of 'civilization,' it can be recast as a creative and critical concept in cultural theory," it has the potential to "unsettle binary oppositions" and "trigger alternative modes of knowing and relating to others."²³ To this end, one needs to be attentive to various forms of self-identification with the barbarian, various ways of self-othering: In contrast to the reactionary and (proto-)fascist identification with the barbarian as a brute force unspoiled by artificial civilization, there is Schiller's critical, questioning use of this figure: "If 'our age is enlightened' and 'the spirit of free inquiry has . . . undermined the foundations upon which fanaticism and deception had raised their throne,'" Schiller famously asks, "how is it, then, that we still remain barbarians?"²⁴ This reversal is structurally similar to Marx's identifying fetishism with the capitalist subject, rather than with "benighted" Africans. However, not all critical détournements of barbarism are so explicit. Alois Riegl offers a case in point.

Michaud demonstrates the extent to which Riegl's characterization of a late-Roman *Kunstwollen* that is distinct from classical art, and that is characterized by a predominantly optic rather than haptic conception of visual space, is rooted in nineteenth-century narratives about the barbarian (gothic, Germanic) incursions into the Roman Empire. To be sure, Riegl did indeed make uncritical use of

the period's conceptual lingua franca of races, peoples and tribes.²⁵ He refers to the "Nordic barbarian tribes newly entering the cultural world [Kulturwelt] at that time," and wants to do justice to their creative impetus and contribution to the arts.²⁶ As he notes, critically,

...that no one has ever attempted a close examination of the alleged process of the Barbarians' violent destruction of classical art. One spoke only in general terms of 'barbarisation' and left the details shrouded in an impenetrable fog, the dispersion of which the hypothesis would have spelled the end of this hypothesis. But what could have been put in its place, since it was taken for granted that Late Roman art could not mean progress, but only decay? Breaking this prejudice is the main aim of all the investigations in this volume.²⁷

Riegl's differentiation between various "artistic volitions" as rooted in various *Völker* is consistent with the Herderian rejection of universal/classical aesthetic norms. The implication of the overarching project of post-Herderian *völkische* aesthetics in cultural nationalism and—ultimately—fascism is clear enough. However, on this spectrum, Riegl's tone is hardly that of out-and-out racial-aesthetic warfare, à la Julius Langbehn.²⁸ Context matters: Riegl's intellectual and social milieu was not that of Prussia, but of multi-ethnic Austro-Hungary, for which he worked, and whose history and collections shaped *Spätromische Kunstindustrie*.²⁹ If Riegl was a mouthpiece of Empire, the empire in question was Musil's "Kakania," an unstable *Vielvölkerstaat* threatened precisely by various forms of ethnic essentialism and irredentist nationalism. Given this framework, Riegl sought to intervene in his discipline, and in the broader culture, precisely by "debarbarizing" late-Antique art.

Readers from Walter Benjamin to Deleuze and Guattari were hardly wrong to side with the productive elements of Riegl's project, for all its epistemological problems. Benjamin, who took his cues from Riegl in writings that range from the *Trauerspiel* book to the "Kunstwerk" essay, lauded the Viennese art historian for recognizing that "what had previously been called 'regression into Barbarism'" had in fact been a "new experience of space, a new *Kunstwollen*," and that "in the last four decades no art history book has had such a substantive and methodologically fruitful effect."³⁰ Benjamin, then, is attentive to Riegl's debarbarization of late Antiquity: To be different is not necessarily to be barbaric. Curiously, Benjamin's own writings show far less reticence when it comes to using the

barbarism trope. The locus classicus is obviously his dictum that every document of civilization or culture (*Kultur* in the original) is also a document of barbarism.³¹ However, in a dialectical twist, Benjamin posits a “positive Barbarism,” distinct from the reigning variety, in a fascinating passage in “Erfahrung und Armut”: “Indeed, our poverty of experience is not merely poverty on the personal level, but poverty of human experience in general. Hence, a new kind of barbarism. Barbarism? Yes, indeed. We say this in order to introduce a new, positive concept of barbarism.”³²

With Adorno and Horkheimer, the foregoing call seems to have fallen on deaf ears. The *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is also a dialectic of barbarism, but its authors remain fairly orthodox in their use of the term as the unquestioned opposite of civilization. The twist is that civilization (Enlightenment) has generated a relapse into barbarism: “The paradox of faith degenerates finally into fraud, the myth of the twentieth century and faith’s irrationality into rational organization in the hands of the utterly enlightened as they steer society toward barbarism.”³³ Aptly summarizing the sublimation of supercharged white male capitalist individualism into the *völkische* collective, Horkheimer and Adorno note, “Race today is the self-assertion of the bourgeois individual, integrated into the barbaric collective.”³⁴ Building on the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in his later essay on *Kulturkritik*, Adorno went further in implicating himself in the situation. It is here that he launches his most famous dictum on the barbarism of the *Kulturindustrie*: “Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today.”³⁵ The only possible way forward was to exit the “self-satisfied contemplation” of traditional *Kulturkritik*: an understanding of critique as praxis, and its conceptual labor as part of an immanent critique of the dialectic of *Kultur* and barbarism. Arslanbenzer, who references the famous dictum, but does little justice to the reflexive context, is quick to identify Adorno as “both a product and an agent of [the culture he critiqued], as well as one of the people who reproduced it. Just like Noam Chomsky unintentionally reproduces the American system.”³⁶

In what is admittedly an impassioned blog post rather than a theoretical essay, Arslanbenzer does evince a tendency to cast critical Jewish intellectuals in the role of moderns who are beyond redemption, whereas barbarism is “anti-culture, pre-civilization,” and is

“about reclaiming memory, breaking free from the cloud of lies surrounding the ancient, and emerging like the sun.”³⁷ For all its questionable traits, Arslanbenzer’s text is part of a “Barbarian turn” in which the colonized and othered increasingly claim the concept for purposes of self-identification. At its best, this turn takes the form of practices that take this trope from the modern toolbox to articulate divergences in non-identitarian terms, to allow for transversal coalitions and open up the comrade relationship beyond the limited horizon of certain neo-modernist leftist projects, with their unreconstructed retro-Leninist particularism dressed up as universalism.³⁸

UNEXPECTED SUBJECTS

Post-World War II culture witnessed a remarkably unreconstructed version of the “Barbarian invasions” trope, and of the racialization of art history in Asger Jorn’s theory of art. For Jorn, properly experimental art was rooted in the creative vandalism of “barbarian” Nordic-Germanic peoples, and he went to considerable effort to document the traces of this impulse.³⁹ It is staggering to what extent Jorn remains loyal to an ethno-essentialist art history that had been thoroughly discredited by its fascist apogee, yet this does not cancel out the generative dimension of Jorn’s critique of the Bauhaus and much modern culture.⁴⁰ Instead of an undialectical “debunking” of Jorn, what is needed is an unflinching analysis of his position and practice in dialogue with others, as part of a dialectical constellation of historical counterpoints. I can only briefly outline certain key relations of such a constellation.

Jorn apart, the most affirmative use of the “Barbarian Invasions” trope is Amadeo Bordiga’s 1953 essay, “Onwards, Barbarians!”⁴¹ Like Jorn, Bordiga draws on Engels’s *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, which outlined a view of successive “savage” and “barbarian” stages of human development marked by matrilineal *gentes*.⁴² A growing division of labor in the later phases of barbarism led to the rise of an unproductive, exploitative class, and hence to “civilization.” Even though he was not entirely immune to the language of the time, Engels sternly opposed any suggestion that it was “some miraculous power innate in the Germanic race, such as our chauvinist historians romance about,” that had allowed the German tribes to “rejuvenate a world in the throes of collapsing civilization,” insisting that the decisive factor had been their “gentile constitution.”⁴³ Following Engels’s lead, Bordiga proposes a materialist reading of the transition from the state of barbarism to that

of civilization: “Let us jump to the outlet from barbarism to civilization. The key to the transitions lies in the successive forms of division of labor. Up to the first stage of barbarism, there is the only natural division of labor, that between the two sexes. The result is the society of people, a limited community of men. Engels writes a real psalm to this barbaric system.”⁴⁴

Far from being psalmodic, Bordiga’s essay is an enjoyable diss track about Cornelius Castoriadis, who gave his group the Rosa Luxemburg-derived name *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. Contra Castoriadis, Bordiga argues that maintaining the dualism of (good) civilization and (bad) barbarism puts one in the camp of Truman and Stalin–imperialist “defenders of civilization.”⁴⁵ Empire derives its justification from its claim that it maintains order within its borders, and protects its citizens from the barbarians at the gate, but Bordiga says of the the Later Roman Empire that “its order was worse than the worst disorder, and the citizens whom it claimed to protect against the barbarians longed for the barbarians to deliver them.” “Onwards, Barbarians!” is a call for a coming barbarism, a barbarism that does not oppose teleological histories of capitalist civilization with a cyclical return to an aboriginal past, but constitutes a counter-modern, anachronic troubling of such historical schemata.

If the sudden death of capitalism were considered by us as a necessary premise for further development, after which we inevitably would have to pass through the errors of subsequent civilizations, then there is nothing horrible about the characteristics of this barbarism as a human form of coexistence that would make us fear its unthinkable return. As it happened in Rome, with the wild hordes unconscious bearers of a distant but greater revolution, the curators of the greatest contributions of man, we wish for a powerful barbarian wave to come crashing through the gates of this bourgeois world. [...] So let there come with socialism a new and fruitful barbarism, such as that which descended from the Alps and renewed Europe, which did not destroy but exalted the centuries of knowledge and art imprisoned in the dungeon of the formidable empires.⁴⁶

Whereas Castoriadis contrasted socialism with barbarism, Bordiga, thus pitted capitalism against (socialist) barbarism. Aimé Césaire remains closer to Castoriadis’s “traditional” use of the trope, yet his polemical deployment thereof helped instigate a post- and decolonial turn of the trope. At one point in his *Discourse on Colonialism*

(1950), Césaire quotes from a colonial text that differentiates between the “traditional” inner-European barbarian, who “is of the same race, after all, as the Roman and the Greek,” and the “yellow man, the black man, [who] is not our cousin at all,” though the author quoted by Césaire goes on to claim that “if Europe becomes yellow,” this would result in a new Dark Age—which is a white supremacist version of the Barbarian Invasions plot.⁴⁷ Meanwhile, Césaire turns the tables on European colonial ideology:

And now I ask: what else has bourgeois Europe done? It has undermined civilizations, destroyed countries, ruined nationalities, extirpated ‘the root of diversity.’ No more dikes, no more bulwarks. The hour of the barbarian is at hand. The modern barbarian. The American hour. Violence, excess, waste, mercantilism, bluff, conformism, stupidity, vulgarity, disorder.⁴⁸

Césaire further emphasizes that “I make no secret of my opinion that at the present time the barbarism of Western Europe has reached an incredibly high level, being only surpassed—far surpassed, it is true—by the barbarism of the United States.”⁴⁹ But what of the “races” that colonial ideology deemed to be below the level of “traditional” Barbarians, in particular the descendants of enslaved Black Africans? In October 1956, after Krushchev’s “revelations” about Stalin, Césaire wrote a letter to Maurice Thorez of the French Communist Party, in which he argued that the struggle of people of color against racism and colonialism had turned out to be of a different nature than the fight of French workers against capitalism, and that the former cannot be subsumed under the latter:

This is not a desire to fight alone and a disdain for all alliances. It is a desire to distinguish between alliance and subordination, solidarity and resignation. [...] I am not burying myself in a narrow particularism. But neither do I want to lose myself in an emaciated universalism. There are two ways to lose oneself: walled segregation in the particular or dilution in the “universal.” My conception of the universal is that of a universal enriched by all that is particular, a universal enriched by every particular: the deepening and coexistence of all particulars.⁵⁰

As a key figure in the Caribbean radical tradition, Césaire participated in a ricocheting debate on historical materialism, on the dialectical negation of the negation, and on Alexandre Kojève’s Marxist interpretation of Hegel’s parable of master and slave (or lord and

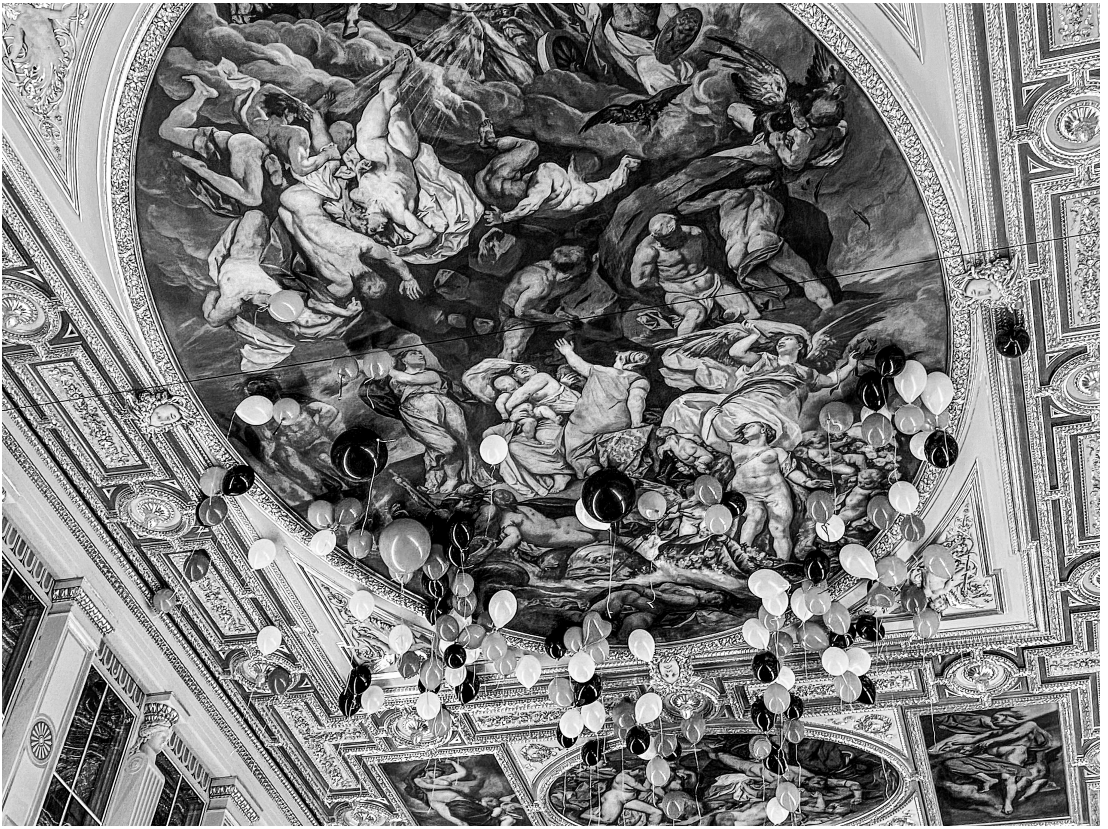
bondsman) as the principle of class struggle and of history itself. If, in the register of theory, C.L.R. James largely tended to view the anti-colonial struggle through the prism of class struggle, Sylvia Wynter has noted that his literary work went a step further: James's alter ego has the telling name of Matthew Bondsman, and has "to come to terms with the fact that he had become 'refuse.'"⁵¹ Francophone Caribbean thinkers such as Césaire and Fanon effected a more decisive break. In Fanon's pithy gloss, the real-world master of the plantation "laughs at the consciousness of the slave," and wants relentless toil from his slaves, rather than something as useless and unproductive as "recognition."⁵² Donna V. Jones summarizes Fanon's critique: "The Hegelian dialectic simply does not seem to fit the experience of African slaves in the New World: it is nonsensical that chained and whipped slaves could see in work a vehicle for self-realization."⁵³ Thus, emancipation needs to take the form of emancipation *from* work, not *through* work.

We could apply to this Black critique the words with which Carla Lonzi encapsulated her own critical break with Hegel: "We recognize within ourselves the capacity for effecting a complete transformation of life. Not being trapped within the master-slave dialectic, we become conscious of ourselves; we are the Unexpected Subject."⁵⁴ The history of social movements of the last half-century has been shaped by Unexpected Subjects asserting their agency, and in this framework, the dialectic of Barbarism enters a new phase. Crucially, this goes beyond rhetorical games and semiotic swordplay, beyond flipping a term from negative to positive and back again. The dialectics of barbarism, as developed by the likes of Adorno and Benjamin, becomes a *barbarization of the dialectic, a barbarian dialectic*. This happens in the context of decolonial practices that are far more pointed and incisively critical than much academic and para-academic discourse on decolonializing and demodernizing epistemology, a discourse that at times also involves reductive and excessively "superstructuralist" readings of Sylvia Wynter's account of history as a history of various modes of being human.⁵⁵

In France, the notion of *indigeneity* has been claimed by descendants of the colonized, particularly from the Mahgreb, organized in the Les Indigènes de la République movement/party. Two activists and authors (formerly) associated with this party have released books reclaiming the concept of the barbarian in their titles: Bouteldja's *Beaufs et Barbares*, and Yousfi's *Rester Barbare*. The latter discusses the genealogy and valences of the concept of the

barbarian as the Other of Empire. Yousfi takes cues from the Algerian poet Kateb Yacine, who embraced the status of barbarian given to him by the colonial administration: “Beyond the Empire is the zone of non-being where he and his fellow inmates vegetate: peasants, students, revolutionary comrades. All barbarians.”⁵⁶ Yousfi insists that this is not about a quasi-Deleuzian “becoming-barbarian” but about remaining barbarian, remaining unassimilable (in Adornese, one might say “non-identical”).⁵⁷ Nonetheless, this barbarian is the dialectical product of empire, and not of some pure origin: “He is the product of this civilisation, but cannot be subsumed by it. He is the sign of an unprogrammed, unencoded mutation of the civilisation process. We could even say that he is ahead of civilization: a figure of the future, condemned to come.”⁵⁸ Yousfi, like Bordiga, seems to present the alternatives as *Empire or Barbarism*, with the second term having drastically changed its valence, when compared to the old “socialism or barbarism.” In *Against the Grain*, James C. Scott characterizes the era of ancient empires such as Rome as “the golden age of the barbarians”: the Empires, which made and wrote history (and made history by writing it) actually covered only a small part of the globe, and on their frontiers, “barbarians” thrived.⁵⁹ They were not an anterior state to be wiped from the face of the earth, but resilient social formations that thrived through exchanges and confrontations with the empires. As David Graeber and David Wengrow do, one might see this as an example of schismogenesis on a grand scale.⁶⁰ The reach of nineteenth-century capitalist empires was rather more sweeping and global, and today the descendants of the colonized are present in the metropolis, and often create activist and political formations consistent with Césaire’s words to Thorez.

The latter’s descendants often attack “identitarian leftists” without much critical discrimination or acuity—and in the wake of the Hamas attack, “Islamist-leftist antisemitism” became another stick with which to beat the bogeyman. What are needed are alliances and coalitions that bring together different forms of subjectivation and political practices. *Faut-il se ressembler pour s’assembler?*⁶¹ What is urgently needed is a *rassemblement* of those who may not fully resemble each other: a coalition of comrades and barbarians, of barbarians-as-comrades and comrades-as-barbarians. It is in this spirit that Bouteldja conjures up an alliance of “beaufs,” which in this context one could translate as “white trash,” and the barbarians, or “indigenous proles.”⁶² To be sure, there is a risk in turning “barbarian” into an identity for (and in contrast to) others, which may give rise to questionable over-affirmations of the most reductive imagery of



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“barbarism,” for instance, by fetishizing Hamas as barbarian liberators, along the lines of reactionary and fascist projections on the ancient Germans.

Nonetheless, if history as barbarian dialectics involves us all, it does so differentially, and some are more barbarized than others, or may see greater use value in claiming the term. What matters is that such speech acts remain dialogic, and counter the “forced homogenization” of societies in the Levant after World War II (a process that was itself a colonial import), and today’s “rampant neonationalism and monocultural identity politics projects.”⁶³ In the spirit of the “Levantinism” theorized by Jacqueline Kahanoff, and recently, in her wake, by Eva Meyer and Eran Schaerf, we urgently need to picture and practice coalitions—at local, (anti)national and transnational levels—that bring together hung-over moderns, critical barbarians, indigenous nomads and unsettled settlers.⁶⁴ Dissenting and deserting on the frontier and in the heart of Empire, all such practitioners are involved in a barbarian dialectic; in various ways, they are all un-learning imperialism by becoming barbarian, and vice versa.

ONWARDS, KINDA

Nobody said this was going to be easy. A telling moment occurred on the 15th of June 2019, outside artist Kader Attia’s decolonial space in Paris *La Colonie*: While the inauguration of an *École décoloniale* was taking place inside, a noisy parade of *Gilets Jaunes* came down the street. There has been much discussion about the politically inchoate and ambiguous nature of this “Yellow Vests” protest movement in the circles of *La Colonie*: Was this a white right-wing movement à la the Tea Party or Trumpism, or was there potential for progressive coalition-building? On that June 15th, it was more of a tourist encounter, as people from inside *La Colonie* went out to photograph the march, which included a large cut-out of Delacroix’s *Liberty Leading the People*. The groups were physically close without encountering each other; although the *Gilets Jaunes* refused to play the part of immigrant-hating white workers, an actualization of the potential coalition between *beaufs et barbares* imagined by Bouteldja—between lower-class “white trash” and “barbarian” immigrants—did not exactly appear to be imminent.⁶⁵

Nonetheless, even such missed encounters may be part of a project of sensitization, as Natascha Sadr Haghghian outlined in her essay, “What I Do Not Yet Recognize, Now at This Very Moment,” in which the artist reflects on her belated coming to terms with an anti-racist

demonstration in 2006, triggered by the National Socialist Underground's killings in Germany. In failing to see the images of the protest and sense their importance, Sadr Haghghian acknowledges that she “participated in a process of rendering the images invisible.”⁶⁶ The artist, who would later be part of the *NSU Komplex auflösen* people's tribunal, and a member of the Society of Friends of Halit (which commissioned Forensic Architecture to reconstruct the NSU's murder of Halit Yozgat in Kassel), emphasizes the importance of “[abandoning] the anesthetized order of the White Ignorance Contract” and of *sensitizing* oneself.⁶⁷ Such a barbarian sensitization also involves opposing hegemonic images—such as those produced and distributed by the little sovereigns of reactionary autonomy—with *counter-images* that seek to make “another reality imaginable and perceptible.”⁶⁸

On Thursday, January 18, 2024, the official opening of the Viennese art academy's open days (or *Rundgang*) took place in the academy's aula, a grand space with a ceiling painting by Anselm Feuerbach depicting the battle of the gods and the giants. A few years before, Zachary Formwalt had shown his video piece, *But Where Are the Hundred-Handed Ones?* in this space—a work that evokes Peter Weiss's anticapitalist and anti-imperialist reading of the Pergamon Frieze, and similarly depicts the Gigantomachy. At the Rundgang opening, a group of students silently interrupted the proceedings and released a large number of balloons in the colors of the Palestinian flag, which nestled against the ceiling—in a Cagayan distribution of monochrome dots.

As a quasi-modernist gesture, the piece recalls Felix Gonzalez-Torres's polyptych, *Forbidden Colors* (1988), which consists of four monochrome panels in the colors of the Palestinian flag. At the time, the Israeli army did not allow these colors to be shown side by side in the occupied territories.⁶⁹ If Gonzalez-Torres called his piece “a solitary act of consciousness here in SoHo,” the action there in Vienna was very much shared, even with those who wanted no part of it.⁷⁰ A mute act, this protest produced a counter-image that many, no doubt, immediately framed in terms of a barbarian attack on democracy and liberty. The contemporaneity of that moment was truly disjunctive, with people inhabiting the same physical space, but in vastly divergent intellectual, ethical, and political worlds.

Still: That night, the barbarian balloons soared, and nothing else mattered.

- 1 The focus of this article is not on the uses and abuses of the concept (or specific concepts of) antisemitism. Even its spelling, antisemitism or anti-Semitism, is contentious. For an introduction that predates the recent further intensification of the debate, see the special issue of the *American Historical Review* 123, no. 3 (October 2018). For a critical take on the imposition of the IHRA definition, see, for instance Elad Lapidot, "A Critique of Anti-Antisemitism," *Tablet*, May 20, 2021, <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/critique-anti-antisemitism-elad-lapidot>.
- 2 On the way in which "anti-Antisemitism" functions within the "desiring-machine" of Staatsräson, see Simon Strick, "Wunschmaschine Staatsräson," *DieAusnahmeUndDieRegel*, March 30, 2024, <https://dieausnahmeunddieregeln.substack.com/p/wunschmaschine-staatsraeson>; and "Wunschmaschine Staatsräson, pt. 2," April 29, 2024, <https://dieausnahmeunddieregeln.substack.com/p/wunschmaschine-staatsraeson-staatsraeson>.
- 3 For an impression of the situation, see Hanno Hauenstein, "Die Drecksarbeit der Liberalen Mitte," *WOZ*, no. 18, May 2, 2024, <https://www.woz.ch/2418/israeldiskurs-in-deutschland/die-drecksarbeit-der-liberalen-mitte!6MGK4Y2S4R1D>.
- 4 In particular, see Rolando Vázquez's essay, *Vistas of Modernity: Decolonial Aesthetics and the End of the Contemporary* (Amsterdam: Mondriaan Fonds, 2020), which has become bizarrely hegemonic in the Netherlands. In a recent article, Vázquez doubles down, and defines contemporaneity as "a normative category that praises the time of the now as the time that is real and that is valuable." Rolando Vázquez, "Aesthetics and Epistemic Restitution for the Joy of Life: Recalling Earth, Overcoming the Contemporary, Knowing Otherwise," *Errant Journal* 5 (2023): 55.
- 5 The phrase is Peter Osborne's; inter alia, see, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013), 17.
- 6 Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2011), 115.
- 7 This "sociological" diagnosis implies no judgement on the cogency of publications such as Osborne's *Anywhere or Not at All*, Terry Smith's *What Is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), or Jacob Lund's *The Changing Constitution of the Present: Essays on the Work of Art in Times of Contemporaneity* (London: Sternberg Press, 2022).
- 8 For a curatorial project, see *Tools for Demodernizing* by Kunstinstituut Melly (Rotterdam) and its institutional partners, <https://tfd.kunstinstituutmelly.nl/>.
- 9 Walter D. Mignolo and Rolando Vázquez, "Decolonial Aesthetics: Colonial Wounds/Decolonial Healings," *Social Text*, July 15, 2013, https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/decolonial-aesthetics-colonial-woundsdecolonial-healings/.
- 10 Hakan Arslanbenzer, "Gaza: End of Every Possible Modernity," *Daily Sabah*, November 24, 2023, <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/op-ed/gaza-end-of-every-possible-modernity>.
- 11 Arslanbenzer, "Gaza: End of Every Possible Modernity."
- 12 Arslanbenzer, "Gaza: End of Every Possible Modernity."
- 13 Some of Osborne's formulations are telling: "The coming together of different but equally 'present' temporalities in temporarily totalized but disjunctive unities, which characterize historical contemporaneity today, are not the individual combinations of existential presents with particular pasts (religious or otherwise) characteristic of Kierkegaard's concept of sametiness, or even Benjamin's now-time, although the purported collectivity of the subject of experience always remained a central issue for Benjamin, however unresolved. Rather, these conjunctions involve geopolitically diffuse multiplicities of temporalities (each carrying its own history) combined within social structures that produce geopolitically totalized presents that are constitutively problematic: unified only in *images* of ideal, speculative or fictional 'subjects' purporting to occupy the same kind of historical space as the alienated ideality of the value-form of capital, in its seemingly self-determining movement." Peter Osborne, "The Postconceptual Condition: Or, the Cultural Logic of High Capitalism Today," *Radical Philosophy* 184 (March/April 2014): 24.
- 14 Regarding a trenchant regime of the racial dimensions of modern aesthetics, see David Lloyd, *Under Representation: The Racial Regime of Aesthetics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019).
- 15 My phrasing evokes Ariella Aïsha Azoulay's *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London/New York: Verso, 2019), though I also discern potential history in certain modern artistic or intellectual practices she would identify with "imperialism."
- 16 See also Sven Lütticken, "Fetishize This!," in *Objections: Forms of Abstraction, Vol. 1* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2022), 42-92.
- 17 Arslanbenzer, "Gaza: End of Every Possible Modernity."
- 18 David Isaac, "Netanyahu Calls Civilized World to Arms Against 'Forces of Barbarism'," *Jewish News Syndicate*, October 30, 2023, <https://www.jns.org/netanyahu-calls-civilized-world-to-arms-against-forces-of-barbarism/>.
- 19 Mark Antliff, *Inventing Bergson: Cultural Politics and the Parisian Avant-Garde* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 118. The quotation is by Eugen Weber.
- 20 Antliff, *Inventing Bergson: Cultural Politics and the Parisian Avant-Garde*.
- 21 Michel Foucault, 'Society Must Be Defended': *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 149.
- 22 Éric Michaud, *The Barbarian Invasions: A Genealogy of the History of Art*, trans. Nicholas Hucke (Cambridge MA/London: MIT Press, 2019).
- 23 Maria Boletsis, *Barbarism and Its Discontents* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), p. xi.
- 24 Friedrich Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, cited in Boletsis, *Barbarism and Its Discontents*, 75.
- 25 Michaud, *The Barbarian Invasions*, 113-115.

- 26 Alois Riegl, *Spätromische Kunstindustrie* (Vienna: Österreichische Staatsdruckerei, 1927 [1901]), VI.
- 27 Riegl, *Spätromische Kunstindustrie*, 7. Author's translation.
- 28 "Von einem Deutschen" [Julius Langbehn], *Rembrandt als Erzieher* (Leipzig: C.L. Hirschfeld, 1890).
- 29 For a detailed account, Diana Reynolds Cordileone, *Alois Riegl in Vienna 1875-1905: An Institutional Biography* (Farnham/Burlington: Ashgate, 2014).
- 30 Walter Benjamin, "Bücher, die lebendig geblieben sind," in *Gesammelte Schriften* III, ed. Hella Tiedemann-Bartels (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991 [1929]), 170. Translation adapted from Jay Hetrick, "What Is Nomad Art? A Benjaminian Reading of Deleuze's Riegl," in *Deleuze Studies* 6, no. 1 (2012): 28-29.
- 31 Walter Benjamin, "Über den Begriff der Geschichte," in *Gesammelte Schriften* I.2, eds. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991 [1940]), 696.
- 32 Walter Benjamin, "Erfahrung und Armut," in *Gesammelte Schriften* II.1, eds. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991 [1933]), 215. Translation adapted from: Walter Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," in *Selected Writings* Volume 2:2: 1931-1934, eds. Howard Eiland, Michael W. Jennings and Gary Smith, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Others, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 732. Boletsi makes much of Benjamin's use of *Barbarentum* instead of *Barbarei* in this passage (*Barbarism and Its Discontents*, 117), although *Barbarentum* does not stand out for a German speaker; although less common than *Barbarei*, its analogy to terms such as *Heidentum* and *Christentum* gives it an idiomatic ring.
- 33 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford California Press, 2002 [1944/47]), 15.
- 34 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 138.
- 35 Theodor W. Adorno, "Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft," in *Gesammelte Schriften* 10.1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003 [1951]), 30; English translation from *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge MA/London: MIT Press, 1981), 34.
- 36 Arslanbenzer, "Gaza: End of Every Possible Modernity."
- 37 Arslanbenzer, "Gaza: End of Every Possible Modernity."
- 38 Jodi Dean, *Comrade: An Essay on Political Belonging* (London/New York: Verso, 2019). Strikingly, after failing to "make the American Communist Party great again" (dixit Geert Lovink and Ned Rossiter), Dean wrote a text on the October 7 Hamas attack, focused on the role of paragliders and kites in Palestinian resistance, and characterizing Hamas as an "agent hoping that the [revolutionary] subject would emerge as an effect of its action." Jodi Dean, "Palestine Speaks for Everyone," *Verso Blog*, April 9, 2024, <https://www.versobooks.com/en-gb/blogs/news/palestine-speaks-for-everyone>. Following this text, Dean was suspended from teaching duties at Hobart and William Smith Colleges.
- 39 See Asger Jorn, *Signes gravés sur les églises de l'Eure et du Calvados* (Copenhagen: Éditions Borgen, 1964), which is marked by an insistent ethno-essentialism in which the "Barbarie Nordique" (p. 219) is pitted against Latin culture (of which Debord, with his "politico-latine" orientation, is an exponent; see p. 290), and by a dialogue with Friedrich Engels's historical sequence of savagery—barbarism—civilization (pp. 294–302).
- 40 See also Sven Lütticken, "Dialectic of Dionysos," *New Left Review* 76 (July-August 2012): 119-127.
- 41 Amadeo Bordiga, "Onwards, Barbarians!" (1951), trans. Radical Reprints, libcom.org, <https://libcom.org/article/onwards-barbarians>.
- 42 A February 1964 letter from Jorn to Debord suggests that he came to Engels's *Origin of the Family* quite late in the work on *Signes gravés*. See Ellef Prestsæter ed., *Open Creation and Its Enemies: Asger Jorn in Situation* (Valencià: IVAM, 2023), 216.
- 43 Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private property and the State* (London etc.: Penguin, 2010 [1884]), 192.
- 44 Bordiga, "Onwards, Barbarians!."
- 45 Bordiga, "Onwards, Barbarians!."
- 46 Bordiga, "Onwards, Barbarians!."
- 47 Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, n.d. [1950]), 50.
- 48 Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 76.
- 49 Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 47.
- 50 Aimé Césaire, letter to Maurice Thorez, October 24, 1956, <https://libcom.org/article/letter-maurice-thorez>.
- 51 Sylvia Wynter, "In Quest of Matthew Bondsman: Some Cultural Notes on the Jamesian Journey," *Urgent Tasks* no. 12 (Summer 1981), <http://www.sojournertruth.net/matthewbondsman.html>. Although French-Caribbean writers such as Césaire and Fanon clearly reacted against Kojève's influential reading of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, there is little to no evidence that James was familiar with Kojève. In his 1946 comments in the master-slave dialectic, he takes cues from Lenin instead, and treats the "lordship and bondage" dialectic as pertaining to a pre-capitalist past. See J.R. Johnson [C.L.R. James], "From the Master-Slave Dialectic to Revolt in Capitalist Production," extract from "Historical Retrogression or Socialist Revolution" *New Internationalist* 12, no. 1 (January 1946), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/james-clr/works/1946/master-slave.htm>.
- 52 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986 [1952]), 220.
- 53 Donna V. Jones, *The Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy: Négritude, Vitalism, and Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 167. See also, more broadly, pp. 163-170 of Jones's important study.
- 54 Lonzi, *Let's Spit on Hegel*, 18. See also Janet Sarbanes's fifth letter, "On Difference, Self-Valorization, and the Unexpected Subject" in *Letters on the Autonomy Project* (n.p.: Punctum Books, 2022), 43-50.

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- 55 Although the *Ceremony (Burial of an Undead World)* (Berlin/Leipzig: HKW/Spector Books, 2023) catalogue, contains some strong contributions, it does evince this tendency—as did the exhibition, in which the curators’ “cosmogonic” investment in Wynter, Aby Warburg or Ernesto de Martino resulted in a rather excessive sprawl of iconography accompanied by a mystificatory myth-ritualism.
- 56 Louisa Yousfi, *Rester Barbare* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2022), 15. Author’s translation.
- 57 Yousfi, *Rester Barbare*, 21. Author’s translation.
- 58 Yousfi *Rester Barbare*, 23.
- 59 James C. Scott, *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2017), 219-256.
- 60 David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (London etc: Allen Lane, 2021), 57. See also Sven Lütticken, “Capitalism and Schismogenesis,” Parts 1 and 2, *e-flux journal* no. 138 and 139 (September and October 2023), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/138/553831/capitalism-and-schismogenesis-part-1/>; <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/139/558496/capitalism-and-schismogenesis-part-2/>.
- 61 Nicole Lapierre, *Faut-il se ressembler pour s’assembler?* (Paris: Seuil, 2020).
- 62 Houria Bouteldja, *Beaufs et barbares* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2023).
- 63 Eva Meyer and Eran Schaerf, “Kahanoff’s Levantinism: The Anachronic Possibilities of a Concept,” *Prospections*, February 3, 2021, <https://bakonline.org/en/research+publications/prospections/antinism+the+anachronic+possibilities+of+a+concept/>.
- 64 Meyer and Schaerf, “Kahanoff’s Levantinism.”
- 65 Bouteldja, *Beaufs et barbares*.
- 66 Natascha Sadr Haghigian, *What I Do Not Yet Recognize, Now at This Very Moment* (Berlin: Harun Farocki Institut, 2023), 9.
- 67 Sadr Haghigian, *What I Do Not Yet Recognize*, 15.
- 68 Sadr Haghigian, *What I Do Not Yet Recognize*, 15.
- 69 See <https://www.moca.org/collection/work/forbidden-colors>.
- 70 I take the Gonzalez-Torres quotation from Greg Allen’s blog post about his open-source version of the work: <https://greg.org/archive/2021/05/18/gonzalez-torres-forbidden-colors-may-2021.html#more-15695>.