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Marxist Aesthetics: A Historical Antinomy

Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen

Abstract: This essay discusses the current status and meaning of Marxist aesthetics. As a somewhat heavy-handed gesture, some might say breast-beating, it attempts to link Marxist aesthetics to the question of revolutionary politics. To achieve this, it examines the relationship between revolutionary strategy and imagination in a previous era discussing a short paragraph in Lenin's *What is to be Done?*, in which Lenin refers to Dmitry Pisarev. By comparing Lenin and Pisarev, the essay highlights two contrasting approaches within revolutionary Marxism, characterised by two divergent conceptions of art. Nevertheless, both sought to relate art to revolutionary politics. The essay ends by asking whether this is possible today, and, if not what this means for the project of Marxist aesthetics—does it even exist?

Keywords: *Marxism; Aesthetics; V.I. Lenin; D. Pisarev; Modern Art*

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> *The beginner who has learned a new language always translates it back to his mother tongue, but he assimilates the spirit of the new language and expresses himself in it freely only when he moves in it without recalling the old and when he forgets his native tongue.*
>
> —Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*

To be frank, there is no such thing as *a* Marxist aesthetics, and it would be difficult to agree on how a Marxist approaches aesthetics, both historically and today. There is a huge difference between, say, Georgy Plekhanov and Herbert Marcuse. Indeed, Marcuse himself ended up with more than one "aesthetic"—his critique of the affirmative character of culture during the inter-war years was replaced in the 1960s by an idea of sensual liberation through aesthetic experience. Most people who identify as Marxists probably spend little time thinking about aesthetics or art, preferring to relegate signifying practices to the ghostly realms of the superstructure, even though one could argue that Marx's analysis of the commodity and the capitalist mode of production has much to do with sensuous perception; that is, aesthetics in the original Greek sense of the term. In this context, the notion of alienation immediately springs to mind. As most Marxists know, Marx was fond of quoting classical literature, but he himself never found the time to write about aesthetics, like Hegel did, nor did he write his planned book on Balzac or engage with art theory. Obviously, there are a few pages here and there where he talks about artistic expression and literature, and he sketched certain guidelines for the study of the relationship between modes of production and forms of consciousness, but this in no way constitutes a Marxist theory of aesthetics.[1] So, in a certain sense, it is no surprise that aesthetics has always been and remains a fringe phenomenon of Marxism. Today, browsing through the pages of journals like *Historical Materialism*, *Rethinking Marxism*, or *Actuel Marx*, to mention just three contemporary scholarly journals devoted to Marxist thought and analysis, it is noticeable how few articles deal with aesthetics in the broad sense, or engage in discussions of historical or contemporary art. In the mid-1970s, Perry Anderson famously

argued that, after World War Two, Marxism in the West took a turn away from economics and politics, and towards culture and art. Nonetheless, aesthetics has never emerged as a primary field of Marxist studies.[2] This is even evident from Anderson's "own" journal, *New Left Review*, one of the most important Anglo-American Left journals since the early 1960s. This is not to say that *NLR* does not include articles on aesthetics, art, or cultural issues, but they are few and far between, and rarely feature prominently.[3]

Answering the question of what constitutes a Marxist aesthetics will, of course, require an assessment of the state of Marxism in general. That is, of course, not really possible in a short journal piece, but I'll take a stab at it by linking together the questions of Marxist aesthetics and revolutionary strategy. In doing so, I argue that both are in fact post-Marxist, because they are incapable of thinking about history and revolutionary break in conjunction.

There are obviously many different, even competing Marxisms, both scattered across academia and outside of its walls. In 1983, Stuart Hall said that "you have only to come into any public meeting and you can see the fifty-seven varieties."[4] There are no doubt far fewer now than when Hall sought to think a "Marxism without guarantees" after being confronted with a new kind of Right-wing politics, which unsettled the handed-down certainties of Marxist analysis—in which economic crisis led to working-class mobilisation. Nonetheless, Marxism seems to have acquired a new relevance since 2008 and the financial crisis.

When I came of age as a PhD student in Denmark in the early noughties, writing a dissertation on the Situationists, there were few self-declared Marxists and it was even difficult to find people working within "shouting distance of Marxism."[5] Danish academia might have been a particularly grim example of a deep anti-Marxist tendency.[6] Here, the so-called postmodern turn enabled an almost complete abandonment of totalising analysis in favour of all kinds of detailed studies or analyses of communicative reason or systems theory. However, even at the renowned School of Criticism and Theory at Cornell, where I spent the summer of 2001, just two months before 9/11, Marxism was a relatively marginal phenomenon among the many smart students, who were more likely to know Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy inside out, than the trajectories of Lenin, Karl Korsch, and Jacques Camatte.

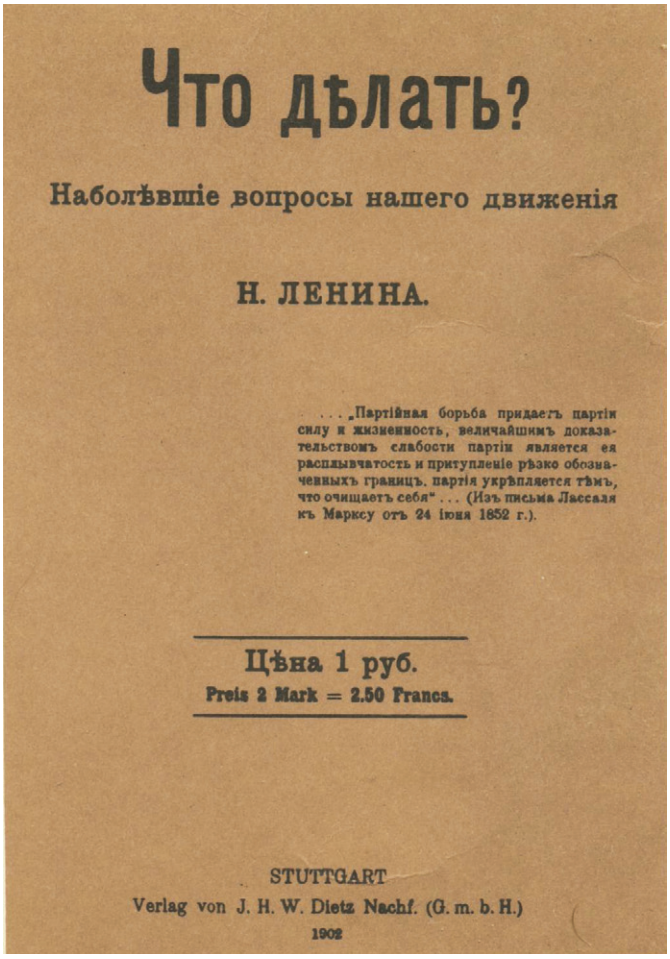
This has definitively changed. Especially after 2008, Marx has again become a respectable object of study, and Marxism has once more become a scientific method one can apply in most disciplines—preferably in combination with other methods, it appears to me. However, even in this apparent revival, Marxism as a movement dedicated to a revolutionary upheaval of capitalist society is rarely present. Few today dare pose the questions Edward Said sought

to ask in the early 1980s, in "the age of Reagan": "Who writes? For whom is the writing being done? In what circumstances?"[7] As Stathis Kouvelakis writes, the "renewed acceptance of Marx's vision of capitalism […] goes together with an almost consensual rejection of any version of the political project defended by its author."[8] Few are engaged in the nitty-gritty of founding a party, however imaginary, and few participated in the NON Kongress in Berlin in June 2024, which united the remains of "the radical current" in the old centre of accumulation.[9] And almost no-one has gone off to fight the Israeli state's genocide in Gaza. The contrast to the number of Leftists who went to fight in the Spanish Civil War is staggering.

The following is intended as a somewhat heavy-handed contribution to a discussion of the current status and meaning of Marxist aesthetics. I'm aware most readers will likely find it to be a somewhat futile, breast-beating gesture, and so be it. This is an attempt to connect Marxist aesthetics to an extra-academic outside. In order to arrive there, I'll look at the relation between revolutionary strategy and imagination in a previous period. I start by discussing a short paragraph in Lenin's *What Is to Be Done?* which relates the question of dreams to the question of revolution, and by juxtaposing Lenin with a couple of Russian Nihilists, Nikolay Chernyshevsky and Dmitry Pisarev. I will then pose a question about the relationship between Marxist aesthetics and the notion of a revolutionary subject today. Put bluntly, the question is something akin to "Can a Marxist aesthetics exist without the notion of a historical subject?" To which the answer is "Not really."

Lenin's Dream

"We should dream!"[10] These are, somewhat surprisingly, the words of Lenin, in his 1902 book *What Is to Be Done?* Surprisingly, because as is well known, Lenin's answer to the question posed by the book's title was not dreaming, but organisation, professional revolutionaries, and "konspiratsiia" (the art of not getting arrested). In order to advance a socialist revolution in Czarist Russia, it was necessary to organise and to establish a revolutionary party composed of skilled professional revolutionaries who could lead the revolutionary struggle and knew how to avoid getting caught by the Czar's secret police. At this time, in 1901 and 1902, when he wrote the book, Lenin was not only a member of the Russian Social Democratic Party but headed up its Bolshevik faction. *What Is to Be Done?* is Lenin at his most straight-forwardly social democratic. The proposal to set up an underground revolutionary avant-garde party tasked with distributing an illegal, all-Russian socialist newspaper was in fact an attempt to follow the example of the German Social Democratic Party, which itself had



1. The cover of V.I. Lenin: *What is to be Done?* (Stuttgart: Dietz, 1902).

been an illegal organisation dodging the censorship of the Kaiser. As Lars T. Lih shows in his comprehensive analysis of Lenin's book, Lenin's professional revolutionaries were tasked with mobilising workers and peasants in a situation of brutal repression.[11]

The title, *What Is to Be Done?*, was a quote familiar to all Russian intellectuals at that time, not least the ones affiliated to the different components of the Russian Social Democratic Party. This stems from the fact that it was also the title of an 1863 novel written by the revolutionary journalist and philosopher Nikolay Chernyshevsky.[12] The novel had left a distinct impression not only on the Russian nihilists, among whom Chernyshevsky was a leading light in the 1860s, but also on subsequent generations of rebellious Russian youths in the early twentieth century in the Second International, and in revolutionary circles in Russia and across Europe. One such youth was a young Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, better known as V. or N. Lenin.[13]

Chernyshevsky wrote the novel while imprisoned in the Peter and Paul Fortress in Saint Petersburg, convicted of plotting against the Czar following student and peasant unrest.[14] It was, in many ways, a political manifesto in novel form, in which Chernyshevsky uses various literary strategies to avoid censorship. The novel is therefore characterised by a fractured narrative, where Chernyshevsky constantly interrupts the story, starts again, asks the reader questions or contradicts the plot, all in an attempt to project a revolutionary perspective. It also stands out among contemporary Russian novels due to its combination of "destruction" and "affirmation."

The novel tells the story of a young woman, Vera Pavlova, who *pro forma* marries her brother's tutor to avoid an arranged marriage, and becomes involved in the revolutionary struggle, dedicating herself to overturning the existing order. Like Turgenev's Bazarov, she is a nihilist, but she is also engaged in the construction of a new world, in which individual emancipation and destructive revolutionary action are fused with collective organisation. She thus establishes a seamstress co-operative with a number of other women, based on cooperation and early socialist principles—Chernyshevsky was an avid reader of Fourier, Saint-Simon, and Louis Blanc—such as from each according to their abilities and no owner profit. There is also an educational aspect to the workroom, with the women reading aloud while sewing, as well as collectively visiting the opera and engaging in recreational activities in the countryside as a group. They function in a kind of proto-communist Rancière-Gauny fashion, in which "ordinary" people appropriate artistic means and show themselves capable of aesthetic appreciation.[15]

Chernyshevsky's book was not only intended as a literary account of revolutionary life, via Vera's liberation and dedication to the revolution, but also as an example of literature's ability to be used in revolutionary propaganda. He was pointing "the way to the society of the future through a work of imaginative literature," but also using literature as a way of circumventing censorship.[16] As such, it was an experiment in finding ways to communicate the new revolutionary credo of socialism to workers and peasants—the novel as a propaganda tool. It was meant to show how the world could and should be, how it would be possible for everybody to live differently. As Chernyshevsky writes: "What we have shown you will not soon be in its full development […]. Many generations will pass before what you foresee is fully realized […] [but] at least you saw it, you know the future. It's light, it's beautiful."[17]

In the 1860s and 1870s, the novel played an important role for Russian populists as a representational moulding of revolutionary life. In 1902, Lenin adopted the title to explain the tasks of the Russian Social Democrats in the new century. While Lenin took his title from a novel, Chernyshevsky's only work of fiction, art does not feature in Lenin's account of the tasks of the newly established Russian Social Democratic Party.

As the re-purposing of Chernyshevsky's title shows, Lenin was not indifferent to art. In fact, he was very fond of literature, he read Virgil and Ovid and several other classics, as well as Goethe, and he often invoked Russian literature in texts and speeches, ranging from Ivan Goncharov's seemingly apolitical novel *Oblomov*, about the indolence of the landed gentry, to Tolstoy's depictions of the collective anger of the peasants. In situations of intense repression and censorship, literature and literary criticism had throughout the nineteenth century been one of the means by which revolutionaries could engage in political discussions. It was politics by other means. Lenin was perfectly aware of that, as is evident from the title of his 1902 book. Literature, art, and literary criticism were important tasks.

Lenin did not devote himself to art criticism in the manner of previous generations of Russian revolutionaries, like Chernyshevsky, Dmitry Pisarev, or Alexander Herzen, but after the failed 1905 revolution he took the time to write a series of articles on Tolstoy. In these articles, he sought to inscribe Tolstoy in the revolutionary movement, arguing that the author's mystical Christianity should not detract from his novels' powerful depiction of the contradictions of Russian society.[18] Tolstoy had illuminated the material basis of the 1905 revolution like no other. Lenin contends that while Tolstoy himself clearly did not understand the revolution or the nature of the class struggle, his novels nonetheless mirrored "the motive forces" of the Russian revolution.[19] Not unlike the workers, with their "trade-union consciousness," Tolstoy was halfway

revolutionary. However, when embedded in the right context, his novels would take on a truly revolutionary significance. Lenin himself, of course, could provide that context. The same held true in the political arena—the right intellectual leadership could combat the domination of capital.

As Lenin explains in the 1908 text "Leo Tolstoy as the Mirror of the Russian Revolution": "Our revolution […] is an extremely complicated thing."[20] Not everybody knew the laws of history. This was the case for workers and peasants in Russia at the time, but it was especially so for the old aristocratic writer Tolstoy. Yet Tolstoy nonetheless successfully mirrored "the peasant bourgeois revolution," the process by which the peasant masses were being deprived of their land and transformed into "free and small equal peasants," which took place in the Russian countryside in the last third of the nineteenth century.[21] In his novels, Tolstoy was capable of drawing incomparable pictures of Russian life, and exposing the profound contradictions between "the growth of wealth" and "the growth of poverty."[22] In Lenin's analysis, Tolstoy was a revolutionary writer—unbeknownst to himself, of course:

> Among the mass of those who are directly making and participating in it [the revolution] there are many social elements which have also obviously [like Tolstoy] not understood what is taking place and which also [like Tolstoy] stand aloof from the real historical tasks with which the course of events has confronted them.[23]

Tolstoy had provided a powerful depiction of the development of capitalism, and its dramatic and brutal consequences in the countryside, not least in order to effect the next stage of the revolutionary process, in which the party and its professional revolutionaries had to step up.

Lenin's answer to Chernyshevsky's question, as well as Tolstoy's "revolutionary flabbiness," was organisation. He wrote that the workers' spontaneous resistance to poor working conditions must be expanded and organised within the framework of a political party consisting of professional revolutionaries who would direct the class struggle and agitate among the workers. In 1900, Lenin founded the illegal annual journal *Iskra*, which was printed abroad and distributed in Russia through local secret networks. To a large extent, *Iskra* was modelled on the journal *Sovremennik*, in which Chernyshevsky's novel was initially published. Lenin's plan was to transform the network that distributed *Iskra* into a national party modelled on the German Social Democratic Party, which before 1906 was the leading revolutionary Marxist party in Europe. However, due to the autocratic rule of the Czar—a savagely authoritarian system in which any revolutionary risked being imprisoned and sent to Siberia—the immediate goal for Lenin and the revolutionary socialists in Russia at this time

was to achieve the political freedom to propagandise in everyday life, just as the German party had successfully done in 1890.

At the same time, however, it was also important for Lenin to warn against the development he observed in the German organisation in the new century, where Eduard Bernstein had slowly but surely replaced Marx and Engels' idea of the class struggle as proletarian revolution and the abolition of capitalism with a reformist policy in which the revolution disappeared in favour of improvements in workers' economic conditions. As Bernstein put it, "the movement is everything, the goal is nothing."[24] Although the Russian Social Democrats were prepared to fight against the Czar's despotism and for political freedom, Lenin insisted that this was only the first step in the revolutionary process. Upholding the revolutionary perspective was paramount. Parliamentary participation was by no means off the table, but Lenin was unwavering on the necessity of insurrectionary politics. The goal still had to be the simultaneous abolition of private property and the nation state, as Marx and Engels had argued in *The Communist Manifesto*.[25] That could not be achieved through a "bourgeois" revolution, by gaining access to national democracy and electoral success, as a socialist transformation was not achievable through reformism and constitutional politics.[26] Lenin wanted to establish a particular kind of organisation, one that could lead the working class in a *coup d'état*. Without proper leadership, the proletariat would not become a truly revolutionary force.[27]

For Lenin, the question "What is to be done?" is formulated as a purely "political" question with an organisational answer—the all-knowing party. Bereft of class consciousness, the working class needs revolutionaries equipped with socialist consciousness. "Socialist consciousness is something introduced into the proletarian class struggle from without and not something that arose within it spontaneously," says Karl Kautsky, as approvingly quoted by Lenin.[28] The workers' un-coordinated economic struggles must be transformed into a purposive class struggle by the revolutionary organisation, comprised of the select few who properly understand the situation. The obvious conclusion is that the workers themselves are not capable of revolution. They need help, they need the party. As Paul Mattick puts it: "In Lenin's view, the more forceful the spontaneous movement, the greater would be the need to supplement and direct it with organized, planned party-activity."[29] The mass of workers must be saved from themselves by a dedicated minority who act as the harbingers of a better future. Lenin is basically proposing a theory of the assumption of leadership over the unconscious masses.

In contrast, revolutionaries like Luxemburg, Anton Pannekoek, Otto Rühle, and later Debord were opposed to Lenin's answer; instead, they argued that social revolution cannot be a matter of leadership. If the goal of the revolution

is to end the domination of humans over other humans, how can it require leadership as a first step? If the revolution starts out by reproducing the passivity of the existing world, then that is a problem. The consequences of this voluntaristic idea, in which there is always a structural gap between what the proletariat could know and what it actually knows, became painstakingly clear more than fifteen years later, after October 1917, when the Bolsheviks took power and completely disregarded the councils in Saint Petersburg. The rest, as they say, is history.[30]

However, the revolution was a question of organisation. In this context, it is perhaps somewhat surprising that Lenin concludes his extended argument for the formation of cadres of professional revolutionaries who will lead the proletariat with a call for dreaming: "We should dream!" He differentiates between different kinds of dreams—some of which are necessary in the revolutionary struggle, others are not. The invocation of dream-work takes place towards the end of *What Is to Be Done?*, where Lenin explains how *Iskra* can become a weekly magazine circulated throughout Russia. In accordance with the idea of the necessity of a party, at this point in the text Lenin formulates a vision of *Iskra* as a forerunner of a national Social Democratic Party:

> This newspaper would become an enormous pair of smith's bellows that would fan every spark of the class struggle and of popular indignation into a general conflagration. Around what is in itself still a very innocuous and very small, but regular and common, effort, in the full sense of the word, a regular army of tried fighters would systematically gather and receive their training.[31]

His professional revolutionaries would nurture close contact with the masses by selling the newspaper, thus preparing the ground for the coming mobilisation.

Lenin concludes the passage with the following formulation: "That is what we should dream of!"[32] He then goes on to imagine objections to this formulation that may be raised by the editors of the rival social-democratic newspaper *Rabocheye Dyelo*: "Has a Marxist any right at all to dream?"[33] This is not a trick question; Lenin admits it sent a cold shiver down his spine and made him "wish for nothing but a place to hide in." He quickly musters an answer, in the form of a quote. This time, he cites the revolutionary journalist, polemic and literary critic Dmitry Pisarev, another leading figure in Russian nihilism in the 1860s, who died at the age of twenty-seven after serving four years in prison, together with Chernyshevsky, for criticising the despotic rule of the Romanovs. The quote reads:

> My dream may run ahead of the natural march of events or may fly off at a tangent in a direction in which no natural march of events will ever proceed. In the first case my dream will not cause any harm; it may even support and

> augment the energy of the working class… There is nothing in such dreams that would distort or paralyse labour-power. On the contrary, if man were completely deprived of the ability to dream in this way, if he cowuld not from time to time run ahead and mentally conceive, in an entire and completed picture, the product to which his hands are only just beginning to lend shape, then I cannot at all imagine what stimulus there would be to induce man to undertake and complete extensive and strenuous work in the sphere of art, science, and practical endeavour… The rift between dreams and reality causes no harm if only the person dreaming believes seriously in his dream, if he attentively observes life, compares his observation with his castles in the air, and if, generally speaking, he works conscientiously for the achievement of his fantasies. If there is some connection between dreams and life then all is well.[34]

Lenin takes issue with the crude economism of the *Rabocheye Delo* group, and wants the dream, the utopia, which he considers a necessary part of the revolutionary project. He values both Tolstoy's literary depictions of the destructive transformations in the countryside and a dream that outlines what is to be done. But Lenin also understands Pisarev to mean that only the first kind of dream, the one that runs "ahead of the natural march of events," is useful in the revolutionary struggle. Revolutionaries should dream about the world they struggle to make; the realisation of the Marxist programme. However, Lenin is suspicious of dreams that "fly off at a tangent." As Lih has pointed out, that's not actually what Pisarev meant.[35] Pisarev does not reject the second kind of dream, even though it goes off "in a direction in which no natural march of events will ever proceed." The second dream, which we might call the wild or nihilistic dream, is as important as the first, precisely because it goes further, because it is destructive, not grounded in the present world. Rather, it negates the materially existing world, effectively paving the way for imagining otherwise.

Lenin and Pisarev were both dedicated to the revolutionary upheaval of Russian society, and both wanted art to be "objectively" partisan. But whereas Lenin had a voluntaristic understanding of the revolutionary struggle—that leadership is necessary to organise the fight against the capitalist world of exploitation and misery—the nihilist Pisarev was first and foremost dedicated to the destruction of the existing world. He was a kind of artistic version of Sergey Necaev. Lenin did not dismiss dreaming altogether, nor was he a dogmatic scientist. Instead, his approach was characterised by a pedagogical take—it was a question of educating the revolutionaries on the matter of who should lead the working class, a question of giving direction to destructive energies. For Lenin, both dreams and art could be tools in that programme. With the right kind of consciousness, and the proper understanding of the class struggle, its direction, and organisation, one could dream, use the dream as an instrument of measurement, take aim, and then get to work on realising it. Pisarev, on the other hand, was not afraid of wild dreams. His project was nihilistic—the

existing world was to be destroyed. "In short, here is the ultimatum of our camp: what can be smashed must be smashed."[36]

For Pisarev, this campaign of destruction extended to art. He saw art as a bourgeois phenomenon, which therefore had no special value, and had to go—along with more or less everything else, including Tolstoy. In many of his utterances, Pisarev comes off as a kind of proto-avant-gardist: "That which is dead and rotten will crumble down into the grave of its own; our task is merely to give it the final thrust and bury their stinking corpses in the mud."[37] It is quite telling that in the mid-1960s, the people who went on to become King Mob, who later constituted the core of the short-lived British section of the Situationist International, translated a text by Pisarev.[38] They recognised a kindred spirit in the Russian nihilist who vehemently attacked art as useless. As Pisarev phrased it, he "would rather be a Russian shoemaker than a Russian Raphael."[39]

Zooming out, we might say that Lenin and Pisarev represent two strands within Marxist aesthetics. Lenin is interested in literature in so far as it depicts a contradictory world that has to be remade, and art mirrors a social reality that has to be transformed (by the proletariat, under the leadership of the professional revolutionaries). As Lenin writes in the previously cited article on Tolstoy:

> Tolstoy reflected the pent-up hatred, the ripened striving for a better lot, the desire to get rid of the past—and also the immature dreaming, the political inexperience, the revolutionary flabbiness. Historical and economic conditions explain both the inevitable beginning of the revolutionary struggle of the masses and their unpreparedness for the struggle, their Tolstoyan non-resistance to evil, which was a most serious cause of the defeat of the first revolutionary campaign.[40]

Marxism strives to show how real processes manifest themselves in thought. This somewhat mechanistic account of art is part and parcel of Lenin's pedagogical conception of the revolutionary project.[41]

Pisarev, who did not develop a fully formed aesthetic but is here seen as a prefiguration of a later Left-communist or ultra-Leftist avant-garde position, sought to question the received category of art. As a modern aesthetic artefact, art was tied to a particular class subjectivity—the bourgeoisie. Art therefore could not content itself with dreaming of another world but had to contain its own critique. The dream had to self-destruct and become more radical; hence Pisarev's second nihilistic dream. This line of thinking is more in line with the Marx who writes about the division of labour and the way capitalist production impedes the free development of mankind: "The exclusive concentration of artistic talent in particular individuals, and its suppression in the broad mass,

which is bound up with this, is a consequence of division of labour."[42] The revolutionary perspective therefore called for an end to specialisation. It was not a question of leading the masses or introducing the right kind of consciousness from the outside. In the context of art and literature, the task was to radically critique the separation between artist and spectator, between writer and reader. As Marx wrote in *The German Ideology*: "In a communist society there are no painters but only people who engage in painting among other activities."[43]

This was the perspective that artists and writers associated with the Communist Workers' Party of Germany (KAPD) and groups like the surrealists and the Situationists sought to put into practice in the twentieth century, by repeatedly exiting the art world and problematising the artistic and social division of labour. The revolutionary upheaval of capitalist society was not some process of reform, in which workers were first recruited to participate under the leadership of a Leninist vanguard and then put in charge of running the production. The revolution was something completely different—a kind of aesthetic *Gesamtkunstwerk*, in which everybody would participate right away. As a privileged activity reserved for a select group of people, art had to kill itself in order to be realised as a poetic life. As the Situationists put it, the reconceptualisation of art as a cultural activity was "an experimental method for constructing daily life."[44]

It is hard to find more contrasting samples of revolutionary communist strategies than Lenin and the SI or the surrealists. What they did have in common, however, was a shared idea of historical necessity—they were convinced that the proletariat was a progressive force that not only made it possible to analyse the movements of history, but also moved history onwards. This underlying necessity expressed itself in revolutionary consciousness, and could be expressed as revolutionary theory and praxis. In the sphere of art, "good" art was necessarily partisan. I therefore propose that *Marxist aesthetics* consists of a materialist analysis intermixed with a revolutionary strategy based on a notion of historical development. My wager is that this form of aesthetics has disappeared. We are now in a completely different situation. Or, formulated as a question (one that is no doubt somewhat heavy-handed, at least when seen from the perspective of dominant academic Marxism): Is Marxist aesthetics possible at all without this historical dimension?

After the Revolution

As all activists and many Marxists know, we now have a problem. The revolution has evaporated, and it is no longer present as a historical perspective. This is the story of how Marxism ended up empty-handed after having gone through a series of radical gestures of self-critique, especially in the 1960s and 1970s. This is a shared reading.

As argued by Left-communists like Jacques Camatte and Temps Critiques, the revolutionary project of the proletariat is dead.[45] For the late Mario Tronti, figurehead of Italian Workerism, the revolutionary subject has dissipated, and the working classes have transformed into a democratic mass.[46] Writing from a Trotskyist perspective, Enzo Traverso describes the exhaustion of twentieth-century communism.[47] In her highly affirmative account of new protest movements across the world, Susan Buck-Morss, a Benjaminian, reluctantly admits that "the emergence of a revolutionary subject is not to be found in classical Marxist terms."[48] According to the nihilist communist duo Monsieur Dupont: "There was a revolutionary movement but it collapsed because it turned out not to be a revolutionary movement at all but an ideological mystification of social and economic relations and processes."[49]

The global wave of class struggle that broke out in the centres of accumulation in the late 1960s was crushed and replaced with what we call, using a somewhat simplistic shorthand, neoliberal globalisation. The militant workers in Paris, Turin, the Midlands, and Detroit were dispersed and subjected to processes of automation, and their jobs ultimately transferred elsewhere. Unemployment returned, which disciplined the unruly subjects, and the state shifted from being welfare-oriented to being the authoritarian state it had always also been (for minority groups). The result of these processes was dramatic. By the end of the neoliberal counter-revolution, the worker had disappeared as a culture of opposition, and is today primarily invoked by the Right or by racist social democrats, via slogans such as "Make America Great Again" or "Danish jobs for Danish workers."[50]

Contemporary philosophers such as Alain Badiou and Jacques Rancière are typical figures of this situation. In a philosophical scene characterised by the abandonment of a notion of revolutionary action, they stand out by virtue of their insistence on a radical notion of political transgression. They conceive of politics as a singular event that completely breaks with the existing world and escapes from any kind of historical and sociological determination. In this way, they uphold the idea of a revolutionary break, but consider it to have lost its connection to history. As Rancière explains, politics is an incomprehensible gesture without sociological or socio-economic foundation:

> Political subjectivization is the enactment of equality—or the handling of a wrong—by people who are together to the extent that they are between. It is a crossing of identities, relying on a crossing of names: names that link the name of a group or class to the name of no group or no class, a being to a nonbeing or a not-yet-being.[51]

Politics occurs when all of a sudden, seemingly out of nowhere, people decide to object to the way they have been inscribed in the social order, and refuse the way they are identified, the role they have been given.

This gesture is not explicable as the result of some sociological fact or class affiliation, but seems to happen spontaneously. All of a sudden, thousands of people clad in the yellow vests that are mandatory in cars in France were occupying roundabouts in the countryside. They did this for months. President Macron eventually withdrew the proposed tax increase on diesel that, according to the media, commentators, and sociologists, had mobilised the protesters. However, this did not put an end to the *gilets jaunes* protests. As Rancière put it, "this movement that has surprised all expectations has no other reasons than those that feed the normal order of things."[52] His point is that the protesters, who for the most part had not previously been politically active, were engaged in a more fundamental act of opposition, one that cannot be reduced to a question of taxes. They were not protesting as rural workers who could not afford to fuel their cars to go to work, they were precisely refusing their classification by the political system. "Revolts do not have reasons; they do however have a logic. And this consists precisely in breaking the frameworks in which the reasons for order and disorder—and the people in a position to judge these—are normally perceived."[53]

For Rancière, as for Badiou, albeit using a slightly different vocabulary, politics is a question of a singular moment that cannot be inscribed in or derived from history. They wrestle politics free from actions that take place in the "normal" sphere of politics, the parliament and congress—that is, the reproduction of that which already exists—and instead position it as a radical, transgressive gesture that shatters the existing order, but one that it is no longer possible to anchor in history. The separation between the two forms of politics has become absolute. This is obviously a radical departure from a Marxist perspective, which is historical through and through. As Karl Korsch, for example, writes: "Marx comprehends all things social in terms of a definite historical epoch. He criticises all the categories of the bourgeois theorists of society in which this specific character has been effaced."[54]

Badiou and Rancière are perhaps the best two examples of a broader development, in which history and revolution have become disconnected, and where activism and philosophy seem incapable of somehow merging into a global

project of revolutionary transformation. This is not solely the case with Western Marxism, nor is it some local Parisian phenomenon; this development has also taken place elsewhere. As David Scott writes, we are presented with the exhaustion of "the triumphalist narratives of national liberation, anti-imperialism and socialism."[55] He writes specifically about the postcolonial situation of Jamaica, but we might easily extend his characterisation to other parts of the so-called Global South, such as North Africa and the Middle East. The emergence of fundamentalist Islamist movements across the region, and in places like Egypt and Gaza, has to be understood in the framework of the collapse of state-led modernising projects such as Nasser and the PLO, which fell apart either due to internal contradictions, as was to a large extent the case with Nasser's United Arab Republic, or as a result of imperialist and Zionist manoeuvres, as with the emergence of Hamas in Palestine. Describing this as a tragedy, Scott argues that, as a mode of emplotment, the prism of tragedy better accounts for our present situation than romance. The hoped-for future has itself become part of the past. As he puts it, "the problem about the former colonial worlds for the present is not the superficial one of finding better answers to existing questions but the more fundamental one of altering the questions concerning the relation between past and present that have organized our expectations of possible futures."[56] The progressive redemption of anticolonialism, in which past, present, and future were linked in a narrative of vindication, has been lost.

On the streets, this is visible in most kinds of activism today, from anti-fascism to climate activism, from CrimethInc to Ni una menos. Most of these are characterised by a distrust of—if not outright contempt for—what is conceived as grand revolutionary theory. Paraphrasing Hall, quoting Marx, we can say that we now have many determinations, but no (rich) totality.[57] In activist milieus, it is rare to find mentions of revolution, communist or otherwise. Obviously, capital, capitalism, and the capitalist mode of production are invoked, alongside other related terms, such as the Capitalocene, but in almost all cases this occurs without the sense of inevitable historical process and historical possibility that these terms once carried. Further, more recent terms, such as racial capitalism and pharmacopornographic capitalism, are in themselves a testament to a shift away from Marxist revolutionary theory. The expansion of the term "capitalism" points to the necessity of supplementing what is perceived as an excessively narrow focus on wage labour with a focus on other forms of domination. Exploitation is certainly important, but what about racism, sexism, ableism, or other kinds of domination and exclusion?[58] The ability to fight on many different fronts is important. Activists are sceptical of the hierarchisation that characterised revolutionary theory, in which all struggles were somehow supposed to be subordinated to one central struggle (against exploitation), and where certain figures were presented as the bearers of historical truth—first and foremost, the industrial worker. But there are no secondary struggles.

The critique of a previous mode of conceptualising struggles in capitalist society highlighted how Marxism not only made certain forms of domination and attempts to counter these invisible, but actually repressed them. The emergence of feminism, of anti-, post-, and decolonialism, and of Indigenous thinking, as well as ecological framings and a host of other theories (or, rather, problem-spaces) all testify to this repression. All insist on the specificity of a struggle or a situation, characterised by specific problems and challenges that must be dealt with as such in situ, preferably by those directly affected. The flipside of this development is, of course, the disappearance of the sense of unity between struggles—that is, the disappearance of a global revolutionary theory, and the notion of a revolutionary transformation carried out by a revolutionary subject of some sort. While activists mobilise and transform themselves, and perform all sorts of actions "topically," they never transform the society that gave rise to the problems that activated them in the first place.

Within a theoretical setting, we can date this shift to the aftermath of May '68 or *Maggio strisciante*, when a whole generation of thinkers—including Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, but also Left-communists like Camatte and Furio di Paola—sought to rethink militancy outside of the framework of Marxist revolutionary politics. In the 1960s, the Situationists sought to expand and readjust Hegelian-Marxist thought to new circumstances, yet continued to rely on the notion of the proletariat. However, Foucault and Deleuze developed new conceptions that were supposed to replace Marxist revolutionary theory. For Foucault, the fundamental problem with Marxism—both the versions Marx developed and the later variants, including those of Lenin, Sartre, and even Louis Althusser, who heavily inspired Foucault—was that it conceptualised power "monolithically." The theory of the "microphysics of power" that emerged during the 1970s was an attempt to think and act politically in a way that differed from the teleological schemas of Marxism. According to Foucault, Marxism only understood liberation movements with reference to an idea of a total overthrow of power and capitalist society—the great catharsis, in which the subjugated of yesterday become the rulers of tomorrow, and the local working classes transform themselves into the emancipated proletariat that liberates humanity from capital, such that womxn becomes (a whole and authentic) human being.

The problem with Marxism was the attempt to frame all struggles within its "original" oppositions—capital-labour, bourgeoisie-working-class (which Marxism simultaneously promises to redeem through revolution). May '68 showed that this model did not account for the many different kinds of struggles that were taking place. A changed model of rebellion required a changed analysis of power. Foucault proposed that the notion of class struggle be replaced by the notion of resistance [*résistance*], as "an action upon an action."[59] Against the

monolithic idea of class struggle, led by the party organising the class, Foucault offered an "analytics of power" and the notion of a dispersed power—"the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organisation," as he puts it in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*.[60] Power is not to be conceived as a general system of domination exercised by capital or the bourgeoisie over the working class, the effects of which permeate the whole body of society. Rather, power is a much more dynamic relationship. It is not a substance or a property possessed by some, but a relationship that takes its starting point in freedom, in the sense of resistance to power, where traditional binaries—for example, active-passive, master-slave, possessor (of power)-deprived (of power)—dissolve in favour of the omnipresence of power: "it [power] is produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another."[61]

The Marxist model of revolution had to be abandoned. The events of May '68 revealed the emergence of new political subjectivities that did not fit the Marxist model of class and party. The movements of 1968 did not try and seize control over the state apparatus in order to start the construction of a proletarian state power. In the vocabulary of Deleuze and Guattari, they were a-subjective forms of desire that overthrew the societal order by becoming more and more intense. The dialectical analysis of Marxism was inadequate precisely because "a social field does not contradict itself, but […] leaks out on all sides. The first thing it does is escape in all directions."[62]

This shift—from the historical subject and dialectics to the irreducible counterparts of power relations; from class struggle and revolution to resistance and permanent social war; from exploitation to discipline and subjectivisation—was Foucault's way of going beyond Marxism. It was intended as an attempt to develop a new critical analysis of society with a view to intervention. The emphasis was no longer solely on the proletariat's exploitation by capital, but on the many dispersed forms of resistance—what Foucault called "transversal resistance"—that were emerging.

Deleuze's and Foucault's displacement of class struggle and the proletariat paved the way for a different mode of activism and replaced the serious and self-important militancy of Marxist revolutionaries and militants with joyful or ironic activism. This was especially the case in Italy in 1977, in the creative wings of the Autonomist movement. As Foucault explained in the preface to the 1977 English translation of Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*: "Do not think that one has to be sad in order to be militant, even though the thing one is fighting is abominable."[63] This was an important re-adjustment of revolutionary theory, but in retrospect we can see how the move from class struggle to minoritarian struggles, which we might call the deconstruction of Marxist

2. Jakob Jakobsen and Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen: *This World We Must Leave: An Idea of Revolution,* 2010. Installation view: 2017, Kunsthall Oslo. Photography by Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen.

militancy, within or outside the party, ended up in theory-less activism and non-political theory. As Bernard Aspe writes in *La division politique*, the deconstruction of Marxist militancy was not capable of filling the gap between theory and practice, and this led to an abandonment of thinking about the relation between revolutionary subjectivity and history.[64] The meta-political gesture of deconstruction replaced the revolutionary act of collective struggle.[65]

Farewell to an Idea

Ultimately, the different practices of minoritarian politics did not lead to a programme of revolutionary social change or a radical project aimed at tackling the roots of social misery. Today, we therefore find ourselves in a situation in which Marxism has a hard time living up to its historical project. In the words of Alberto Toscano, we have Marxism without communism; or à la Badiou, communism as an oddly transhistorical idea, where the categorical forms are totally disconnected from concrete history—in other words, communism without Marxism.[66] This is a paradoxical situation, because it means Marxism has finally become just one more discipline or method. For a long time, Marxism was something entirely different. As Eric Hobsbawm writes, Marxism was "both a method of interpreting and of changing" the world.[67] It was not merely a method of analysis, but a material force for transforming and ending capitalist society.[68] Today, this is no longer the case, or, as Allen Hunter puts it, "Marxism creatively informs work within various academic disciplines, but the Marxist notion that there are overarching, total explanations of social reality is considered dubious, if considered at all."[69]

This historical development leaves Marxist aesthetics in a highly contradictory situation. It is by no means irrelevant to spend one's time analysing the gimmick as the main cultural form of late capitalism, trying to develop a *Wertkritik* of the artwork or re-reading Lenin on Tolstoy. Marxist aesthetics should, of course, also be judged by its capacity to illuminate works of art and cultural practices, but this takes place at a great distance from the types of interventions I mentioned earlier, such as those of Chernyshevsky, Lenin, and Pisarev, but also the Situationists during *les Trente Glorieuses*. The lack of practice means that organisational problems seldom come up, as they did for Debord or Khayati in the late 1960s. There's no political hope to be realised. Today, there is something missing.

At the culmination of his long, desperate attempt to locate Lenin in (or apply a historical-materialist vision to) *Las Meninas*, Geoff Waite writes, "however necessary new vision [a materialist vision] is, it will remain an ultimately

insufficient condition for emancipatory social change."[70] In that sense we can paraphrase T. J. Clark's position that Marxist aesthetics is a relic of a long gone past, "a handful of disconnected pieces left over from a holocaust that had utterly wiped out the pieces' context."[71] We merely engage with these pieces as archaeologists, unable to quite understand the terms and vocabulary that were once used. In other words, the best thing Marxist aestheticians can do is perhaps to abandon Marxist aesthetics. This was once obvious for artists and art critics alike, not just the Situationists, but many other artists and critics in the late 1960s. Take, for instance, Carla Lonzi or Lee Lozano, who abandoned art criticism and art, respectively. They deemed it necessary to disappear. That might still be the case.

NOTES

1 The best attempts at reconstructing Marx's views on art and aesthetics are Mikhail Lifshitz, *The Philosophy of Art of Marx*, trans. Ralph B. Winn (Pluto Press, 1973); Margaret A. Rose, *Marx's Lost Aesthetics: Karl Marx and the Visual Arts* (Cambridge University Press, 1984); and Adolfo Sánchez Váquez, *Art and Society: Essays in Marxist Aesthetics*, trans. Maro Riofrancos (Monthly Review Press, 1973). Selections of Marx's texts on art and literature in English translations have been compiled on several occasions, including Lee Baxandall and Stefan Morawski, eds., *Marx & Engels on Literature and Art: A Selection of Writings* (Telos Press, 1972) and M. Krylov, ed., *Marx Engels: On Literature and Art* (Progress Publishers, 1978). In the late 1960s, Karl Werckmeister dismissed the idea of a Marxist aesthetics, arguing that there was a contradiction between aesthetics as an autonomous philosophical discipline and historical materialism. For Werckmeister, the point was to engage in a rigorous ideology critique that immanently criticised the self-understanding of art, proving that the timeless world of art was a product of contemporary consciousness, "a surrogate for a humane civilisation." The task of Marxist art history was to make visible and criticise that function. Otto Karl Werckmeister, *Ende der Ästhetik* (S. Fischer, 1971), 85. Werckmeister's criticism of aesthetics in favour of ideology critique remains vital, but it is marked by a problematic positivist understanding of science, as well as a dubious teleological conception of (art) history.

2 Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (NLB, 1976). Anderson's analysis was obviously intended as a critical assessment—in his opinion, the move towards art and culture was a problem—but in retrospect we can see that it was also an attempt to come to terms with new forms of control in the centre of accumulation. As T. J. Clark once put it, invoking Debord, in a debate with Anderson and Fredric Jameson, Western Marxists sought to analyse the way the political shifted ground and became a question of images during a period of enormous economic growth; see T. J. Clark: "Origins of the Present Crisis," *New Left Review* 2 (2000): 89. It was thus less a question of ditching practice in favour of theory, than of being forced to develop a new practice while still upholding a Marxist theory of historical transformation, as was the case, for example, with the Situationists.

3 From Peter Wollen to Sven Lütticken, a number of Left-leaning critics have written pieces in *NLR*, but they are rarely printed as lead articles. Fredric Jameson would be the one exception to this editorial line.

4 Stuart Hall, "For a Marxism without Guarantees," *Australian Left Review* 84 (1983): 38.

5 Writing in 1992, Hall, in retrospect, describes his own relation to Marxism as, among other things, working "within shouting distance of Marxism": "I entered cultural studies from the New Left, and the New Left always regarded Marxism as a problem, as trouble, as danger, not as a solution." Nonetheless, he was "working with it, working to try to develop Marxism." Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies," in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler (Routledge, 1992), 279.

6 In a recent overview of the different generations of Danish Marxists (the 1970s onwards) from the point of view of a younger generation of self-proclaimed Marxists, Søren Mau labels my generation (he mentions me and two other authors) "'the lost generation' who went against the post- and anti-Marxist Zeitgeist" of Danish Marxism. Søren Mau, "What Is Alive and What Is Dead in Danish Marxism? The Marxist Turn, Its Absent Fathers, and the Future Tasks of a Ruthless Critique of All That Exists," in *Danish Marxism: Past, Present, Future*, ed. Mikkel Flohr (Próblema, 2025), 25.

7 Edward Said, "Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies, and Community," *Critical Inquiry* 9, no. 8 (1982): 1.

8 Stathis Kouvelakis, "Beyond Marxism? The 'Crisis of Marxism' and the Post-Marxist Moment," in *Routledge Handbook of Marxism*, ed. Alex Callinicos, Stathis Kouvelakis, and Lucia Pradella (Routledge, 2021), 338.

9 See https://nonkongress.noblogs.org/.

10 V. I. Lenin, *What Is to Be Done? Burning Questions of Our Movement*, trans. Joe Fineberg and George Hanna (Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961), 509.

11 Lars T. Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered: 'What Is to Be Done?' in Context* (Haymarket, 2008).

12 Nikolai Chernyshevsky, *A Vital Question, or, What Is to be Done?*, trans. Nathan Haskell Dole and S. S. Skidelsky (Thomas Y. Crowell, 1886).

13 According to Lenin's wife, he kept four photographs of five individuals: Marx, Engels, Alexander Herzen, Chernyshevsky, and Dimitri Pisarev. Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered*, 607.

14 For a presentation of nineteenth-century Russian socialism, Chernyshevsky, Pisarev, et al., see Franco Venturi's magisterial *Roots of Revolution: A History of the Populist and Socialist Movements in 19th Century Russia*, trans. Francis Haskell (Alfred A. Knopf, 1960).

15 See Rancière's reading of the carpenter Gauny's letters in *The Nights of Labour: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*, trans. John Drury (Temple University Press, 1989). The difference between Rancière-Gauny and Chernyshevsky is, of course, that Chernyshevsky to a large extent projected Vera's new life into the future. According to Rancière, Gauny refused to postpone communism, and instead sought to live differently now.

16 Charles A. Moser, *Esthetics as Nightmare*: *Russian Literary Theory, 1855–1870* (Princeton University Press, 1989), 44.

17 Chernyshevsky, *Vital Question*, 387.

18 For an account of the way Lenin intervened in the heated discussion of the significance of Tolstoy in the late 1900s, see Stefan Morawski, "Lenin as Literary Theorist," *Science & Society* 29, no. 1 (1965): 2–25.

19 V. I. Lenin, “Leo Tolstoy as the Mirror of the Russian Revolution,” trans. unknown, in *Lenin Collected Works: Volume 15* (Progress Publishers, 1973), 202.

20 Lenin, “Leo Tolstoy,” 202.

21 Lenin, “Leo Tolstoy,” 206.

22 Lenin, “Leo Tolstoy,” 205.

23 Lenin, “Leo Tolstoy,” 202.

24 Eduard Bernstein, *Evolutionary Socialism: A Criticism and Affirmation*, trans. Edith C. Harvey (Schocken, 1961), 204–5.

25 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, trans. Samuel Moore, in *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, vol. VI, *Marx-Engels 1845–1848* (Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 505–6.

26 The literature on the debate about constitutionalist versus insurrectionary strategies within European Social Democracy in the first decades of the twentieth century is huge. I rely on Ralph Miliband, *Marxism and Politics* (Oxford University Press, 1977) and Adam Przeworski, *Capitalism and Social Democracy* (Cambridge University Press, 1985).

27 Lenin was thus trying to distance himself from both Bernstein’s reformism and Luxemburg’s scepticism towards the privileging of the party. She rightly feared that the party would not only control the working class but stifle its militancy and creativity.

28 Lenin, *What is to Be Done?*, 384. Gilles Dauve’s “The ‘Renegade’ Kautsky and His Disciple Lenin,” originally written in 1969, remains a great analysis of Lenin as an orthodox Kautskyian—and later, the only true one, as according to Lenin, Kautsky himself had become a social chauvinist. Available at https://libcom.org/article/renegade-kautsky-and-his-disciple-lenin-gilles-dauve.

29 Paul Mattick, “Spontaneity and Organization,” in *Anti-Bolshevik Communism* (Merlin Press, 1978), 117.

30 Following Marx, Lenin envisaged that the events in Russia would set off a revolutionary chain reaction in Europe. However, the opposite occurred—the revolution was blocked in the advanced West, and instead spread to less developed societies.

31 Lenin, *What Is to Be Done?*, 508.

32 Lenin, *What Is to Be Done?*, 509.

33 Lenin, *What Is to Be Done?*, 509.

34 Lenin, *What Is to Be Done?*, 509–10.

35 Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered*, 608.

36 Dmitry Pisarev, “Skholastika XIX veka,” quoted from Kristian Petrov, “Strike Out, Right and Left! A Conceptual History of 1860s Russian Nihilism,” *Studies in East European Thought* 71 (2019): 89.

37 Dmitry Pisarev, “O brošjure Šedo-Ferroti,” quoted from Petrov, “Strike Out,” 89.

38 David Wise with Stuart Wise, *King Mob: A Critical Hidden Story* (Bread & Circuses, 2014).

39 Dmitry Pisarev, “Razrusheniye estetiki,” quoted from Irene Pearson, “Raphael as Seen by Russian Writers from Zhukovsky to Turgenev,” *The Slavonic and East European Review* 59, no. 3 (1981): 364. As Pearson writes, for Pisarev, Raphael was an example of the way art feeds off and serves luxury and was a “lackey of luxury,” sponsored by the Church and “willingly prostituting his creative thought” (364).

40 Lenin, “Leo Tolstoy,” 208.

41 As Pierre Macherey puts it: “Lenin’s contribution to Marxist aesthetics was intimately connected with the elaboration of a scientific socialism. The literary articles were to play their part in this larger enterprise.” Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production* (Routledge, 2006), 119.

42 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology: Critique of Modern German Philosophy According to Representatives Feuerbach, B. Bauer and Stirner, and of German Socialism According to Its Various Prophets*, trans. Clemens Dutt, in *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, vol. IV, *Marx-Engels 1845–1847* (Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 394.

43 Marx and Engels, *German Ideology*, 394.

44 Situationist International, “Theses on Cultural Revolution,” trans. John Shepley, in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents*, ed. Tom McDonough (MIT Press, 2004), 61.

45 Jacques Camatte, “The Wandering of Humanity,” trans. Freddy Perlman, in *This World We Must Leave and Other Essays* (Autonomedia, 1995), 89–90; Temps Critiques, *Après la révolution du capital* (L’Harmattan, 2007).

46 Mario Tronti, “On Destituent Power” (Interview by Adriano Vinale), trans. Andreas Petrossiants, in *Ill Will*, May 22, 2022, https://illwill.com/on-destituent-power.

47 Enzo Traverso, *Revolution: An Intellectual History* (Verso, 2021), 28–29.

48 Susan Buck-Morss, *Revolution Today* (Haymarket, 2019), 1.

49 Monsieur Dupont, *Nihilist Communism: A Critique of Optimism (The Religious Dogma That States There Will Be an Ultimate Triumph of Good over Evil) in the Far Left* (Ardent Press, 2009), 47.

50 See Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen, “Towards Liberal State Racism in Denmark”, *e-flux* 22 (2011), https://www.e-flux.com/journal/22/67762/on-the-turn-towards-liberal-state-racism-in-denmark/; Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen, *Trump’s Counter-Revolution* (Zero Books, 2018).

51 Jacques Rancière, “Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization,” *October* 61 (1992): 61.

52 Jacques Rancière, “The Virtues of the Inexplicable—apropos the Yellow Vests,” trans. David Broder, Verso Blog, February 12, 2019, https://www.versobooks.com/en-gb/blogs/news/4237-jacques-ranciere-on-the-gilets-jaunes-protests?srsltid=AfmBOoqZDPyOi9jKTIs5PQlqRXnNsLt7S9BkvSXXnxyMBOeGegoMlLWC.

53 Rancière, “Virtues of the Inexplicable.”

54 Karl Korsch, *Karl Marx* (Brill, 2016), 12.

55 David Scott, “The Tragic Vision in Postcolonial Time,” *PMLA* 129, no. 4 (2019), 799.

56 Scott, “Tragic Vision,” 800.

57 Stuart Hall, “Marx’s Notes on Method: A ‘Reading’ of the ‘1857 Introduction,’” in *Selected Writings on Marxism* (Duke University Press, 2021), 37.

58 As Peyman Vahabzadeh puts it: “With new social movements, the defeat of the revolutionary agent came first, as the unique logic of a unilinear History lost its intelligibility.” Peyman Vahabzadeh, *Articulated Experiences: Towards a Radical Phenomenology of Contemporary Social Movements* (SUNY, 2003), 154.

59 Michel Foucault, “Subject and Power,” in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, ed. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1982), 220.

60 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. I, *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (Pantheon Books, 1978), 92.

61 Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 93.

62 Gilles Deleuze, “Desire and Pleasure,” in *Two Regimes of Madness: Texts and Interviews 1975–1975* (semiotext(e), 2023), 127.

63 Michel Foucault, “Preface,” in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (University of Minnesota Press, 1983), xiii.

64 Bernard Aspe, *La division politique* (Nous, 2024), 15–16.

65 The exchange between Jean Genet and Jacques Derrida in 1971 about George Jackson, who was charged with killing a white prison guard, shows both the importance of the deconstruction of political action and its political inefficacy. Derrida showed the difficulty of solidarity, as Parisian intellectuals acted in favour of an imprisoned Black militant in California, but also complicated Genet’s intervention, to the point of suspending it. See Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen, “Yes of course, but… Derrida to Genet on Commitment in Favour of Jackson,” *New Formations* 75 (2011): 140–53.

66 Alberto Toscano, *Terms of Disorder: Keywords for an Interregnum* (Seagull, 2023), 1.

67 Eric Hobsbawm, “Preface,” in *The History of Marxism*, vol. I, *Marxism in Marx’s Day* (Harvester Press, 1982), vi–vvi.

68 Hobsbawm wrote the sentence in the present tense—“Marxism is”—but should probably have put the sentence in the past tense, at least the last part about changing the world. That Hobsbawm could pretend Marxism still had this duality in the early 1980s was no doubt due to his highly problematic positive view of the Soviet Union. To the very end, he upheld a seriously flawed analysis of what he approvingly referred to as “actually existing socialism.” A surprisingly large number of Western Leftists, including Hobsbawm, harboured illusions about the Soviet Union to the very end.

69 Allen Hunter, “Post-Marxism and the New Social Movements,” *Theory and Society* 17, no. 6 (1988): 885.

70 Geoff Waite, “Lenin in ‘Las Meninas’: An Essay in Historical-Materialist Vision,” *History & Theory* 35, no. 3 (1986): 284.

71 T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (Yale University Press, 1999), 1.