

Revolutions: Great and Still and Silent

Thursday 28 January 2021, by [BENSAÏD Daniel](#) (Date first published: 28 April 2007).

[History and Revolution: Refuting Revisionism](#), edited by Mike Haynes and Jim Wolfreys and published by Verso in 2007, collects essays on the English, French, and Russian Revolutions and the body of revisionist historiography – developed or publicized by historians like François Furet, Simon Schama, Orlando Figes, and Conrad Russell – that dominated public conception of them during the high years of “the end of history.”

“Revisionism generally shares a view of revolutions, “the editors write, “as, to paraphrase George Taylor, political acts with social consequences rather than social acts with political consequences.”

The lasting achievement of revisionist historiography of the French Revolution has been to discredit the idea that the event brought about a change in France’s social order. Against the “determinism” of social explanations of historical change, which focus on class antagonisms, revisionists emphasize the primacy of the political. Their tendency to see revolutions as narrow political events rather than broader social transformations means that extraordinary circumstances — war, famine, counter-revolution — figure little in explanations of why protagonists sometimes act in ways which would otherwise be considered extreme or intolerable. The focus on elite activity and the attempt to establish a causal link between ideas and events leaves little room for the active role played by groups who do not form part of the elite. Popular insurgencies, violence and insurrection are no longer integral to revolutionary change but an unnecessary distraction, or worse, a reactionary brake on modernization and peaceful reform.

In the book’s final chapter, reprinted below, [Daniel Bensaïd](#) takes on some of the broader themes of the revisionist literature, picking up Marx’s figure of the old mole to trace the persistence of revolution during even the most apparently static of times.

The party of flowers and nightingales is closely connected with the revolution.

Heinrich Heine, *History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany* [1]

We think a revolution is a straightforward answer, and we know that that too is not correct. These are vulgar simplifications of things.

Paul Valéry

It is the desirability of the revolution which causes a problem today.

Michel Foucault, 1977

I

A few years ago, the journal *Lignes* published a survey about the “desire for revolution.” [2] Desire or need for revolution? This deceitfully juvenile desire, with vague suggestions of 1968, gives off the

bitter scent of a faded flower left on a grave. Desire and longing, these are what are left over when the initial impetus and the original enthusiasm are definitively exhausted: a vague wish without force, covetousness without appetite, a death wish, a ghost of freedom, an erotic whim! A subjectivity enslaved to the impracticable feeling of the possible.

This desire which we believe to be liberated from needs is, ultimately, only the consumerist version of it: the desiring mechanism is, first of all, a consuming mechanism. It is the inverted reflection of the commodity on display, which makes eyes in order to tout for customers who are enticed by the luminous charms of the shop window.

The substitution of desire for need has a theoretical history, namely the replacement of labour-value by want-value by Leon Walras in his *Elements of Pure Economics* in 1874. As marginalism makes value subjective, "the object springs from desire." To measure value, the economist Charles Gide thus replaced the excessively objective term "utility" by that of "desirability." Consciously or not, Foucault drew on this tradition when he enquired, in the late 1970s, whether revolution was still desirable. [3]

II

As for revolution, that is a long story.

Jan Patočka sees in the very idea of revolution "a fundamental feature of modernity." Between Chateaubriand's essay on "revolutions" and that of Hannah Arendt on "Revolution," the idea lines up, through this process of being put in the singular, behind History, Progress, Science or Art. It is inscribed into the new semantic of times, where the past no longer illuminates the future, but where the future illuminates the present. After the French Revolution, revolution becomes the name given to the expectations and hopes of emancipation. Raised to the status of "locomotive of history," it rushes on towards the future, with all its metallic power, until its mechanical dream is swallowed up in the derailment of cattle wagons.

Set up as a dim object of fetishistic desire, this revolution keeps one foot in the sacred. It still suffuses the event with a thirst for miracles. To come down from the transcendence of desire (with its cohort of temptations and sins) to the immanence of needs, a long slow labour of secularization was required, repeatedly thwarted, and always renewed. Through experiences and ordeals, revolution has little by little come down from heaven to earth, from divine revelation to profane history. The myth has become obliterated in favour of the project.

"The emancipation of the proletariat," wrote Marx in 1848, is the "secret of the revolution of the nineteenth century." The disclosure of this secret breaks the history of the world in two, divides the people against itself — class against class — and undoes the unitary myth of the Revolution and the Republic. It sows discord between the former and the latter. It draws out from the original simplicity the plural complexities of bourgeois or proletarian, conservative or social revolutions. In short, this disclosed secret causes revolution within revolution: "February 25, 1848, had granted the *republic* to France, June 25 thrust the *revolution* upon her. And revolution, after June, meant: *overthrow of bourgeois society*, whereas before February it had meant: *overthrow of the system of government*." [4]

To this social determination of revolutionary contents, the experiences of the Paris Commune or of October 1917 added the strategic determination of the struggle for power: mass strike and armed insurrection.

Today, on the contrary, everything goes on as if this profound movement of secularization had

become exhausted, and as if, by going back through the revolutionary ages towards their mythical source, we were abandoning as we go the experiences and the contents. In the 1980s the strategic debate reached its degree zero. While actual revolutions bore the names of places and dates, the places seemed doomed to disappear in unlimited space. The dates were lost in a time stretched out in weariness, where we commemorated without inventing. The temporal perspective contracted into an eternal managerial present.

We do not yet know what, in this anaemia of the social imaginary, was a result of the conjuncture, of an ephemeral weariness produced by the heavy defeats of the past century, or of a new upheaval of historical times. But the result is that the revolutionary idea tends to lose its political substance and to be reduced to a stance of desire, aesthetic or ethical, to a judgment of taste or an act of faith. It seems torn between a will to resist without any perspective of counter-attack, and the expectation of an improbably redemptive miracle; between a pilgrimage to the purifying sources of an original revolution, and a waning desire for a conservative revolution, whose consensual velvet would cover the exact opposite of a revolution. This melancholy re-enchantment is thus a re-deception, which must be urgently countered by a new effort of historicization and an outburst of politicization.

Inasmuch as it is “the non-inevitable part of becoming,” profane revolution does not spring from a compulsive dynamic of desires, but from a dialectic of needs. It does not obey the whims of desire, but the reasoned imperative to change the world — to revolutionize it — before it disintegrates amid the din of ashen idols. This need is not a sad passion, determined to fill an irreducible gap, but the joyful passion of permanent revolution, in which are brought together duration and event, the determinate conditions of the historical situation and the uncertainties of political action which strives to transform the range of possibilities.

III

The problem with the term revolution is that it is akin to myth (in the Sorelian sense) as much as to concept. We must therefore begin by disentangling the meanings (or trying to). We may say, broadly, that revolution (since the French Revolution) has become the algebraic formula for social and political change in contemporary societies. From this point of view, it constitutes, in Kant’s pre-Revolutionary terminology, “a political prophecy,” “a considered expectation of the future,” which organizes wills and structures their horizons of expectation. Inasmuch as it opens the way to another possible world, this idea is always just as necessary against ordinary resignedness, tactical accommodations, and against the dissolution of politics into channel-hopping.

As it becomes defined with the French Revolution, this notion of revolution is also linked to the elaboration of a modern temporality, to the “semantics of historical times” studied by Kosseleck or Goulemot. [5] It is then associated with sentiments of acceleration, improvement, or progress. It is this representation of the world which has become problematic under the impact of the catastrophes of the last century. Consequently, we can grasp that the idea of revolution no longer fulfils in the same way its “mythical” function (of an indeterminate image of the future, in the way that the general strike in Sorel represents an indeterminate image of the strategic event).

Finally, in the course of experience, the notion of revolution has taken on an efficacious strategic content. There was a time when we discussed these contents in practical terms: armed insurrection, insurrectional general strike, protracted people’s warfare, dual power . . . Today these debates seem very far away, though they tend to re-emerge as a result of social crises and imperial wars. [6] There are numerous reasons for this. One, and not the least important, is expressed indirectly in certain texts by the Zapatista Subcomandante Marcos. If strategy (at least since Bonaparte) was the art of concentrating one’s forces at one point at a given time, what then, in the dissolution of space and the dissemination of powers, becomes of this concentration in the age of networks? There is much to

be discussed here. The military are always said to be fighting the last war, just as revolutionaries are always making the last revolution (or the last but one).

IV

The mole is single-minded. It moves quietly along: “Great revolutions which strike the eye at a glance must have been preceded by a still and secret revolution in the spirit of the age, a revolution not visible to every eye . . .” [7] Out of the range of appearances and of what is apparent, it digs silently, secretly, when the world is asleep. If it is short-sighted, the age for its part is blind to “its thrust, when it continues to burrow from within.” [8]

From Blanqui to Benjamin, via Joyce’s Stephen, the infernal repetition of defeats is more like a nightmare from which we must awake than a peaceful dream. History, it is well-known, stammers and stutters. From tragedies to farces, from uncle to nephew, from Napoleon the Great to Napoleon the Little. From tragedies to tragedies: from the massacres of June 1848 to the Bloody Week that ended the Paris Commune.

Marx also recommences and repeats. From one allusion to another, the past is summoned to appear. The old mole of the *Eighteenth Brumaire* thus revives the ghost of the murdered king wandering beneath the stage in *Hamlet*. It is always a story of “invisible burrowing,” of the “underground” and of ghosts, of pathways and passages: “But the revolution is thorough. It is still journeying through purgatory.” [9] It scratches and undermines “*gründlich*,” deeply, to the root.

“Brav gewählt, alter Maulwurf”

“Well burrowed, old mole!”

From translation to transposition, from slip of the tongue to shift in meaning, from Shakespeare to Schlegel, from Hegel to Marx, the old friend is transformed, until it feels strong enough to deal with the surface: “The spirit often seems to have forgotten itself and to be lost, but internally divided against itself, it continues to work from within but forwards, as Hamlet says of his father’s ghost: well said, old mole! canst work i’ the earth so fast? — until it is strong enough to break through the crust of earth which hid it from the sun.” [10] Between the basement and the surface, between the stage and the wings, it is the unheroic image of preparatory abnegation, of the indispensable preliminaries, of the task before the threshold. An agent of depth and latency. A sort of invisible text which always runs beneath the visible text, which frequently corrects it and sometimes contradicts it.

V

The revolution interrupts the ordinary course of things. It is an event that causes a stir. “Suppose that what the twenty-first century was incapable of saving from the twentieth were — that there are still events?” wonders Michel Surya. Might the disillusionments of the age of extremes have destroyed the possibility of any event at all?

Since our resounding fall into modernity, “revolution was the name of the event which did not occur, from which the whole name of the event derived; or which occurred, which is worse, in the form of its absolute denial. If there is no event to save, it is because the only one which we could have wished to be able to save was this horrible metamorphosis.” [11]

This injury to hope will weigh for a long time yet on the shoulders of coming generations. For a long time to come, it will darken the future. Rather than resigning ourselves to this disappearance without trace, there is perhaps still time to change a loss into a gain.

On condition that we desacralize and secularize the event itself. That we snatch it from theology to restore it to profane history and politics.

Until the First World War, all politics was based on this possibility of an event which would resist “the insidious notion of a historical law” which threatened to swallow it up. Just after that ordeal, Paul Valéry was already wondering whether the political spirit was not going to stop “thinking by means of events,” and whether we had not failed to rethink “as appropriate” this fundamental notion: “Henceforth any action makes a quantity of unforeseen interests echo in all directions, it engenders its sequence of immediate events.” Its effects “make themselves felt almost instantaneously at any distance, return immediately to their causes, and are deadened only in the unexpected.” That is why “the old historical geometry and the old political mechanics are not at all befitting.” [12]

Today post-modern rhetoric threatens the event in a quite different fashion. From the exhausted stuttering of the grand narratives emerges the deafening chorus of ventriloquial commodities. History recants around an eternal present. The spectre of Capital haunts the ruins of broken hopes. Tired of watching the horizon for an event which is not coming, watchers and numbed sentries let themselves drift into sleep.

Rejecting the inevitability of a history reduced to a commercial eternity, the philosophical discourses of the event respond to its political eclipse by its mystical celebration. “Having emerged from nothing,” it then presents itself as an absolute beginning, a “pure prelude to itself,” without antecedents or conditions.

Like the often dreamt-of first meeting of an amorous encounter, it seems simultaneously improbable and “eternally self-evident.”

VI

What would an encounter be worth, if it did not shake certainties and destroy the insidious temptation of getting used to the order of things? For it still to be an event, it must be capable of letting itself be surprised and of risking itself wholly in the uncertainty of what arises.

But a sudden revelation or illumination would not make an event either. They would lack any historical logic, and we should quickly be reduced to banking on Providence or fate so that, occasionally, “the impossible miracle of the event might come forth.” A profane politics would then become both unthinkable and impracticable.

That which marks a historical epoch “lies not in the inherent qualities of the Event itself, but in its place — in the way it relates to the situation out of which it emerged.” [13]

In the condition of modern man, Péguy comments, the “expectation of nothing” is not, for all that, “just a worthless bit of expectation.” And the project without guaranteed result “is not for all that a non-existent project.” It commits a responsibility towards the possible. Pure initiation into itself, the event is then “a flowering of the possible in the instant,” “a broaching of the subject of time”: “Nothing is so mysterious as these upheavals, these renewals, these profound new beginnings. It is the secret of the event.” [14] As in revolution, however, these fresh beginnings and renewals imply that the slate is never blank, and that we never start from nothing, “We always start again in the middle,” Deleuze liked to say.

Inasmuch as “it always happens to someone” and we cannot be that someone, we can hope to succeed in penetrating this secret and its mystery. Instead of celebrating it as “the pure possibility of the possible,” we must then ascribe the event to the historical conditions which determine its

location. While a miracle is of the order of faith, the event determines the conditions of a politics in the form of a reasoned wager. The politics of the event breaks both with the routine of a “socialism outside time” and with the reassuring “laws” of a determinist history. The storming of the Bastille is only capable of being thought rationally through the crisis of the *ancien régime*. The October Revolution can only be thought through the upheaval of the war and the specificities of the “development of capitalism in Russia,” which make the country into the weakest link of the imperial order. The landing of the Granma, through the subordinate dictatorship of a corrupt dependent bourgeoisie. The commands of will may then correspond to the circumstances of the decision.

VII

There are therefore no authentic events except at the critical point where memory clings on to expectation, where experience goes out to meet forthcoming facts. Being expected, it nonetheless arises against all expectation. Thus it always appears as premature, untimely, inopportune. That is what gives it its strength. It gains meaning “from its future” and from the new possibilities it inaugurates. It bears within it the “conditions of its own comprehension.” Only its posterity will take the measure of this novelty. For it goes back to the root of the possibilities. It alters their horizon and proclaims “a revolution of times.” [15]

Journalistic time, on the other hand, has no tomorrow. As mass producers of current events and news items, the media confuse ephemeral novelty with what will mark a historical epoch. Its present, ever begun afresh, is no longer situated in a perspective of duration which would reveal its meaning. Much reinforced by headlines, scoops and revelations, it offers cheaply the semblance of events. “Once again, the instrument has got the better of us,” observed Karl Kraus. The epoch “is so prone to regard the special edition as the event” that, despite the din they make, the trumpets of media reputation no longer make any walls tumble down. [16]

A politics of the event is a strategic art of the inopportune. Necessarily untimely, it inevitably comes always too soon and always too late. The favourable moment is always premature. The modern idea of revolution appears as the stitch which joins historical necessity to the contingency of the event. For not only does political action expose itself to the uncertainty of its results, but it produces its own contingencies for itself. How can we account for this? By the Hegelian ruse of reason? Contingency then indicates the tenuous relation between the fragility of the possible and the consistency of the effective. It cannot be reduced either to pure chance or to the lacunae of an incomplete knowledge, it is inscribed in the very heart of history conceived as “the act by which the spirit fashions itself in the form of the event.” [17]

“The test of this contingency” is a frequently painful experience of historical irrationalities: how can we reconcile the uncertainty of the event and the rationality supposed by the very concept of history? A history without events would be as unthinkable as an event without history. It becomes intelligible only through the “changing texture” of what happens, but which might not have happened. The mere accomplishment of a predicted end would however suppress “the test of contingency.” [18]

VIII

Of what “historical necessity” is then the event the random part? Of the necessity of struggle and conflict, for only the struggle is predictable, not its outcome. The capitalist mode of production, Althusser insists, is not generated by the feudal mode of production “according to the principles of genesis or descent.” It springs from the encounter — as strange as that of the umbrella and the sewing-machine on the operating table — between capitalized money, formally free labour power, and technical innovation. The event is the form taken by this combination which is not necessary.

The decisive instant “when everything seems to be called into question again” thus defines politics as the “collusion in the heart of history” of the virtual, which is multiple, and the actual, which is unique.

“There is the unforeseeable. That is the tragedy,” observed Merleau-Ponty. Moreover, it is necessary that this tragic freedom, at the risk of turning into the pure whim of desire, should know the limits assigned to it by conjuncture and circumstances. Unlike the saint or the classical hero, acting all in one go, the profane militant faces the uncertainty of a decision, of which the result always runs the risk of going against his intentions. The fragility of political and historical judgments is thus imposed as a necessary antidote both to dogmatic and doctrinaire temptations and to those of cynical indifference. To change the world means interpreting it in order to change it. It also means changing it in the process of interpreting it.

IX

Strategic history and its memoirs of possibilities are thus distinguished from the platitudes of the accomplished fact. The same historians for whom the event is self-evident when it fits the presumed “meaning” of history, quibble about mistakes in policies when it is a matter of going against the stream. That gives them “the possibility of displaying their retrospective wisdom by enumerating and cataloguing mistakes, omissions and blunders.” Unfortunately, “these historians do not indicate what path would have enabled a moderate to triumph in a revolutionary period, or, on the other hand, indicate a reasonable and successful revolutionary policy in a Thermidorian period.” [19] Registrar of the accomplished fact, this history of historians sacrifices the contingent to the necessary, and the possible to the real.

Critical history on the other hand deciphers the event from the point of view of the intervention of its actors. It releases the captive possibilities from the accomplished fact. Against the implacable force of circumstances, the test of contingency and the uncertainty of struggle thus open a breach in the bleak sequence of labours and days.

Marx thought politics “in a horizon torn between the chance of encounter and the necessity of revolution”: [20]

World history would indeed be very easy to make if the struggle were taken up only on condition of infallibly favourable chances. It would, on the other hand, be of a very mystical nature, if “accidents” played no part. These accidents themselves fall naturally into the general course of development and are compensated again by other accidents. But acceleration and delay are very dependent on such “accidents,” which include the “accident” of the character of those who first stand at the head of the movement. [21]

Having abandoned the speculative philosophy of history in favour of the critique of political economy, Marx inscribes his acute sense of the event — wars and revolutions — in the systemic logic and laws which “act as tendencies” of *Capital*. Against the providential mysticism of universal history, he takes uncertainty into consideration. But its role has scarcely been recognized when it seems to be immediately neutralized by a mechanism of counterweights and compensations. The “chances” cancel each other out in their outcome which is foreseeable “in the framework of the march of evolution.” The “dark crossroads” are erased in an alternation of accelerations and decelerations. The singularity of events is lost again in the grand narrative of progress, and political contingency melts into historical necessity.

This return of “reason in history” hardly enables us to grasp the enigma of Thermidor and its recurrence. The enigmatic intertwining between revolution and counter-revolution is reduced to a

comforting difference between bourgeois revolutions and proletarian revolutions, of which the outcome remains, in short, guaranteed:

Bourgeois revolutions, like those of the eighteenth century, storm swiftly from success to success, their dramatic effects outdo each other, men and things seem set in sparkling brilliants, ecstasy is the everyday spirit, but they are short-lived, soon they have attained their zenith, and a long crapulent depression seizes society before it learns soberly to assimilate the results of its storm-and-stress period. On the other hand, proletarian revolutions, like those of the nineteenth century, criticize themselves constantly, interrupt themselves continually in their own course, come back to the apparently accomplished in order to begin it afresh, deride with unmerciful thoroughness the inadequacies, weaknesses and paltrinesses of their first attempts, seem to throw down their adversary only in order that he may draw new strength from the earth and rise again, more gigantic, before them, and recoil again and again from the indefinite prodigiousness of their own aims, until a situation has been created which makes all turning back impossible, and the conditions themselves cry out:

Hic Rhodus, hic salta! Here is the rose, here dance! [22]

So social revolutions only retreat in order to advance better.

If the inaugural revolution shines like a magnificent sunrise, counter-revolution is crooked and dim. It is revealed after the event. Too late. When it is already accomplished. For revolution and counter-revolution are not a simple process of advance and retreat on the same temporal axis. They are not symmetrical. An expert in reaction, Joseph de Maistre, has given the game away: counter-revolution is not a revolution in the opposite direction, an inverted, backward revolution, but the “opposite of a revolution.”

X

According to Merleau-Ponty, revolutions are “true as movements” and “false as regimes.” According to Mannheim, the institutional order is never anything but the “baleful residue” of Utopian hope. For Badiou, Thermidor indicates the end of the event, as sudden and miraculous as its inrush, a “betrayal of fidelity” rather than a social and historical reaction. The recurrent alternation of the openness of events and its bureaucratic closure thus confirms the intermittence of a politics reduced to a few rare moments of epiphany.

From Marx to Trotsky, the paradoxical formula of “revolution in permanence” indicates the problematic knot between event and history, between rupture and continuity, between the moment of action and the duration of the process. Merleau-Ponty stresses that, in Trotsky, historical reason is no longer a secularized divinity driving the train of the world. Although history is thus emancipated from both teleology and economic determinism, he nevertheless suspects the remnant of a belief in a predicted end.

In fact everything depends on the way the concept of revolution is articulated with historicity. In a genetic perspective, “permanent revolution” may very well be merely the false nose of a secular faith in guaranteed progress. The ambiguous notions of “transcendence” or “growing over” thus illustrate the evolutionist interpretation “of a revolution in which each stage is contained in embryo in the preceding stage.” [23]

But “permanent revolution” may also assume a meaning contrary to the mechanical stageism (illustrated in sinister fashion in the Stalinist scriptures by the dreary chronology of modes of

production): a performative and strategic meaning. It thus expresses the hypothetical and conditional link between a revolution circumscribed within a determinate space-time, and its spatial (“world revolution”) and temporal (it “necessarily develops over decades”) extension. The revolutionary transformation of the world then assumes the dimension of a “continual internal struggle” of the constituent power against its Thermidorian petrification.

XI

The relationship between resistance, event and history is achieved in the strategic notion of crisis, where the faults of normality and the miscarriages of routine take on their full force. Etymologically, crisis is a moment of decision and truth, when history hesitates in face of a point of bifurcation where the bushy paths of “lateral possibilities” open up.

A characteristic theme of modernity, crisis represents the dark side of progress. It has acquired its current meaning by passing from medical vocabulary to economic and then political vocabulary. The economic “great crisis” of 1929 coincides strangely with Freud’s *Civilization and its Discontents* (1929) or Husserl’s *The Crisis of European Sciences* (1935). For Husserl, “the crisis of European sciences” means that their scientific status has become dubious. In the social and political crisis, the legitimacy of institutions and the power of the established order are in turn shaken. It is as if the discontent were foretelling the crisis, and as if the crisis were affecting the different spheres of social and intellectual life.

The discontent is the critical moment of repressive disillusion. Symptom of a new discontent in civilization, the disenchanting discourse of post-modernity today becomes favourable to the “melancholy cruelty” of aimless action. The crisis, on the other hand, is the active part of the discontent. In a flickering of eyelids, the mole then glimpses the light.

From Marx to Lenin, the crisis has taken on a clearly strategic sense. Henceforth it indicates the “factual node” which upsets the field of possibilities. It clarifies antagonisms. It imposes a hierarchy on contradictions. It combines social rhythms and disentangles multiple attachments. [24]

Since the beginning of the seventeenth century, Marx states, Europe has not seen any radical revolution “not preceded by a commercial and financial crisis.” “It is enough to mention the commercial crises that by their periodical return put on trial, each time more threateningly, the existence of the entire bourgeois society. In these crises there breaks out an epidemic . . . Society suddenly finds itself put back into a state of momentary barbarism.” [25] The crisis may still be delayed by a few weeks, but it must break out. It is thus presented as the way in which “the conflict must be continually overcome” and as the form in which the broken equilibrium is violently re-established. This diagnosis does not escape what Michel Dobry describes as an “illusion of causation.” The fact that the commercial crisis precedes the revolutionary crisis seems to establish a direct link between them, confirmed by the medical metaphor of the “epidemic.”

But Marx does not merely interpret the chronological succession as a causal relation. He penetrates the internal logic of economic and financial crises. But the economic crisis is still only light without heat, the form of the possible which is “most abstract” and “lacking in content.” It is not the mechanical cause of political crises, but merely the condition that makes them possible. The transformation of a crisis into a revolutionary crisis depends on the capacity of the actors to grasp the strategic opportunity of the conjuncture. The action of a coherent force endowed with a clear project then becomes a decisive condition for the outcome:

it is not every revolutionary situation that gives rise to a revolution; revolution arises only out of a situation in which the above-mentioned objective changes are accompanied

by a subjective change, namely, the ability of the revolutionary class to take revolutionary mass action strong enough to break (or dislocate) the old government, which never, not even in a period of crisis, “falls,” if it is not toppled over. [26]

Lenin thus stresses an essential feature of crisis: the “deobjectification” of social relations and the insistence that “laws of history” are not inevitable. [27] The outcome of the crisis is played out with two or more protagonists, and the actors become stabilized as characters through “the exchange of blows.”

XII

Since the middle of the 1970s, the world has become settled in an atmosphere of crisis which short-lived economic upturns have not managed to dissipate. The social, ecological and technological future remains darkened by anxieties and dangers. The indefinable crisis lingers. The fear of a terrible end is prolonged eternally in the stretching out of an endless dread.

This is something quite different from an industrial or financial crisis: a new discontent in civilization. It is a global crisis of social relations and relations between humanity and its natural environment, a general disordering of spaces and rhythms. The crisis in civilization is a crisis of disproportion and of mismeasurement. This goes on and extends itself in a decay that leads nowhere. Negri deduces the hypothesis that large-scale crisis would disappear with modernity in favour of a post-modern proliferation of “small crises” branching out like a rhizome. If it transpires that state sovereignties are being undone in the mesh of an imperial network, it is not surprising that rapid and violent crises about identifiable questions of power are giving way to slow crises of “corruption.”

The notion of crisis would then change meaning and function. It would no longer be a hole in the structure, a break in the continuity. Henceforth it would be an integral part of history. It would coincide with “the general tendency of history.” It would be the very modality of it. [28] Here we rediscover the catastrophist tones which Negri claimed to be avoiding. Marx considered more soberly that capital was becoming the obstacle to its own development.

Today this contradiction has reached a critical point. But how do we get out of it?

We have seen many decadent empires and many civilizations in ruins. History is not a long peaceful river. It has no guaranteed happy ending. If the crisis is not yet the event, it shows the concrete possibility of it. Its outcome is not settled in advance. The alternative, liberation or barbarism, posed at the beginning of the last century, is more urgent than ever. From world wars to nuclear bombing, from genocides to ecological disasters, barbarism has subsequently taken a lead of several lengths. The crisis appears as something quite different from a mere “historical turning point”: as a great transition, a crucial junction, at the meeting-point between the constraints of the situation and the contingency of action.

Catastrophe can still be averted. If . . .

There is no other choice than to apply ourselves to it.

And this, precisely, is the mole’s job.

XIII

Hegel described the “still and secret” revolution which preceded the appearance of a new spirit. Through the irrationalities of history, the crafty burrowing of the mole traced, in his view, the path

of Reason. The mole is in no hurry. It “does not have to hurry.” It needs “length of time” and “has plenty of time.” It does not withdraw to hibernate, but in order to drill a tunnel. Its deviations and retrogressions lead it where it wants to emerge. It does not disappear, it merely becomes invisible.

This metaphor of the mole is, according to Toni Negri, condemned by post-modernity: “We suspect that Marx’s old mole has finally died.” [29] Its digging gives way to the “infinite undulations of the snake” and to reptilian struggles. This verdict is still based on the chronological illusion according to which post-modernity is succeeding a modernity relegated to the museum of antiquities. But the mole is ambivalent. Modern and post-modern at the same time. Discreetly busy in its “subterranean rhizomes” and suddenly, thundering in revolt.

Under the pretext of abandoning grand historical narratives, the philosophical discourses of post-modernity favour mystics and mystagogues: a society which no longer has prophets has fortune-tellers, said Chateaubriand. They are appropriate to periods of reaction and restoration. After the massacres of June 1848 and the Eighteenth Brumaire of Napoleon the Little, the socialist movement was thus gripped with “christolatry.” [30]

To mystical and sooth-saying affirmation, Pierre Bourdieu contrasted the conditional, preventive, and performative language of the prophet: “Just as the priest is in league with the ordinary order, likewise the prophet is the man of situations of crisis, where the established order topples and where the whole future is suspended” [31]

The prophet is not a priest. Nor a saint.

Even less a fortune-teller. But rather a strategist.

To ward off the crisis, unplanned resistances and wagers on a hypothetical salvation by events cannot suffice. We must stand fast both on the logic of history and the unpremeditated nature of the event. We must remain available for the contingency of the latter, without losing the thread of the former. This is the very challenge of political action. For the spirit does not progress in empty time, “but in a time that is infinitely full, filled with struggle.” [32]

And of events whose advent the mole is preparing.

With slow impatience. And with hasty patience.

The mole is a prophetic animal.

Daniel Bensaïd

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P.S.

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Footnotes

- [1] Heinrich Heine, *History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany*, North Queensland, 1982, p. 72.
- [2] *Lignes*, new series no. 04, February 2001.
- [3] On the “marginalist innovation” and its philosophical, aesthetic and literary repercussions, see the fascinating book by Jean Joseph Goux, *Frivolité de la valeur*, Paris, 2002.
- [4] Marx, *The Class Struggles in France*, in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, London, 1975ff, vol. x, p. 71.
- [5] Reinhart Koselleck, *Le futur passé. Contribution à la sémantique des temps historiques*, Paris, 1990 and *L'expérience de l'histoire*, Paris, 1997. Jean-Marie Goulemot, *Le règne de l'histoire. Discours historiques et révolutions*, Paris, 1996.
- [6] The echo of the recent books by Toni Negri (*Empire*) or John Holloway (*Change the World without Taking Power*) is in a sense evidence of this renewal. On this see my book *Un monde à changer. Mouvements et stratégies*, Paris, 2003.
- [7] G.W.F. Hegel, *Early Theological Writings*, Chicago, 1948, p. 152.
- [8] G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, London, 1955.
- [9] K. Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. xi, p. 185.
- [10] Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*. {Well said, old mole}', said Hamlet. *Brav alter Maulwurf! Wühlst so hurtig fort!* translates Schlegel (“Dig well and promptly, worthy old mole!”). {Brav gearbeitet, wackerer Maulwurf}' (Well worked, worthy mole!' interprets Hegel). `Brav gewählt, alter Maulwurf!', sums up Marx, whose idea of digging (*gewählt*) adds to the simple labour of Hegel a touch of subversion. On these transformations of the mole, see Martin Harries, “Homo alludens. Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire*,” in *New German Critique*, autumn 1995, pp. 35-64.
- [11] Michel Surya, article in the *Quinzaine littéraire*, 1 August 2000.
- [12] Paul Valéry, *Regards sur le monde actuel*, Paris, 1996, p. 17.
- [13] Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, London, 1999, p. 140.
- [14] Charles Péguy, *Clio*, Paris, 1931, pp. 170 and 228.
- [15] See Claude Romano, *L'événement et le temps*, Paris, 1999.
- [16] Karl Kraus, *In These Great Times*, Manchester, 1984, pp. 76, 80.
- [17] See Hegel, “Reason in History,” introduction to *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, Cambridge, 1975.

- [18] Bernard Mabille, Hegel. *L'épreuve de la contingence*, Paris, 1999.
- [19] Pierre Naville, *Trotsky vivant*, Paris, 1988, p. 85.
- [20] Louis Althusser, "Le courant souterrain du matérialisme de la recontre," in *Ecrits philosophiques et politiques*, vol. 1, Paris, 1994, p. 574.
- [21] Marx, Letter to L. Kugelmann, 17 April 1871, in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. xlv, pp. 136-7. 2
- [22] K. Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. xi, pp. 106-7.
- [23] Trotsky, *Permanent Revolution*, London, 1962.
- [24] While rejecting the idea of crisis as a moment of clarification and truth, Michel Dobry gives a subtle analysis of certain characteristic features of political crises such as the tendency to multisectoral unification of sectoral logics, the accentuation of the tactical interdependence of decisions, "the conjunctural desectorisation of social space," the reduction of the autonomy of social sectors in conjunctures of high political fluidity, the "simplification of social space," or again "the unidimensionalisation of personal identity" beyond the multiplicity of roles. See Michel Dobry, *Sociologie des crises politiques*, Paris, 1992.
- [25] Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. vi, pp. 489-90.
- [26] V.I. Lenin, "The Collapse of the Second International," in *Collected Works*, Moscow, 1960ff, vol. xxi, p. 214. In *History and Class Consciousness*, Georg Lukács gave a more radical turn to this subjectivist tendency: "When compared to earlier crises the qualitative difference in the decisive, the 'last' crisis of capitalism . . . is, then, not merely that its extent and depth, its quantity, is simply transformed into a change in quality. Or more accurately: this transformation is distinguished by the fact that the proletariat ceases to be merely the object of a crisis; the internal antagonisms of capitalist production . . . now flourish openly." (Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, London, 1971, p. 244.)
- [27] On this point see Dobry, *Sociologie des crises politiques*, p. 154.
- [28] Michael Hardt and Toni Negri, *Empire*, Cambridge MA and London, 2000, pp. 385-400.
- [29] Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, p 57.
- [30] Gustave Lefrançais, *Souvenirs d'un révolutionnaire*, Paris, 1971, p. 191.
- [31] Pierre Bourdieu, "Genèse et structure du champ religieux," *Revue française de sociologie*, 12, 1971, p. 331.
- [32] Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*.