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Clash of Temporalities: Capital, Democracy, and Squares

While the Western world was celebrating the “peaceful transition into democracy” in the Arab world, one could read the following slogans in many squares around the world: Democracy Is a Joke (Brussels) and Democracy Is an Illusion (London). “Democracy has been kidnapped,” said the Spanish Indignados outside the parliament on September 25, 2012: “We are going to save it.” Real Democracy Now!, claim people in different parts of the world. At the very least, the “transition into democracy” requires us to investigate: Which democracy are we talking about?

Western powers have tried both to neutralize and to co-opt the protests in the Arab world by pointing to them as the correct pathway of transition from one governmental form to another. Such a transition, on the one hand, allows the West to maintain its hegemony in the oil-rich Gulf and, on the other, envisages the Western model of representative democracy as the singular configuration of contemporary democracy. This model is now in crisis. And it is not because there was a golden age of democracy, but because internal and external strains are showing that even its self-legitimation no longer works. The conflict of temporalities that characterizes the recent crisis shows us that the

time of liberal democracy has passed. An activist from Mali, who was asked to comment on the economic crisis in 2009, reacted: “What crisis? We live in a permanent crisis” (Crossing Borders 2009). From the perspective of permanent crisis, in which the West has organized the colonial world system, the current crisis expresses a violent resynchronization of temporalities that are out of sync.

A 2011 article in the *New York Times* denounced the current situation of disastrously high unemployment in both the United States and Europe and the mistrust of leaders and institutions as part of a general context in which “democratic values are under siege” (Krugman 2011). Actually, this state of emergency has become the rule in countries such as Greece, Portugal, Spain, and Italy, and the ascendancy of right-wing populists and neofascist groups and the rise of new authoritarian governments can be observed in many countries. An article in the *Washington Post* states: “Globalization has clearly begun to undermine the legitimacy of Western democracies” (Applebaum 2011). This statement is vague, but it contains an element of truth, possibly beyond the intentions of the author: Western democracy cannot be the model for the “transition to democracy” anymore. It is not that globalization as such undermines democracy. It is that the clash of political, economic, and juridical temporalities in the globalized world is destabilizing the form of political democracy that was born in the modern West.

The Clash of Temporalities

Democracy is currently caught amid a clash of different temporalities. When Sheldon Wolin (1997: 4) posed the question “what time is it?” he argued that “political time is out of synch with the temporalities, rhythms, and pace governing economy and culture.” The crux of the matter, according to Wolin (2000: 20), is that “high technology, globalized capitalism is radically incongruent with democracy.” In a response to Wolin, William E. Connolly (2002: 141) denounced his romantic vision of democracy that wants “the world to slow down so that democracy can flourish.” He also argued to accelerate its speed in the name of pluralism and melting identities (Connolly 2002; McIvor 2011). That discussion is important because it represents two apparently opposite perspectives: the longing for the return of a golden democratic past, on the one hand, and the postmodern enthusiasm for acceleration, on the other. However, the real question concerns neither the acceleration or deceleration of contemporary political life nor the speed limit of democracy but rather the *mechanism* of the synchronization of different temporalities

and their different tempos and the possibilities of different forms of “social relations” that the crisis is disclosing.

Liberal democracy as we know it is collapsing under the forces of synchronization:¹ on the one hand, there is the economic temporality that imposes the speed of decision making; on the other, there is the temporality of the state and the slowness of the participatory process of decision making. On a global scale, the temporal disjuncture between national and transnational institutions is growing, and “the slower temporal rhythms of nation states are marginalized by the transnational proliferation of soft law and fast policy” (Hope 2009: 79). The speed of formal democracy, with its parliamentary discussions and search for consent, is too slow compared to the speed of capital. As the two temporalities diverge, a new process of synchronization appears in the agency of the current “revolution from above,” which finds its own legitimacy in the economic crisis, austerity measures, and sometimes even the crisis of legitimacy of the present ruling class itself.

The current conservative revolution aims to redetermine the political functions of state sovereignty, which, rather than declining, is simply reconfiguring its authority. The conservative revolution is composed of different temporalities: the glittering temporality of finance and the reaction of left- and right-wing countertemporalities that contest banks and their plutocratic power; the acceleration of political decisions by national and supranational technocratic governments and the countertemporalities of those who argue for a reinforcement of the democratic process to the detriment of finance and through the participation of the people; and the different speeds of functions of state sovereignty relocated at a supranational level and the countertemporalities of those who want to reinforce sovereignty and the very role of the nation-state. Finally, the violence of the synchronization of the states with their austerity measures encounters the countertemporalities of the anti-austerity protests. Our task is to understand the current situation as a clash of temporalities. Their synchronization according to the rhythm of the global market is attempted by economic and extra-economic violence. In today’s context in which the financial acceleration of profit-making clashes with the long-term requirements of capital accumulation (Hope 2011: 97), the clocks of world stock markets are beating the time for political decisions, constitutional changes, and the pace of work.

Global capitalism is driven by a constant process of *temporalization of space* that Karl Marx (1986: 448) summarized as the “annihilation of space by time.” This space-time compression in the ongoing process of capitalist accumulation is driven by the temporality of the socially necessary labor

time that continuously imposes on space a constant rescaling and redefinition of the hierarchical scales of power-regulation that traverse different nation-states, redefining their sovereignty without abolishing it. In fact, the most typical functions of sovereignty, such as the decision making with respect to inclusion and exclusion, are not reduced but just replaced. It is being resynchronized by means of the “revolution from above” that has become the new political clothes of synchronization. The current transformation of democracy represents the most adequate configuration of both capital and the state in the global market after the defeat of workers’ movements. The welfare state and democratic decision making, themselves the result of class struggles, are under relentless attack.

The disassembling of the welfare state, especially in Europe, would not have been possible without the defeat of workers’ struggles over the past forty years and the outcome of the Cold War. This defeat presents two sides. During the Cold War, Western democracies were glittering displays that showed off both luxury commodities and democracy. At the same time, the working class acted as a collective subject, imposing collective rights and agreements and putting a minimal standard of democracy in the factories and in the common life of society. In “the twentieth century, citizenship and the capitalist class system [were] at war” (Marshall 2009: 153–54), and in this war the working class won the incorporation of social rights in the status of citizenship. Social rights, as well as civil and political rights, are not stages of a necessary juridical development but a conquest that the working class was able to impose on the state. This *virtuous anomaly*, in which the working class imposed collective agreements and social rights and kept the process of democratization open, is now over, and the train of modernity takes up its course again on the rails of the individual labor contract and the privatization of public utilities. Capital and its state no longer tolerate collective rights, against which they have already fought a centuries-old war: before, the state should be individuals with their individual rights, just as before, the employer there is the individual worker in the capitalist relationship. The first step of the new conservative revolution is to destroy both the material and the symbolic gains of the working class during the second half of the twentieth century in order to obliterate the anomaly.

The declaration of war against the working class as collective subject claims to impose “normal” relations between the state and society, that is, atomized private individuals confronting the multinational employer and the state’s monopoly of power. In the West, this war began in 1981 when Ronald Reagan crushed the strike of the Professional Air Traffic Control-

lers Organization. It continued with the defeat of the UK miners' strike of 1984–85 by Margaret Thatcher, who not only squelched the strike but also declared that “there is no such thing as society” (Keay 1984). Global capital found new spaces to occupy both temporally and spatially, and a new chapter of history was begun. The defeat of the working class and the end of the Cold War “inspired a noisy triumphalism expressed in forms of endism that merely parroted earlier declarations of the end of ideology” (Harootunian 2007: 489–90). The new course that is now called neoliberal policy itself has meant “limitless privatization, interminable downsizing, outsourcing, endless appropriation by dispossession, and the transformation of the everyday into a day-to-day temporality, a time without any future” (Harootunian 2007: 490). But this is only one side of the story.

On the other side, the 1990s saw the beginning of new global mobilizations. In 1992 the United Nations sponsored the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, which became the occasion for the Global Forum of NGOs and Social Movements. From that moment on, global protest movements have continuously occupied spaces worldwide. These global responses to global capitalism express a reaction against the devastation of the environment, technocratic decision making, the political and institutional collapse of social relationships, and austerity measures. In response to the process of synchronization and its effects, “workers across Europe [have also] synchronize[d] protests,” especially in the recent strikes against austerity (Minder 2012).

To explore the possibilities of these movements, however, one has to understand the kind of reaction they express and what they are, or could be, beyond the current form of reaction that they constitute.

The Saint Vitus's Dance of the Middle Class

Especially in the West, the recent protests are predominantly the expression of an expanded and no longer purely economic middle class. In strictly economic terms it is larger than the part of society that falls between the working class and the upper class. However, the reaction to the loss of social status and the decline of the democratic dream is typical of the middle class. In their declassing, the atoms of the middle class fall down like the atoms of Epicurus: their swerve produces different configurations. One can understand these configurations as different temporalities that coexist and conflict in the same present.

To understand the protests of the middle class, one needs to consider them in the context of the class composition of the recent uprisings. Marx's

“The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon” and Ernst Bloch’s “Nonsynchronism and the Obligation to Its Dialectics” provide two remarkable lessons in the historiography of conflicting temporalities. In the analysis of the political economic situation of national-socialist Germany, Bloch ([1932] 1977: 30) considers how it was possible that a “large amount of pre-capitalist material” was reactivated by the economic depression in the form of ghosts. These are not merely the ghosts of the past; they are manifestations of different temporalities that coexist in the ether of the present. Bloch’s analysis sometimes resorts to a historicist point of view, largely as a result of his aim to intervene, through the Communist Party, in the war against fascism. Nonetheless, his comprehension of the temporal multiversum is extremely useful. “Not all people exist in the same Now,” writes Bloch (22). Some of them exist only externally in the present. They may be seen today, but “that does not mean that they are living at the same time with others” (22). After the economic crisis, an “immiserated *middle class* wants to return to prewar conditions when it was better off” (25). Their misery and insecurity produce “homesickness for what has been as a revolutionary impulse” and divulge a nonsynchronism that can either manifest reactionary forces or reactivate revolutionary energy (25).

The problem of the middle class can be imagined as a conflict in determinate nonsynchronous dimensions. “Things out of season” (Bloch [1932] 1977: 30) are both producing and are themselves the product of the relative chaos that can push sectors, strata, classes, and entire countries, not yet synchronized, toward the political Right.

In the recent crisis, a terrified Western middle class seeks a return to previous conditions of life. In Europe, part of the middle class dreams of returning to pre-euro conditions and to their national currency. It condemns the excessive power of the banks and their secret committees and longs to go back to the age of small shops, to when human relationships between traders and customers were still possible. Unable to transcend capitalist society, the middle class aims at transcendence in yoga centers on Oxford Street and searches for a compensation for the defeat of the modern rationality in the fashions of “new age” movements. Even in this reaction there is an element of truth: in fact, the economists’ ability to make predictions is comparable to that of the psychics.

Members of the middle class are scared, and their fear produces ghosts whose degree of reality can be understood through the real effects they create. They belong to right-wing movements and parties, which, even while contesting government’s excessive power, accelerate the process of synchronization by mobilizing nonsynchronous parts of society.

Moreover, in today's Western societies, the middle class does not stand exactly in the middle. A considerable number of proletarians represent themselves as middle class. And this self-representation has objective and subjective consequences: objectively, it results from the rise in the standard of living that workers achieved through struggles during the second half of the twentieth century; subjectively, proletarians see themselves more as consumers than as producers.

Declining middle classes present an entire spectrum of conflicts. They become racist as a dual reaction to the need for community and the reallocation of scarce resources that favor the native population. At the same time, there is also a generational conflict within the middle class: if the ghost of longing for the past pushes the older generation toward the Right, the no-future perspective of the younger generation pushes them toward rebellion for a different kind of life. Youths react against their declassing and against the empty condition of being young and atomized. While older generations are looking back toward old, more authentic human relationships, youths are looking for their own new and authentic human relationships. "Old" and "new" are not really counterposed here: what pushes one toward right-wing parties and movements is not very different from what drives the other toward the public squares and demonstrations. The "relatively more lively and intact nature of earlier human relationships . . . were still relatively more immediate than those in capitalism" (Bloch [1932] 1977: 25). For Bloch, the most important point of his analysis of fascism is that "this 'relative' not only serves, in a reactionary way, to hold up against the present a past as something which in part is genuinely not dead. It also positively delivers in places a part of that matter which seeks a life not destroyed by capital" (34).

Clearly, the rebellion against the present is filled with ghosts of non-synchronous temporalities whose contents and forms are expressions of an older matter. The fall of the middle class increases the emotional temperature of a society, so that, in times of crisis, mythological forces regain their original power. The bewitchment of the New Age with the Orient and astrology, and the attempt to restore the primitive relationship with Mother Earth, or Gaia, introduces into the nonsynchronous present other temporalities that mix utopian forms with pseudo-restorative tendencies. The myth of prior primal states of paradisiacal bliss survives in the aorgic claim of fusion with nature in which a new life becomes possible. The Left believed that it had tamed these obscure forces with the Enlightenment but then found itself prey to fascism.

The revolt of the middle class is like the "dance of Saint Vitus" (Bloch [1932] 1977: 25). Its expressions appear irrational and its orientation is unclear.

That is because its agitation takes place among different temporalities in the uncanny context of the ahistorical present. This phantasmagoria characterizes capitalism when it presents itself as a world of consumers and commodities without tracing the memory of their production. From the point of view of circulation, capitalist relations take the features of a “fetish,” such that it “no longer bears the birthmarks of the origin of value” (Marx 1998: 389), which thus seems produced in the sphere of circulation. The removal of the “abodes of production” is so radical that even some groups of the radical Left have sung the song of the end of work, or the jingle of the end of the law of value. Those “hidden abodes of production” (Marx 1996: 186) are partly just relocated elsewhere in the world and thus substantially erased from the Western imaginary. In the oblivion of production, products appear in circulation without traces of the process of production. The shadows of production do not follow the product. And they become ghosts, as in Adelbert von Chamisso’s *Peter Schlemihl’s Miraculous Story*. In the empire of exchange value, the phantasmagoria is the “framework in which its use value recedes into the background” (Benjamin 2002: 7) such that exchange value itself becomes use value. Consumer addiction expresses only the impossibility of the commodity to satisfy needs insofar as the bought object is, above all else, an exchange value. Experience collapses, or becomes indifferent and without quality, when it regards exchange values that are indifferent to their bearers. Individuals want stimulation and need to be distracted to compensate for their poverty of experience. And they obtain what they are looking for: they can enjoy endless, happy hours in the gigantic Disneylands of the Western metropolis.

The imperative “buy it now” turns the present moment into an absolute. It is a present without history and a memory in which the historical forms of capitalist modernity become naturalized. The only way to imagine overcoming the unhistorical present is through disasters. In the fashion of apocalyptic movies and novels, people are looking for the change that they are no longer able to imagine. In the phantasmagoria of the ahistorical present everything is well organized and run. But without life.

Memory of the Future

“Es gibt kein richtiges Leben im falschen” (Adorno 1991: 39). A possible translation of Adorno’s statement is, “There is no right life in the wrong.” At stake here is the very old theological question of whether a right life is possible in a wrong world. Adorno’s statement does not express a resigned

pessimism about the possibility of a right life; rather, it posits the true theological-political question of justice. The predicament of a “right life” makes sense only in relation to the idea of justice. But justice is not something that one can realize according to the means-ends relationship, because it is not possible to justify one’s present praxis through the ends that one intends to realize. Socialism was realized by this logic through gulags, and today the same logic still justifies bombings by the state when it bombs in order to export democracy and defend human rights. Future perfect is the temporality of this logic: the violation of the law is justified in order to realize a new global order in which the previous violation of the law *will be legitimated*. This is the temporality of modern politics both of the state and of the “revolutionaries.” Immanuel Kant (1991b: 82) already stressed the intrinsic contradiction of this temporality when he said that the revolutionaries will be legitimized only when they write a new constitution. Pursuing the logic of the future perfect temporality can produce only a military escalation that is unable to go beyond the horizon of the state. A new political temporality is necessary.

The Greek document “Principles and Theses of Direct Democracy” discussed and voted on in Athens’ Syntagma Square, on September 3, 2011, concluded: “We want everything for everyone.” Obviously, to want everything is already like not wanting anything. What the statement declares is a distance. The meaning is, “We don’t want anything that you, the state or capital, can provide us.” It expresses a very human need for a different kind of social relationship, in which “anthropos can neither be a medium nor can the ecosystem be thought as inexhaustible and expendable” (Direct Democracy in Syntagma Square 2011). This is what “99 percent” demands: a “99 percent” that stresses not a totality but a partiality. And this partiality is not the generality within the state but a universality that exceeds the state.

This formulation is very different from the three questions posed by Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès (2003: 94) at the beginning of his pamphlet *What Is the Third Estate?*: “1) What is the Third Estate? *Everything*. 2) What, until now, has it been in the existing political order? *Nothing*. 3) What does it want to be? *Something*.” We all know what happened. Through the mechanism of representation, the Third Estate became the people, the “democratic” subject in whose name the government acts. It became more than something; it gave rise to the nation-people, which, in its unity and totality, became the absolute political subject of modern democracy.

Far from being a totality or even a numeric majority, the “99 percent” denotes the partiality that neither embodies “the true *volonté générale*

[general will]” nor stands “for the 99 percent.”² The 99 percent denotes the partiality in which we take part and generates “true enthusiasm” (Kant 1991a: 182), because it expresses the universality of an idea. True enthusiasm arises from the real presentation of a part that is more universal than the whole. And this political miracle is possible when the political praxis is oriented beyond “selfish interests” and toward an idea of justice.

According to Alain Badiou (2012: 42), the recent riots in the Arab world signal the reawakening of History, and they show the “new figure of organization and hence of politics.” He takes the public square as the space of a “real presentation,” the space of the “restitution of the existence of the inexistent,” of people who are acting together (Badiou 2012: 56, 93). This is true. But it is not sufficient. The question concerns the universality of a partiality. In other words, it regards the political issue of a partisan universalism. The inclusive, universal nature of the event depends not on the individual choices of participants but on the dis-order of the existing order and the hierarchical division of society. Because the division of society between oppressed and oppressor is regarded as unjust, middle-class individuals can take part in working-class struggles just as white militants could be part of the Black Panther Party. The real question concerns what is right in peoples’ being together, and it is based on something that transcends the existing partition of the parts (Rancière 2004), enabling them to put the entire order into question.

Still, this is not sufficient either. Justice is an idea whose realization is not possible, and much less desirable. As a practice, it allows people to open new possibilities of being together in history again and again. Events are anticipations of new human relationships. Therefore the claim for democracy is serious. But the true question remains: What do we mean by “democracy”? The anticipation of new kinds of social relations appears as valuable experiments inside the various movements. Their critique of representative democracy can disclose new possibilities of being together. This claim requires concreteness. So while the youths in the squares are reacting against a general condition of atomization and against their hampered future, they are also young workers who are working long hours for little pay and no rights, even when they do have a job. During a congress of a famous Italian union, an old worker said that there is no democracy at all if there is no democracy in the workplace. Democracy is nothing when your body and your soul are consumed in an unhealthy workplace and your boss can scream at you or fire you when he or she likes. When capital buys labor power, capital has also bought the life of the worker. If the former relationship is juridically symmetrical, the latter is necessarily asymmetrical. Marx

(1996: 178) showed this asymmetry, which G. W. F. Hegel (2001: sec. 67) was unable to see, and put it at the center of his analysis. By doing so, he unveiled what the juridical veils. This asymmetry, based on property relations, not only concerns the power relationship or *unfair* wage conditions; it is the site of an injury that cannot be repaired in the existing conditions. The wage pays for a “determinate number of hours of performance of human psychical-physical energy,” but “it does not, however, pay for the total consumption of the bodies of the workers, including their minds and spirits.” Moreover, the wage does not pay knowledge and skills that are expropriated from the workers, incorporated into fixed capital and counterposed to the workers (Tomba 2013: 127).

This is the testing ground of democracy. Here Sieyès’s three old questions leave their place to the three questions of communism: *What* do we have to produce? *How many* products do we need? *How* is the quality of work relations? Sieyès’s questions are the ones of the state and civil society. The other questions concern a different form of togetherness. There is no middle ground between the two perspectives. This is why, in the crisis, the middle class cannot stay in the middle anymore. But their claim for new forms of relationships remains abstract if it does not also break the specific asymmetrical relation that characterizes capitalist production. Grabbing the emergency brake does not make any sense if it is not the brake of the historical continuum of capitalist modernity. Because a “fair wage” is not possible within the capitalist mode of production, “just-ness” can only be the interruption of the wage relation and thus the continuum of the “civil war” between classes—the capitalist configuration of the counterposition between oppressed and oppressor.

Anticipating new forms of relationships means putting into discussion everyday work relations and the intrinsic capitalist use value of both machinery and technology. But it also means that it is not allowed to justify praxis as a means for the realization of an end. Instead of realizing a holy end, the political task is to end the means-ends relationship and its temporality and to turn to the temporality of anticipation (Rosenzweig 2005: 256).³ This task holds together ethics and politics by taking care of the qualitative change of relationships.⁴ Expanding “democracy beyond its current political form” has meaning only in the ethical dimension of anticipation, a dimension that concerns both the private and public life of the individual. Real change is nothing if individuals do not go beyond the distinction between public and private and if they do not overcome themselves in their relationships in order to become what is anticipated. Otherwise, they continue to

project outside themselves, maybe with pompous phrases, the change that they avoid making in themselves and in their relationships.

During the July Revolution in France, recalled Walter Benjamin, the revolutionaries were shooting at the clocks on the church towers, thus expressing the need to arrest time in order to begin a completely new historical time. Similarly, in 1919 the Spartacist uprising in its first fifteen days “changed the experience of time,” interrupted classic historical time, and founded a new time in which “all that is accomplished stands for itself, regardless of its consequences and its relationship with all of the complexity of both transiency and permanence of which history is made” (Jesi 2000: 20; my translation). Today shooting at the clocks of world stock markets could mean arresting their temporality in order to express the temporalities that are anticipated in new forms of being together. This possibility is present in today’s movements and can disclose new temporalities that are encapsulated in global modernity if only they are able to cross the threshold on which is written No Admittance Except on Business.

Notes

This essay is the result of discussions with colleagues in the seminar “Temporalities,” organized by the Committee on Globalization and Social Change at the City University of New York, and it was discussed as a part of the wider project of Next Generation Global Studies at the University of Padua. I extend to them my sincere thanks. I am also indebted to Banu Bargu, Harry Harootunian, and Tracy Ann Essoglou for their suggestions and comments. Of course, the responsibility is my own, but the outcome reflects a collective experience and effort.

- 1 “Synchronization” is the English translation of the Nazi term *Gleichschaltung*, which means “switching onto the same track.” According to Richard J. Evans (2005: 381), the Nazi *Gleichschaltung* was “a metaphor drawn from the world of electricity, meaning that all the switches were being put onto the same circuit, as it were, so that they could all be activated by throwing a single master switch at the centre.”
- 2 This perspective is instead that of Slavoj Žižek (2012: 88–89).
- 3 Without this anticipation, stressed Franz Rosenzweig (2005: 244), the goal is “something that interminably crawls along the long strategic roadway of time.”
- 4 A possible example is the *horizontalidad* expressed in the movements in Argentina. This form of direct decision making “rejects hierarchy and works as an ongoing process,” changing social relationships (Sitrin 2012: 3).

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