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Book Review

Enzo Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, Memory*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2017, 289pp.

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Abstract

Enzo Traverso explores the melancholic dimension of left-wing culture both historically and as a form of understanding the present. His aim is to rethink the history of socialism and Marxism in order to recover hidden traces of “communist melancholy” (48). It is argued that communism was once lived through images of the fallen and memories of catastrophe, but within a dialectic encompassing both past defeat and hope for a future utopia; In the current era, however, this dialectic has been shattered and a socialist future has become unimaginable. Traverso argues that such a future can only be recovered through deeper forms of melancholy, an argument supported through the ideas of heterodox Marxists writing in the interwar period. The key argument is Walter Benjamin’s: that a melancholic embrace of “dead objects” is needed in order for the past to be redeemed and a future restored.

Traverso argues that communism was never lived in a mood of light-hearted optimism, rather, its dominant forms were tragic and mournful. It is understandable why this should be: “the history of socialism” over the course of nearly two centuries had been “a constellation of defeats” (22); but, despite the prominence of remembrance and commemorations of defeat, the movement was sustained by a utopian vision of the future. This argument is supported through numerous images, never used merely for illustrative purposes but constituting, rather, a phenomenology of lived experience. The moment of loss and defeat is not represented as an abstract concept but is present in the bodies of the vanquished and the forms of mourning adopted by their comrades: through memoir, as in personal accounts of the Paris Commune and the Spartacist uprising in Berlin; in Käthe Kollwitz’ woodcut in commemoration of Karl Liebknecht, in the photograph of Salvador Allende in the besieged Monada Palace just before his suicide, and in the image of the dead body of Che Guevara in 1967; and through communist funeral and mourning rituals, as in “the silent processions reaching the Communards’ Wall... in Pere Lachaise”, and the funeral of Togliatti in Rome in 1964. The latter was an occasion for “authentic popular emotion” inspiring several works of art, including two films: Pasolini’s *Uccellacci e Uccellini*, and the Taviani Brothers’ *I Sovversivi*, as well as Renato Guttuso’s painting (48). When socialists embraced tragedy in this form they did not do so despondently; their utopian hopes for the future remained undiminished.

Lived experience suggests something direct and unmediated – an historical consciousness of the material forms of existence - but such experiences are still captured through certain types of images, significantly for Traverso, the Italian neorealism of the late 1940s with its location filming, use of non-professional actors and its proximity to the events it depicted. He cites Visconti’s *La terra trema* (1948) as a film describing the life of the people in all of its “suffering, oppression and struggle” (88), and ending not in victory but in defeat and resignation. Nevertheless, with catastrophe there is also hope and the message of the film is that the vision of a socialist future was undiminished. The theme of “‘victorious’ defeats” is continued with the films of Gillo Pontecorvo, *The Battle of Algiers* (1966) and *Burn* (1969), both depicting anticolonial struggles and influenced by Fanon’s *The Wretched of the*

Earth (1961). These films posit that victory will not be impeded by momentary defeats and that the liberation process cannot be stopped.

After 1989, the vision espoused by Visconti and Pontecorvo no longer worked. Following the defeat of communism this had ceased to function as a means through which the losses of the past were articulated into “the living flow of a political movement” within which both catastrophe and utopia “lived as an horizon of expectation and a historical perspective” (48, 51). Traverso argues that “defeat had turned communism into a realm of memory” (97). The danger of such a situation is that the past becomes an archive of relics, that it is no longer transmissible and can only be conserved. Even though the relationship to these past objects is intense and emotional the dialectical unity between catastrophic historical defeats and an envisioned future utopia has been shattered. Traverso argues that in such circumstances a melancholic gaze upon the past is inevitable but that it need not lead to passivity and resignation; these dead objects can be redeemed, and historical memory can be reactivated. This approach owes a great deal to Walter Benjamin, who wrote in the context of a similarly catastrophic era, and the significance of Benjamin to the book’s themes cannot be overestimated.

As with Traverso’s previous book – *The European Civil War* – its arguments depend on the writing of interwar and largely heterodox Marxist thinkers, mainly but not exclusively associated with the Frankfurt School: Adorno, Siegfried Kracauer, Ernst Bloch, Herbert Marcuse, Lucien Goldmann, and above all Benjamin whose ideas animate every chapter. A persistent theme found in the writing of Benjamin was a vision of history as catastrophe, wherein “the empathic and mournful exploration of the world reduced to a field of ruins... engenders a new vision” (47). Melancholy from this perspective is not just sadness but a form of “tenacious self-absorption” involving the embrace of “dead objects” (47). Melancholy was necessary in order for redemption to occur, enabling the overcoming of trauma and providing a route to critical understanding. Traverso, following Benjamin, argues that for revolutionaries, remembrance had not been confined to victories but “could also bear the tragedies of their defeats”; more than this, that such memories had been a source of enrichment and nourishment.

Since the 1990s memory functions differently, rather than describing “self-confident mass movements” whose future victories could be envisaged even at the moment of downfall, left-wing films now work through the past in a mournful and tragic way without any assured sense of a future. The most significant discussion of this claim is in relation to film-maker Chris Marker’s *A Grin Without a Cat*, which was envisaged in the wake of the defeats following 1968. The film was shot in 1977, then revised in 1993, and represents closure in a particularly intense way: it is “a sort of epitaph of the last revolutionary hopes of the 20th century... it transmits the freshness of the engagements of the 1960s and 1970s” but it is also a “posthumous homage to a closed time” (105). Marker’s film is obviously transitional in the sense that it still represents a moment of hope in the midst of looming disaster, whereas the films of Patricio Guzman exist within a different historical conjuncture, beginning with a chronicle of defeat in the three parts of *The Battle for Chile* (1975, 1976, 1979), and ending with *Nostalgia for the Light* (2011), a film “depicting memory as an impossible act of mourning” (117).

In the second half of the book a series of historical case studies explore the idea of a melancholic vision differently, not as an underlying presence but as the province of “contrapuntal thinkers” able to see beyond the limited epistemic horizon of conventional Marxists; sometimes there was dialogue between the two but mostly there were missed encounters and failed opportunities for the

revolutionary movement. Traverso discusses the idea of Bohemia in this respect. Bohemia rejected bourgeois convention, was associated with a precarious, artistic life, and tended towards transgressive behaviour; and in the midst of wretchedness, squalor and material deprivation it evinced a strong utopian feeling. Marx's attitude towards Parisian Bohemia in his writing on the 1848 revolution in France recognised its ambiguity as a group: "constantly polarised between the fundamental classes", at times "a source of insurrection" at other times "one of the bastions of Bonapartist counterrevolution" (127). Despite its unreliability as a political force, Bohemia's most lucid revolutionary artists in France during this era - Courbet, Baudelaire, Flaubert – were able to interpret the defeats of the 19th century with great clarity, producing works "of mourning [and] creating a melancholy culture that transmitted the memory of the vanquished" (135). Benjamin recognised the political ambiguities inherent in Bohemia but considered that its romantic detachment from bourgeois culture gave it the capacity to "activate the revolutionary potentialities of dreams, eroticism, and utopia," and that, in the case of Surrealism, it constituted the "revolutionary use of a social imagination" (140).

Bohemia was a set of artistic dispositions and intensely felt intellectual and personal commitments, but it was also a way of life for those leading a precarious existence; most political exiles subsisted in this latter way and the trajectories of Benjamin and Courbet as well as Marx and Trotsky made them Bohemians of a particular type. Marx's whole life, as a consequence of being a foreign exile, a Jew, impoverished, politically engaged and intellectually anti-conformist ensured his marginality (144). Benjamin more obviously embraced Bohemianism as an intellectual vocation, but his precarious existence as a writer without a patron or an academic position and as a refugee in Paris after 1933 was also evident. Trotsky is an interesting case because he was no philistine and his writing on art and literature revealed a marked albeit uneven commitment to the values of aesthetic freedom and avant-garde experimentation. Trotsky's life as an exile in Vienna during the First World War, frequenting its cafés and Bohemian literary circles, was in great contrast, though, to his later role as head of the Red Army, anticipated in an anecdote Traverso cites from the exile period, in which it had been suggested to Rudolf Hilferding that revolution in Russia was imminent, to which he responded: "'and who is supposed to make this revolution? Herr Trotsky at the Café Central?'" (147-8).

There are obvious political ambiguities within Bohemia but Traverso considers it to be something more than a decadent, naïve, primarily aesthetic rejection of bourgeois convention. He argues that "revolutions have often been the time... when Bohemia has abandoned its ghetto and... found in revolution its natural accomplishment" providing for its "spiritual preparation, its aesthetic anticipation, its utopian prefiguration, sometimes its intellectual elaboration and its political organisation". Once established, socialist societies have no apparent need for Bohemians and they are usually excluded, but in times of catastrophe, "Bohemia can... become the melancholy realm where, behind the façade of the restored order, the vanquished retire and meditate on their defeat" (150). Another chapter examines the history of Marxism in relation to anticolonial struggle, initially through a discussion of Marx's attitude towards the catastrophic consequences of capital accumulation and colonial rule. Marx's writing contained some isolated observations on "the emancipatory potential of colonised people", and he didn't conceive that every backward country would by necessity pass through capitalism on the road to a socialist society (158), but he was wedded to the Enlightenment idea of progress (159). Marx had a view of the 'Orient' as "a world of stagnation, immutable and paralysed by centuries of lethargy, congenitally unable to produce innovation and a cumulative development" (159), and, as brutal as it was, he "inclined towards a vision of Western domination as a providential destiny" (160). This legacy is then discussed by Traverso through the idea of a "missed dialogue" between C.L.R. James and Theodor Adorno, arguing that this was a failure of Western Marxism to confront its inherited "colonial unconscious" (175). Whilst the critical theory of the

Frankfurt School was pessimistic and melancholic, interpreting Nazism not as a regression to barbarism but as part of the instrumental rationality of the Enlightenment, the utopia it evoked was “a vague, abstract hope” (168). James, rather than dwelling on the collapse of Western civilisation “sought the fragments of [its] redemption” (173) and was able to conceive of a no less melancholic but powerfully liberating dialectic of catastrophe and utopia in the struggles of colonial peoples. In this he regarded the “violence of fascism and Nazism” to be “the result of a transfer into Europe of a wave of systematic destruction and oppression that had already been experimented with in the colonial world” (172). James’ history of the Haitian Revolution, *The Black Jacobins* (1938), anticipated an anticolonial Marxism by decades and for Traverso the missed encounter between its nascent form and Marxist critical theory in the 1930s was a tragic, melancholic, lost opportunity.

In the penultimate chapter Adorno’s complex relationship with Benjamin is addressed. Both exhibited a melancholic gaze in their writing but Benjamin’s material circumstances as well as his compulsively mournful intellectual disposition gave his a distinct inflection, more intense but also less pessimistic. Adorno was relatively sheltered from the impact of the Nazi takeover in Germany, only becoming aware of “the historical catastrophe embodied by National Socialism” towards the end of the war; Benjamin suffered its consequences from 1933 and his writing constantly evoke the concrete threat of fascism as an “historical and political form” (191). If both understood fascism as a disaster borne of the dialectic of modernity, Benjamin saw an opportunity for redemption, by recovering the vanished memories of the past and giving them life. The means to achieve this were elusive but Benjamin’s interest in Surrealism and its aim of winning “the energies of intoxication for the revolution”, and his advocacy of a “Gothic interpretation of Marxism” (195), suggested that the key was a dialectic able to encompass both catastrophe and utopia within its ambit.

Left-Wing Melancholia considers the current era - the period since the end of the 1970s understood as an enduring calamity, albeit one that has had its punctual and emblematic moments - in the context of a much longer history of tragedy and defeat, but the relationship of this history to the book’s argument about the present is interesting. Aside from a few carefully worded but rather poetic formulations, there is no attempt to define a melancholic Marxism adequate for the contemporary era. Traverso refers to Ernst Bloch’s concept of a future utopia as the realm of the “not yet”, and argues that following “the collapse of twentieth-century revolutions, utopia does not appear as a “not yet,” but rather as u-topia, a no longer existing place, a destroyed utopia that is the object of melancholy art” (119). In general, though, the examples he gives of such a melancholy art are few. The most sustained analysis is of Chris Marker’s *A Grin Without a Cat*, and given that this film in its different versions traverses the transitional decades of the era it might stand as an example of melancholy art fully aware of the depth and significance of the calamity it describes. The intense melancholy of Patricio Guzman’s more recent *Nostalgia for the Light*, however, is barely addressed by Traverso. And yet, these lacunae are not necessarily a weakness, because the book’s objectives are other than to provide a description of the present condition.

Left-Wing Melancholia explores the prospects for a reactivated, future-oriented Marxism not by observing glimmerings of hope in contemporary culture but more obliquely, through historical anticipations, discernable in the most intensely melancholic responses to earlier periods of crisis and catastrophic defeat. These responses were nearly always missed encounters, emanating from the most unorthodox writers within already unorthodox currents, figures who were shaped in the midst of catastrophe and whose sometimes-vertiginous ideas might not be available to the distant and detached observer. Such was the case in the distinction between Adorno and Benjamin: the former produced Western Marxism’s canonical texts but his insights were inferior to Benjamin’s, whose melancholy

was deep and uncompromising but also contained a redemptive moment. One might conjecture that such missed opportunities were historically tragic but also a matter of bad timing, and that they anticipate a future in which a socialist project is not exhausted. Such a future, Traverso argues, will first have to pass through the realm of memory and confront hopes and places “that no longer exist. The utopias of the twenty-first century still have to be invented” (119).

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