

# ‘Everything can be made better, except man’

## On Frédéric Lordon’s Communist Realism

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Over the past decade or so, Frédéric Lordon has morphed from Spinozist social philosopher and canny heterodox critic of political economy with a formation in Regulation Theory to one of the most prominent intellectual voices of the radical Left on the French scene<sup>1</sup> – a shift crystallised by his protagonism during the Nuit Debout protests that began in 2016 against the El Khomri labour law.<sup>2</sup>

Lordon’s activist, even revolutionary turn is evident in his 2019 book *Vivre sans?* (Living Without?). Here, Lordon’s critical intelligence is directed squarely at his own side, so to speak, in a patient, sympathetic but also unsparing vivisection of what he diagnoses as the anti-political drift of an autonomist, insurrectionist and ‘des-tituent’ camp most strongly identified with his own stablemates at the Paris-based publisher La Fabrique, the Invisible Committee (and their precursor, Tiqqun). This metaphysically-tinged ultra-leftism is articulated theoretically in an epochal challenge to Western biopolitics drawn from the writings of Giorgio Agamben, while its practical counterpart can be located in the inspiring experiments in anti-statist forms of life associated with the Zones à Défendre (ZAD) movement, especially around the occupations at Notre-Dame-des-Landes.<sup>3</sup> Lordon’s critical balance sheet also takes in a broader range of theorists and contemporary political experiences (with polemical sallies against Alain Badiou, Jacques Rancière and Deleuzianism, as well as reflections on the uses and abuses of the politics crystallised in the tag All Cops Are Bastards).

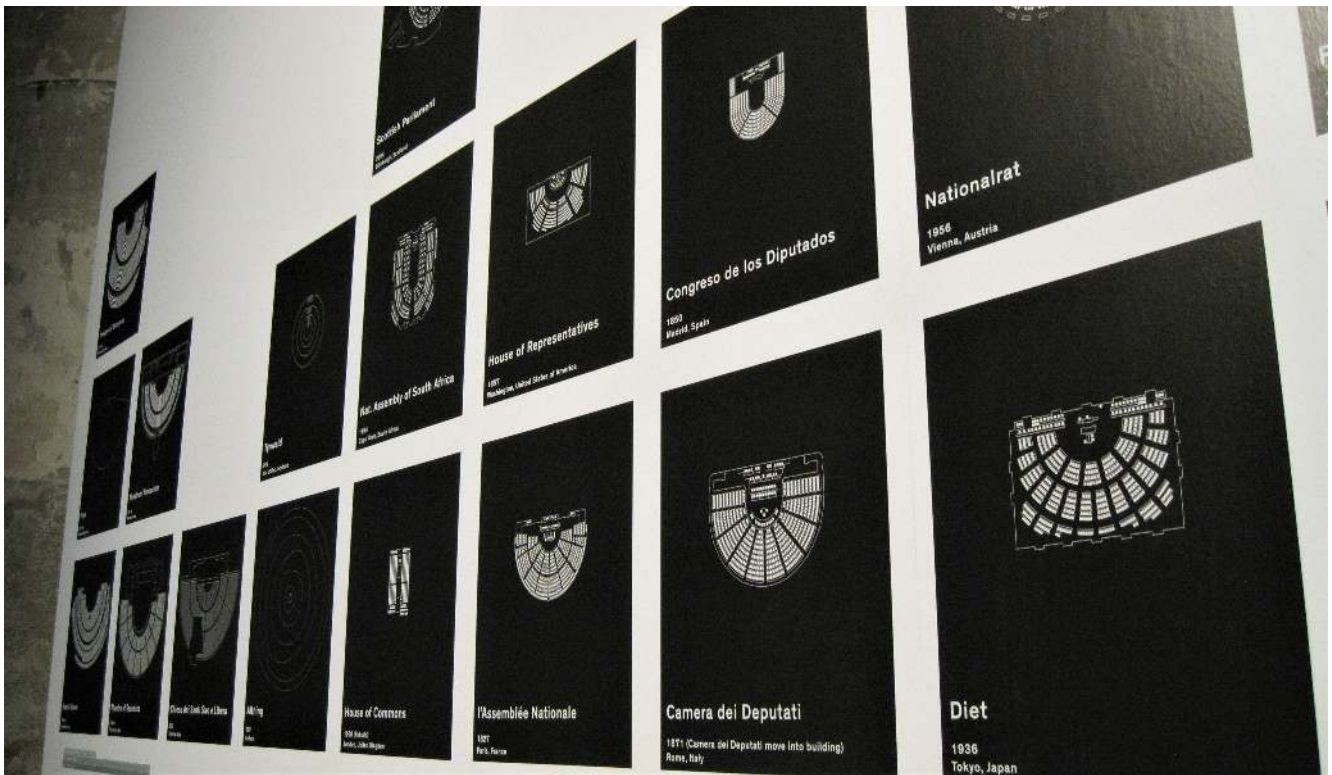
A propositional *pars construens* to the critical *pars destruens* developed in *Vivre sans?* is advanced in Lor-

don’s most recent book *Figures du communisme* (2021), which I will turn to in the second part of this article.

### ***Pars destruens*: Towards a critique of insurgent reason**

*Vivre sans?* takes the form of a set of numbered and thematically classified reflections on the powers and pitfalls of the anti-institutional imaginary of the contemporary radical and insurrectionary Left, prompted by incisive questions and problematisations from Félix Boggio Éwanjé-Épée (co-author with Stella Magliani-Belkacem of *Les Féministes blanches et l’Empire*, also published by La Fabrique, and editor at *ContreTemps*). As the book’s preface avers, this is not a conversation strictly speaking, as the exchanges took place in 2018 and 2019 by electronic correspondence. While it lacks the dialectical brio of a proper interview book like Raymond Williams’s *Politics and Letters*, Boggio Éwanjé-Épée’s contribution, albeit unobtrusive (a paragraph or sometimes one-page long question-intervention will be followed by 20 or 30 pages of exposition by Lordon), is very significant, not least in obliging Lordon to articulate his position more forthrightly on certain decisive themes (especially the role of race and racialisation in anti-capitalist politics), and in leading him to a looser, more flowing as well as more combative genre of exposition than in previous books like *Willing Slaves of Capital* or *Imperium*.

The guiding question with which Lordon begins – namely, why do movements like the ZAD combine intransigently anti-systemic practices and slogans with a minimalism when it comes to global prospects of eman-



icipation – sets the stage for his exploration of the imaginary of an anti-capitalist Left marked by a kind of post-revolutionary ultra-radicalism. Lordon inquires sympathetically into the lived common sense that sees institutions as an infernal trap for any emancipatory activity – a predicament he approaches in terms of the intimate bond between the division of labour and the division of powers. From the workplace to the university, we witness ‘a centripetal, intransitive drift in organisations that only live in view of internal finalities, in the growing forgetting of any external finalities’,<sup>4</sup> operating as though governed by a cancerous and fractal law of bureaucratisation that pervades all of our social, economic and political structures of collective action and labour.

Lordon is a fine guide through the phenomenology of our institutional captivity, touching *inter alia* on the lie as a symptom of institutional declension or the perplexing and ubiquitous figure of the spokesperson, understood as the embodiment of institutional pathology, of the imperative to persevere at all costs that defines the being of contemporary institutions. His effort at an immanent critique of an anti-institutional Left imaginary is aided by his frank agreement with its starting point: an ‘*ethical disgust*’ with our time and its forms of life.<sup>5</sup> But it’s the philosophical underpinnings of the imaginary of ‘living

without’ that Lordon is concerned with, and which he tackles by juxtaposing its ethical imaginaries of *disidentification* to a Spinozist anthropology articulated around the capacity to *modify oneself* and to *differ*.

The virtue of this Spinozism for Lordon is a kind of *realism* about socially-embedded anthropological tendencies towards belonging, identity, group-formation and an ultimately uncircumventable institutional life – or, as demonstrated at length in his earlier *Imperium*, the impossibility of doing without *power* in human affairs. This lays the groundwork for Lordon’s effort to move through the ethical orientation of the contemporary Left to think about the logics of numbers, of force and of material constraints that are the indispensable resources for an anti-capitalist politics. These are in a sense the basic axes of the book: on the one hand, a Spinozist philosophical-anthropological critique of the conception of human life and action that subtends the ‘living without’ paradigm; on the other, a strategic appraisal of the social dynamics of power that determine any fight against (e.g., the Gilets Jaunes) or flight from (e.g., the ZAD) the grip of capitalism and its state.

Lordon’s plea is for an anti-capitalist politics that is intransigent in its opposition and strategic intentions but also doesn’t tell itself stories about the collective,

psychic and anthropological material it is working with. A powerful leitmotiv in this revolutionary realism, so to speak, is the need (disavowed by the anti-institutional left) to confront the *logic of numbers*, the fact that ‘if politics is the business of large numbers, it is not certain that we can really encounter it once we give it an ethic of salvation as its horizon ... The aporia of “politics through ethics” is that one of its terms reserves it for the small number while the other calls on the large’.<sup>6</sup>

Lordon grounds his objections to the anti-institutional imaginary of the contemporary radical Left in a critical and clinical panorama of the anti-political (to wit, anti-realist) tendencies in contemporary European philosophy, presented as the speculative taproots of that imaginary. The four targets of the critique are Deleuze, Rancière, Badiou and Agamben. All, according to Lordon, evade the realist politics of numbers, power and force that are his ultimate horizon – Deleuze by juxtaposing revolutionary becomings to actual revolutionary transition, Rancière by celebrating the rarity of politics, Badiou by presenting a conception of the political subject that makes him into an incarnation of the exceptional Spinozist sage (the one living beyond imagination and ideology), Agamben with his Left-Heideggerian yearning for a catastrophe of forms of life in the context of the *separation* – of beings from being, of actuality from potentiality, of life from itself – that defines Western metaphysics and politics as such.

Lordon presents this ‘constellation of antipolitics’ with verve, but the price of the polemic is tendentiousness. The conceptual targets of his critique – the distinction between lines of flight/becomings and strata/actuality in Deleuze, or the separation of subjective exceptionality from a degraded everyday in Badiou – are well selected but studiously neglect arguments that might resonate or interfere with Lordon’s own. Deleuze, for one, for all his Bergsonism, was also an obsessive thinker of institutions (from his texts of the 1950s on ‘Instincts and Institutions’ and Hume as a thinker of artifice, institutionality and jurisprudence, all the way to salient dimensions of his work with Guattari), while Badiou’s political thinking and practice is signally concerned with a capacity for exceptional political action which is in no way ‘aristocratic’ or requiring the individualised figure of the ‘wise man’ (think of the prominent place in his political practice of organising with undocumented workers,

of Maoism’s refusal of expertise, etc.). That said, Lordon does capture important blindspots and impasses among these thinkers that could be seen to affect their broader political imaginary, for instance by registering both in Deleuze and the ZAD ‘the tragic point of the politics of flight: it is entirely likely to reconstitute the very thing it is seeking to withdraw from’.<sup>7</sup>

Lordon is also effective in showing how the very distinction between the rare political subject and the individual as ‘interested’ human animal that governs, say, Badiou’s *Ethics*, is at odds with the insights of Spinoza, for whom the dimension of interest is insurmountable (thus turning Badiou into a Kantian moralist *malgré lui*). Quite rightly, I think, Agamben appears in these pages as the paragon of the speculative-discursive trend that underlies an anti-institutional Left imaginary, especially in terms of his articulation of the guiding notions of *separation, suspension and destitution*, as well as the Italian philosopher’s abiding concern with the devastating ‘ontological loss’ that marks our present condition. Here again, Spinoza (and especially his thinking of *mode* or *manner*) is enlisted to refute the ontology underlying Agamben’s thinking of bare life – forcing us to think that ‘even in the hell of the camp life is mannered [*maniérée*]’.<sup>8</sup>

Agamben’s entire metaphysical perspective is subjected to further Spinozist critique as Lordon tackles the very notion that the power to act could be suspended, that one could appeal to *impotentiality* – since Spinoza teaches us that the effects of any power or capacity follow *necessarily*, such that ‘a power suspending itself is a contradiction in terms’.<sup>9</sup> A conception of political action and power drawn from Spinoza is accordingly juxtaposed to a constellation of the antipolitical that evades the urgent challenges of modern political collectivity and conflict via *intransitivity* (Deleuze’s becomings without a future), *aesthetics* (Rancière’s rare political moments) or *virtuosity* (Badiou’s political subject as exceptional sage). *Vivre sans?* also contains some perspicuous comments about how and why *art* plays such a salient role in a thinking of politics as ontologically exceptional, one that ultimately disavows the arena of political struggle as actually constituted by powers, conflict and numbers.

This anti-political anti-realism finds its apotheosis in a thinking of destitution without institution, as advanced by Agamben and the Invisible Committee, which ignores how the multitude exerts power over itself and



embodies collectivity in powers and institutions – in an *imperium*, ‘the fundamental sovereignty of the whole over the parts’.<sup>10</sup> If we come, Spinozistically, to understand institution as naming ‘every effect, every manifestation of the power of the multitude’,<sup>11</sup> then the destituent paradigm is sterile. When we understand that the collective is a common power to activate actions, to make its members do something – what Lordon terms *faire faire* – the ‘institutional fact’ cannot be circumvented (as Lordon will later argue via examples from the ZADs and Chiapas). In the end, ‘destroying formal, visible institutions doesn’t get away from the institutional fact itself, because it is a fact whose nature is at once ontological, anthropological, and structural’.<sup>12</sup>

To think through how visions of the state haunt the anti-institutional common sense of the radical Left, Lordon explores how the ZAD experiment manifests the way in which norms and institutions pervade even (or especially) those moments and movements that build themselves on an anti-institutional animus and philosophy. In Lordon’s Spinozist horizon, there is no exit from institutions and no escape from norms. While we may, indeed *must*, discriminate between norms and institutions, *formally* speaking any form of collective life will not be able to do without either, whether it is a monolithic bureaucratic state or an anarchist commune. The question is not to make oneself ungovernable – a dead end from a Spinozist view – but asking *by whom* one is governed and *how*.

In order to bring this point home, Lordon focuses on some of the sensitive points in current debates across the (French) Left, especially as concerns the *police*. While the latter understood as a specific repressive apparatus can certainly be an object of opposition and abolition (and should be, especially in light of the French repression of the Gilets Jaunes, as Lordon details at some length), a ‘formal’ concept of the police is unavoidable when approaching any collective whatever. Police is the name here for ‘every institutional apparatus of accommodation of differends internal to a collective’.<sup>13</sup> In this sense, we find the police everywhere that a collective interpolates itself into these inescapable internal conflicts – which need not mean that this extremely general police-function will find itself instantiated in someone who looks and acts like a cop.

In this sense, *contra* Rancière, there is no *politics*

without *police*, if we understand both as ways of accommodating, mediating and articulating passionate differends *within* collectives. The issue is not to *disavow* but to *control* this function of ‘interposition’ that defines collective institutions – to disconnect interposition as far as possible from its capture by apparatuses of individual and group *domination*.<sup>14</sup> Lordon explores the way in which (as Pierre Clastres already intimated for so-called primitive societies) the lighter the footprint of official institutions, the more collectives rely on constant internal surveillance of everyone by everyone. This gaze of the collective is among the objects of disavowal in anti-institutional perspectives, and one of the dimensions of experiments in antisystemic life that reveal how ‘the “camp of difference” practices similarity [*le semblable*] more than it imagines, even grounding in it the possibility of its experimentations’.<sup>15</sup> What needs to be faced up to instead is the institutional inventiveness of the assemblages (*agencements*) that emerge in flights from and fights against the capitalist state.

When Lordon and Boggio Éwanjé-Épée turn their attention to the limits of a possible state takeover by the Left, it is in order to weigh up with sober realism not just the material but the affective dimensions of the composition of the state personnel (repressive and otherwise). Even its fascist dimensions are understood as ‘sadist drives poured into a legitimating institutional mould’.<sup>16</sup> What needs to be confronted then is an alignment of interests between the ‘men of State’ with their generic passion for *order* and capitalist classes whose priority lies in the *transitive* use of the state *qua* instrument of class reproduction. Here we find ‘a generalised bloc of physical and symbolic violence’.<sup>17</sup> If we really confront these material and affective facts then we realise that what the Left needs to confront are ‘*macroscopic* struggles, *gigantomachias*. Capital is a titan. To bring it down, we therefore need giants’.<sup>18</sup>

Lordon is emphatic that evading the realistic strictures of this *gigantomachia* and deluding oneself that a *defection* from the state can pose a challenge to the domination of capital, is not an option – notwithstanding the obvious fact that the state is not neutral but is rather (largely, but not totally or ontologically) the state of *capital*. Lordon is particularly biting here on the bad faith of those self-described radical intellectuals who in their phobia of the state sing the praises of the ‘huts’ (of the

exodus from the urban in the ZADs) but who avoid confronting the violence that any secession from the state both involves and requires. Radical innocuousness is here juxtaposed to a *tragic* sense of history.<sup>19</sup>

Lordon embraces a radical critique of the absolute limits of formalistic democracy, and a strategic reckoning with the pitfalls of reformism, while rejecting the idea that only destitution, defection or flight can properly respond to this parlous state of affairs. We are enjoined to reinvent a way of strategically and theoretically reckoning with the fact that capital will go to war with any substantial alternative to its order (this what he calls the 'L point' – L as in Lenin). This obliges us to reimagine and practice anew the horizon of expropriation (not just of capital but of its superstructural scaffolding, above all the media) and the dictatorship of the proletariat as a name for mass democracy in conditions of frontal conflict (though the nature of both that dictatorship and this proletariat remain underdetermined across Lordon's work). Over and over, the conversation returns to the need to ready oneself with a steady pulse and eyes wide open for the seriousness of the confrontation that would follow

any real challenge to the neoliberal status quo (as evidenced by the response to the rather modest and strategically immature dress rehearsals witnessed in post-crisis Greece or the Gilets Jaunes mobilisations).

A mass politics, a politics of numbers is here presented as the only corrective to the wielding of colossal class violence against any substantive alternative, while the state reveals itself as a precarious but necessary potential concentration of the energy of the multitude, which in the throes of emergency and transition manifests itself not in its institutional crystallisation but as 'the power of the masses in a state of mobilisation'.<sup>20</sup> Behind this risky but inevitable wager on the question of the state in a horizon of conflict and transformation lies the Spinozist tenet that, *contra* the doxa on the far Left, 'alienation does not come from outside, it is our own production'; the strategic deficit of the Left imaginary is compounded by a philosophical-anthropological error, 'the misunderstanding of the relation of immanence of alienated things to alienated individuals'.<sup>21</sup> This is also the sense in which '[t]he violence of money is *our* violence, the violence of our own acquisitive desire'.<sup>22</sup> As Hegel once





intimated, seeing politics through a tragic lens requires ‘consciousness of oneself, but consciousness of oneself as an enemy’.<sup>23</sup>

In one of his interventions, Boggio Ewanjé-Epée rightly notes the way in which the desire for ‘living without’ is always both a desire for the end of *institutional separation* and for the end of the *division of labour in the economic sense*. For Lordon, we must confront this nexus and do so via a Spinozist philosophical-anthropological definition of the economy as ‘the set of social relations in which collective material reproduction is organised’.<sup>24</sup> The division of labour is thus inseparably an economic and political problem. Or rather, it is *the* economic-political problem, and the one that the contemporary anti-statist destituent Left imaginary never properly confronts. Yet, notwithstanding Lordon’s genuine sympathy for contemporary experiments in escaping the death-grip of the wage-form, he continues to ask the political question, the revolutionary question, which is that of *scale*, also and especially as concerns the domain of collective material reproduction. But questioning the scale at which capital may be challenged is not separable from matters of affect and anthropology, namely: how can an attack on capitalism be organised that doesn’t require the virtuosity and virtues of the ZADists? And how can we confront the fact that these zones and enclaves, however withdrawn, also reproduce themselves *via* the very system they are fighting against, never being fully delinked or autarchic (in energetic, supply or logistical terms)?

Unlike his objections to the theoretical constellation of the anti-political, the critique of the ZAD is a nuanced and sympathetic one, as Lordon also stresses how these enclaves are also experiments and training-grounds in learning how to live beyond the ‘gigantic enforced powerlessness, individual and collective’ that capital organises, as it deskills multitudes from the most quotidian of activities (though it may be noted that the rediscovery of reproductive skills, from mechanics to baking, is perfectly compatible with ‘real subsumption’, and can take exquisitely petty-bourgeois or neo-bourgeois forms). For Lordon, there is much to be learned from experiences like the ZAD but, if they’re not to be relegated to unthreatening enclaves, they need to be ‘scaled up’ to the level of the anti-capitalist gigantomachia, and thus incorporated into mixed and transitional forms that cannot

depend on the face-to-face gift or the altruistic passions of ethical virtuous. And this strategic, compositional analysis needs to confront the ‘conflict of antagonistic affects’<sup>25</sup> that traverses every one of us, when we consider the privations and gains that may be envisaged and desired in terms of an exit from capitalism. Here *Vivre sans?* addresses the crucial role that the ‘climate affect’ could have in inclining bodies individual and collective towards more radical outcomes – something that Lordon sees as closer to the mixed model of the Lip watch-factory occupation of 1973 than the ZADs: maintaining much of the large-scale division of labour but combining and displacing this with radical efforts at decommmodification, emancipation of workers, dis-alienation of tasks – all of this grounded in a drastic transformation of property rights.

By way of conclusion, Lordon returns to a more speculative register in a concerted polemic against the ethico-anthropological dimension of the anti-political imaginary of the contemporary far Left, especially tackling the anti-civilisational notes, the ‘Orphic antipolitics’ in the writings of the Invisible Committee and Julien Coupat – which bring to a pitch the sterile antinomy, for Lordon, between *institutions-as-death*, on the one hand, and *true-life*, on the other, in their aim of ‘living without civilisation’ – an antinomy that Spinozist anthropology shows up in all its delusory quality. This confrontation leads Lordon to stress the need to think ‘the institutionalisation of destabilisation in the institutions of stability’<sup>26</sup> – a reflection that incidentally bears some affinity with that other, institutional Deleuze (it could be argued that all of *What is Philosophy?*, written with Guattari, is organised in these terms, with *chaos* representing the risk of formlessness, *doxa* the ossification into predictable identity and lifelessness).

*Vivre sans?* is an invigorating polemical intervention and probably also the best introduction to the overall stakes of Lordon’s work – particularly effective in arguing just why Spinozist speculations on philosophical anthropology may be of analytical and strategic moment. It is not uninteresting however to wonder how the argument’s scope might have been affected by moving beyond its Franco-centric polemical animus, not least in tackling the practical and theoretical question of ‘living without’ as it manifests itself in the wealth of contemporary debates and movements that take place today,

especially in the US, under the aegis of a renewed *abolitionism*. Arguably, as manifest in a long history of political struggles and experiments, and related theoretical reflections in the Black radical tradition, the question of abolition, pivoting around the prison-industrial-complex and its pervasive juridical and repressive extensions but looking far beyond them, articulates many of the political energies explored in Lordon's work, but shares little if anything with the metaphysical anti-institutionalism that is the principal target of Lordon's criticisms.<sup>27</sup>

### ***Pars construens*: For a consequential communism**

*Figures du communisme* (Figures of Communism) consolidates Lordon's increasingly intransigent turn to a revolutionary politics capable of defining the strategic parameters of a break with the capitalist status quo and the institution of a new mode of production, consumption and distribution – which is also to say new regimes of passions and desires. Where previous work, including *Imperium* and *Vivre sans?*, sounded a note of anthropological realism against the 'abolitionist' horizons of a theoretical ultra-left imagining a world without institutions brought about by destituent power, *Figures* can best be described as a protracted plea for *communist realism*, voicing the urgent need for the critique of capitalism to arm itself with strategic and political *consequentiality*. It is a call to recognise that the ravages which capitalism is inflicting on workers and nature alike – potentially putting into question the very viability of human life on the planet – require a move beyond a generic anti-capitalism and the embrace of a systematic and implementable vision of the termination of the profit, wage and finance as structuring principles of our everyday life, ultimately aimed at the transition to a wholly different way of organising collective life, one that can assume, in a new guise, the name of *communism*.

If *Imperium* and *Vivre sans?* contended that the Left should cease telling itself stories about the possibility of doing entirely without the forms of transcendent power and compulsion generated by the multitude itself (state, nation, police, law, etc.), *Figures* shifts register, strenuously arguing that the most pernicious of contemporary political fantasies, especially among self-described progressives, is the notion that the com-

pound violences and catastrophes of capitalism can be addressed through reforms, good intentions, peaceful energetic transitions or parliamentary roads. At the same time, Lordon wants to compensate for what he perceives as the overly speculative-abstract character of recent debates on the idea of communism by advancing a prospect for communism that is also an implementable, desirable, and in some sense a 'quotidian' or everyday (if also utopian and ruptural) 'figure', capable of animating and crystallising social desires otherwise captured by rudderless opposition or anxious reaction.

As the book's prologue intimates, the Covid-19 crisis should not be allowed to go to waste, and the simple if demanding imperative of a wholesale transformation of social life in light of the pathologies further revealed by the pandemic needs to be confronted with sobriety and intransigence. An order of needs wholly other than that imposed by capitalism is on the agenda, beginning with the priority of health and ecology, under the heading of *living well* and *living intelligently*. But neither health nor a virtuous metabolism with nature are possible unless the economic question, the question of livelihood and social reproduction is confronted. This will turn out to be the core of Lordon's communist proposal. Communism is nothing less than the termination of capitalist insecurity, of a precarity that plunges deep into our bodies, psyches, and our very perception of the time of life. As Lordon declares:

The society which leaves prehistory aims, through collective organisation and at all scales, the greatest possible stabilisation in the material conditions of individuals. No one should have to depend for their life on a versatile intermediary – sovereign and tyrannical – whether it be in the guise of the 'employer' or the 'market'. It is thus up to society as a whole unconditionally to guarantee everyone access to the socially determined means of material tranquillity. ... Private property will no longer have any enjoyment but that of use. Its exploitation for the ends of valorisation belongs to prehistory. Definitively.<sup>28</sup>

This vision of an end to capitalist insecurity and a reorganisation of the priorities of health, life and nature is accompanied not just by the need to reinvent the division of labour but by the recognition that these questions of social reproduction are the premises to 'the development of the creative powers of all'.

As in invocations of *gigantomachia* in *Vivre sans?*, it

is Lordon's unshaken conviction that 'only a phenomenal deployment of political energy can stop capitalism from leading humanity to its demise, a deployment which usually carries the name of "revolution"'.<sup>29</sup> The unprecedented character and urgency of the contemporary situation – especially but not only at the ecological level – requires abandoning all of the inconsequential tales of piecemeal reforms or peaceful transitions voiced by the 'great party of programmes without consequences' and confronting both the magnitude of the task and the formidable obstacles lying in its path, namely the organised force of capital and its institutions. But what must be done also needs to be imagined, made palpable, intelligible, desirable, and this is the task that Lordon sets himself with his plea for *figuration*, one which pivots – in the dialogue he establishes with the Catholic-communist economist Bernard Friot<sup>30</sup> – on the 'wage for life' (Friot's formulation) or the 'general economic guarantee' (Lordon's), understood as the only path through which to free ourselves from the pitiless capitalist domination of the *market* and *employment*.

Only such a general economic guarantee, according to Lordon, can cut through the vicious link between financialised capitalist accumulation, on the one hand, and the twin devastation of workers and nature, on the other – a devastation made even more vicious by the fact that under market and wage conditions any consequential action against ecological catastrophe can often appear to be *against* the immediate interest of workers. The only path to resolve this is the 'disconnection of activity and revenue; collective property of use after the abolition of private property in the means of production; the sovereignty of associated producers; the complete closure of finance; a federal system of funds [*caisses*] that direct the subsidy of investments and the decisions that orient the division of labour'.<sup>31</sup>

The task, the only serious one, is nothing less than the building of a new *mode of production* capable of answering to our material desires, which in turn need to be recalibrated in view of the threat to our life on the planet. Linking back to the polemical survey of the contemporary Left imaginary in *Vivre sans?*, *Figures* rests on the claim that an escape from the economy for the sake of horizontality, enclaves or destituent power is powerless, since, even should we strive to forget it, 'the economy' – namely 'the set of ways in which we collectively face

the necessity to persevere materially'<sup>32</sup> – *will never forget us*. Capitalism is destroying us, capitalism must be destroyed – one can sense in this motto the magnitude of the change undergone by Lordon's perspective, not just since his Regulationist beginnings but even from his radical critique of finance and the Euro in the wake of the 2008 crisis.

Part I of *Figures*, 'The Forces of Inconsequentiality (Denials, Avoidances, Delays)', returns us to polemical terrain but this time the critical targets are not on the anti-institutional ultra-Left but share a kind of inconsequential progressivism that refuses to confront the facts of the Capitalocene, choosing instead to levy its criticism at capitalism in its current configuration, rather than capitalism *as such*. Much of the attack here is on a reformist mainstream that proliferates pseudo-solutions which systematically avoid confronting the constitutive link between the structures of capital accumulation and ecological devastation. In passing, Lordon also notes that these bad faith reformisms are also made possible by narrowing down the ecological question to fossil fuels alone while ignoring pollution, extinction, etc. The very notion of ecological crisis as an opportunity for renewing or relaunching a 'Green' capitalism appears as a primary symptom of the incoherence or 'inconsequence' of much liberal and progressive opinion, unable realistically to draw the inescapable conclusions from the very science it supposedly accepts. Capitalist hegemony has reached such an extension and such intensity that the notion of reform or regulation as a solution is simply no longer tenable.

If we define capitalism as 'the acquired (and juridically guaranteed) capacity by private property in the means of production to compel labour-power into a relationship of *hierarchical subordination*',<sup>33</sup> then, according to Lordon, any proposal to democratise the firm as a step towards alleviating or resolving ecological and social reproduction crises is tantamount (if it wishes to be *consequential*) to abolishing capitalism as such. But Lordon is also extremely sceptical about those more philosophical perspectives that bank on transformations in our worldviews or forms-of-life as the prelude to confronting ecological disaster. His Spinozist realism also dictates that *ontological* and *anthropological transitions*, even if they might be possible, require energy and time that is simply not available under current conditions of urgency,



which will require mass, ruptural and state-mediated political action (there are many affinities here with Andreas Malm's plea for eco-Leninism in his recent book on the nexus between the pandemic and the climate emergency<sup>34</sup>).

Bad faith reformism applies to the twinned crises of ecology and social reproduction the same delay-and-distract tactics that the notion of a 'democratic and social Europe' did during the crisis of the Eurozone (as he quips, 'abstract Europeanism is the epochal form of a moralism without consequences'<sup>35</sup>). Lordon here repurposes his critique of the critique of the sovereign nation-state from *Imperium* and other texts to skewer climate internationalism as an avoidance of the state's role as the immediate terrain of climate struggles. His proposal is that instead of accepting the reality of a globalised capital while chastising national economies the problem be reversed: 'rather than seeking, with capitalism as given and invariant, a solution to the local-global contradiction – the contradiction of global common goods abandoned to deranged national sovereignties – one needs to tackle the very force which established the externalities of disaster: capitalism'.<sup>36</sup>

Some of the sallies here against the middle-class internationalism of hypocritical jet-setting elites, and of a revolution that will never take place by Zoom, fall a little flat. The negative obsession with travelling and tourism is still a little too internal to the discourses of the contemporary intellectual bourgeoisie (limiting conference travel is not exactly a transitional measure). And while the call for 'slow versions of internationalism' is well taken, the claim that 'internationalism is not a political form'<sup>37</sup> is under-argued and unpersuasive, suffering considerably from the lack of engagement with the communist history and theory of the latter, but also with extant forms of struggle against capital and its ecological devastations (Via Campesina, etc.).

Part II, 'Communism as General Economic Guarantee', contains the core of Lordon's contemporary communist prospect – one that combines, on the one hand, the economic-political realism of consequential change (against efforts to rearrange the deck chairs on the Titanic, for which he emphatically faults the likes of Thomas Piketty), and, on the other, the anthropological realism which casts doubt on any communism that would require a thoroughgoing transformation in its human ma-

terial or would demand from communist the cultivating of exceptional virtues. No communism can demand anthropological engineering, though its transformations, consequential as they must be, will no doubt rewire our needs and desires as they progress.

As things stand, what is the primary obstacle to the communist project? The reign of the economy understood as 'the tyranny of autonomised and fetishised exchange value'.<sup>38</sup> Note that this differs from the trans-historical or 'formal' notion of the economy which Lordon juxtaposes to ultra-leftism in *Vivre sans?*, as well as elsewhere in these pages (as with the 'formal' concept of the police, this is the one that *cannot* be abolished, it's a general function of social life). The key then is how to make collective material reproduction possible outside of the value-form and its associated forms of power. More specifically, it is a matter of destroying capitalist value and employment in tandem, along with their distinctive institutions: the right of private property in the means of production, the labour market and finance.<sup>39</sup>

As in *Vivre sans?*, it is rethinking the *division of labour* at a *macrosocial* level which is the key to any consequential challenge to capital. Without this, marginality, defeat or absorption will be the fate of any anti-capitalism. The macrosocial is not merely cumulative, not just the addition or federation of autonomous communal realities. Autonomies, which are important experiences in themselves and practical schools in which to forge new social and economic habits, will need to be reinscribed into a system-wide division of labour. This will require politically rethinking the division of labour in terms of its ends (for what?) and its means (with whom and with what, in which arrangements, through what forms of power?). The commune-form is not the (only) prism through which to approach this. Any 'transition' that takes these challenges on board will be called upon to confront the fact that the abolition of capitalist social relations will also mean the end or substantial transformation of capitalist lifestyles and material habits. The wager is to make not just politically viable, but politically *desirable*, the passage from quantity to quality, from material acquisitiveness to 'material tranquillity for everyone'.<sup>40</sup> To make people *want* and *will* communism, in other words.

For Lordon, the 'great replacement' (of capitalism with communism) will perforce falter if it makes excess-



ive demands on the not-new men and women who will have to carry out and endure it. In this regard, Lordon seems to be following Brecht's wisdom as voiced in one of his parables of Herr Keuner: 'Everything can be made better ... except man.'<sup>41</sup>

Any transition that fails to deal with basic needs and desires will be immediately devastated by the mortal enemy of revolutionary transitions – the inflationary black market. Sacrifices will no doubt be inevitable, but a material basis must be secured. What Lordon seeks to lay out here then is not a full programme for this communist transition but some substantive and strategic guidelines, what he terms exercises in method and consequence.

A social organisation truly alternative to capitalism and its destructive effects will require holding on to three imperatives: (1) in the unavoidably collective process of material reproduction ('economy' in the non-capitalist sense), individuals participate as equals, without hierarchical subordination; (2) the aim of social organisation is to *guarantee* material tranquillity at the highest possible level; (3) due to the harms it engenders, global production is *a priori* an enemy of nature and must be

minimised in scope and intensity at all costs. Failing to answer the question of the mode of production and the forms of social reproduction, anti-capitalism is condemned to remain interstitial, parasitic and in ultimate bad faith in its *de facto* dependence on the mechanisms of accumulation it claims to be opposing. But to pose the question of the macrosocial is also to pose the problem of the state.

Here Lordon seems more sanguine about the local than in *Vivre sans?* He affirms the ethico-political as well as material value of a principle of subsidiarity: 'the more [production] possible at the more local [level] possible'. In dialogue with the work of Bernard Friot, Lordon proposes as a starting point of his communist proposal for social reproduction unmediated by financial markets that the value-added of firms be *entirely* contributed to collective funds that will in turn govern the social redistribution of resources and value. The key requisite of this proposal is the 'euthanasia' of the arbitrary power of bosses and the end of the dependence of individual workers on the power of owners – the 'wage' (Lordon objects to Friot's moniker of 'wage for life', preferring 'economic

guarantee' to mark the rupture) reconfigured as a medium of withdrawal from capitalist precarity. Lordon provides a summary sketch of Friot's proposals, focusing on how patterns of consumption are to be guided by citizen deliberation (this is a system dubbed *conventionnement*, the same term used for doctors registered with social security), so that a portion of individual consumption will be channelled towards socially beneficial production.

Lordon notes the significance of the inducement to consume and produce in view of socially agreed goals but especially underscores that political deliberation will take place in assemblies at a territorial level corresponding to the kind of production at hand, weaving together the political and economic. But Lordon's realism rears its head again as he enumerates the immanent reasons of capitalist self-defence, and why Friot's notion that this process could begin *from within the political institutions of capitalism*, from 'democracy as we know it', is misguided (we could add here that Friot seems to underestimate the 'geo-economic' conditions for the *trente glorieuses*, and the place of colonialism and decolonisation within them).

Friot's analogy with postwar social-democratic gains is no longer viable, according to Lordon, who inserts a critical wedge between the quashed or diverted small transitions *within* capitalism and the urgency of the large transition *from* capitalism. This is the premise for his figuration of the 'general economic guarantee', the material bedrock of a communism capable of confronting the intractable challenges of social reproduction. Here Lordon makes another anthropological detour to caution against certain communist temptations – firstly, that of imagining that the abolition of money is a necessary prelude to the abolition of social violence. We are reminded that (acquisitive) violence goes deeper than the capitalist money-form, that the violence is (in) *us*; but also, that a *macrosocial* division of labour will involve forms of *mediation* that may demand reimagining in a post-capitalist vein the workings of money and markets, now reconfigured so they are no longer tribunals judging over the material survival of individuals. What is called for is nothing less than a 'complete, radical, anticapitalist redefinition of value'.<sup>42</sup>

Lordon advances a mixed system that will incorporate both society-wide planning, socially guided collective

projects of production (in the framework of funds whose priorities will be set by political deliberation) and the 'private proposition' (in the sense of initiative, rather than exclusive ownership). Nevertheless, Lordon enjoins us to think seriously about the hardships and potential pitfalls of the transition, to confront the problem of a 'transition within the transition' that will 'freeze' certain aspects of the division of labour in order to secure social reproduction (in the face of inevitable capitalist sabotage and encirclement). Again, certain regulative principles will need to be secured: to *maximise* freedom of economic activity (while recognising an irreducible kernel of subjection and compulsion for the sake of the social good); to work towards the *technical de-division of labour* while being realistic about the needs of specialisation. In the meantime, those assigned *transitionally* to difficult or onerous forms of labour will be differentially remunerated at the highest level.

The passage from the pseudo-freedoms of a capitalist society to the greater freedoms and assumed constraints of a communist one requires developing a communist discursive virtue, namely that of *naming constraints and necessities*, a virtue of 'minimal lucidity' that does not tell itself stories about the spontaneous emergence of social harmony (whether of a neoliberal or *anarchisant* stripe). But the subjections required by communism are offset by its gains: the end of precarity and the stoppage of the planet's destruction; the establishment of the sovereignty of producers and abolition of private property in the means of production (replaced by property of use); the institution of a new macrosocial division of labour, combining planning, collective deliberation and autonomous initiative. For all this to obtain, Lordon argues, *debt* and *finance* must be terminated, with their attendant violence against workers and public services in the name of profitability and austerity. The *normalising, constraining* force of the financial markets, with their impersonal and inflexible limits imposed on any form of emancipatory collective action here appear – lessons of Greece ... – as the number one enemy of any project of social transformation. They are also – along with the principle of money advanced for the sake of higher returns – at the core of the infernal mechanism of ecologically-devastating 'growth'. Finance is to be replaced by *subventions* – non-recoverable funds, no longer indexed to a (greater) return.



Capitalist profitability is accordingly substituted by political deliberation. Any real transition will thus involve an epochal *jubilee* of debts, a destruction of the accumulated capitalist past weighing on any other possible future. But – *réalisme oblige* – this *euthanasia* of the creditor must not translate into an assault on personal savings, lest communism take its usually phobic place in the imaginaries of the middle classes – whence Lordon’s reflections on the mechanisms that will set ceilings on these personal savings and their removal from circuits of finance (in other words their transformation into mere funds for personal consumption rather than *capital*).

Having confronted in part questions of need and necessity, Lordon turns to ‘luxury’ – reimagined not as material abundance (the trap of modernising communisms with their fossil infrastructures of production and feeling), but as ‘light’, *lux*, the possibility for different expressions of human creative potentials. This will require the abolition *tout court* of the fake creativity that sustains the capitalist circuits of desire, namely advertising (a similar proposal could be found in the writings of Amadeo Bordiga). In a moment perhaps worthy of William Morris, Lordon here talks of the *maximum of beauty for a minimum of objects*, combined with the *decoupling of creativity and remuneration*; he also reminds the reader that an everyday communist aesthetic will emphasise the desires of free producers in very material terms (food, perfume, flower arranging) rather than echo the overly speculative, Platonic aims of certain communist intellectuals.

What will especially reinforce the formation of such a communist aesthetic is *the radical delinking of material survival from creativity* – wholly transforming the status of the artist or the ‘creative’. This will not mean ending the (anthropologically inescapable) drive of distinction and recognition (some musicians will find an audience and ‘social validation’ for their creativity, others won’t), but stripping it of monetary and material consequence. From his own perch at the CNRS, Lordon sees some prefiguration of this new regime of creativity in the history of public funding for academic research prior to neoliberal managerial vandalism – a world whose non-monetisable productivity gives the lie to the notion that risk and precarity are spurs to creation.

Having sketched his figure of a communism beyond precarity and capitalist domination, Part III, ‘Hegemony, Counter-Hegemony’, moves to the political question:

‘how do we get there?’ The starting point must again be realist: twenty-first-century capital does not negotiate with its opposition; it will not come to any substantive compromises with emancipatory forces, as the social landscape corroborates daily. What we witness (in ways that mirror Dardot et al.’s recent *Le Choix de la guerre civile* [2021]) are both the quotidian blockages to any challenge (via anti-labour legislation, market compulsion, competition, capital flight, rating agencies, etc.) and the exceptional violence that capital will employ to retaliate against any substantive challenge. Any government that tackles the power of finance tackles the very means through which finance disciplines governments and will accordingly be the target of a no-holds barred multi-pronged attack. This, together with the ample apparatus of ideological reproduction in the dominant media, puts an enormous obstacle in the face of the great transition, which must operate in a society always virtually hostage to the whims and imperatives of accumulation.

A chapter on ‘Chile 1973’ draws the lessons from that capitalist counter-revolution (or counter-reform), and from the plurality of ways in which capital exercised its powers of sabotage – but above all from the tragic fact that Allende’s faith in the democratic option ultimately put him in the doomed position of the one who cooperates in a non-cooperative game. Lordon is perhaps too sanguine here about the realism of the ‘working class in arms’ option in that historical context; it might have been interesting for him to touch on the role the Chilean experience and that of Spain played in the gestation and impasses of Eurocommunism. The ultimate lesson is that there is nothing to be hoped from electoral procedures in capitalism if it is capitalism that is to be challenged. Again, Lordon may be underestimating the power that for some time Unidad Popular managed to leverage precisely from a minority electoral victory, in a dialectic with popular movements across revolutionary, radical and reformist Lefts.

The ‘democracy’ much feted by the likes of Jürgen Habermas is for Lordon a massively misleading homonym for collective sovereignty, toothless to restrain capital in normal times and easily reversed into exception violence when matters come to a head (here quoting Brecht: ‘Fascism is not the opposite of democracy but its evolution in times of crisis’). Communist realism also

dictates a question of scale, enjoining us to ask after the level of weight on the international field, but also of complexity and significance in terms of an internal division of labour 'susceptible of being backed by an "us" which is sufficiently important to sustain a macropolitical dynamic towards communism'.<sup>43</sup> This is also the problem of 'communist sovereignty', namely that of the possibility of self-defence for a collective social experiment bent on overcoming capitalism and its forms of value. For Lordon, this is a question that cannot be evaded by pleas for autonomy, marginality and the enclave, or by wishful imaginaries of peaceful transition.

The conditions of possibility of a consequential anti-capitalism must perforce be confronted, and here 'the question of the overall scale at which a *complete* communist form of life establishes itself is decisive: for it involves the extension and depth of the division of labour, that is to say the level of development of the productive forces such that it serves both as an antidote to communism as the socialisation of penury and as an instrument of perseverance in a hostile environment'.<sup>44</sup> For, after all, communism in *all* countries will have to begin in *one* of them, or in one part of one of them. Now, while the end of capitalist compromise may indeed be depressing, it must be confronted head on, while paying attention to the growing cracks in hegemony – witness the growing level of social conflict in the face of a take-no-prisoners neoliberalism (here the French example may not be easily generalisable to other jurisdictions). Lordon briefly maps the material, political and affective dimension of this creeping organic crisis in his home country, taking the increasingly 'grotesque' face of mainstream politics as a key symptom (one revealed by the fact that the difference between satire and reality becomes increasingly thin).

Lordon also tackles the nexus of capitalism and anti-racism in view of the conditions for a counter-hegemonic bloc. This reflection is indicative of the changing debate in France (impelled not least by the Indigènes de la République and its avatars) but also of Lordon's theoretical and political limitations in this domain. In a nutshell, to the notion of a mutual implication of race and capital, or even of the existence of a racial capitalism, he opposes a distinction between capitalist essence and racist contingency quite similar to the one advanced by Ellen Meiksins Wood, among others, and whose proposi-

tion that capitalism could in principle function without racialisation seems to strip the *historical* out of the materialism.<sup>45</sup> Here capital appears as merely if violently *instrumentally* racist, grafting its own gradations of inequality onto a racism imagined not just as separate but as in a sense 'anterior' (like patriarchy) – a claim that appears to ignore the ways in which race, racialisation and racism are fundamentally transformed by the capital relation. The notion advanced by Lordon that capitalist domination, crystallised in the wage-form, dominates over other forms of domination<sup>46</sup> is itself problematic, not least because the nexus of race and capital often operates outside of the wage (in extractivism, power over disposable or surplus populations, 'organised abandonment', etc.).

Lordon's passing comments on feminism and social reproduction also suffer from the same analytical limitations – how *contingent* are these forms of domination to the substance of capitalist hierarchy if it could have never established itself without them? The idea of a history of the *relations between relations of domination* is more fecund, and the desire to distinguish among these relations is certainly legitimate, but Lordon is too quick in his desire to demarcate, thereby generating far too ideal-typical an image of capital (reduced to the wage-form and exploitation at the point of production, bypassing entirely questions of land, finance, extraction, etc.), along with some problematic political consequences.

Far too much is made here, to my mind, of the anti-capitalist gestures of 'progressive' capitalism in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement, which shifts the discussion out of the structural and political domain where it should operate, to a more media-ideological terrain. The analytical separation of the wageless from the gendered or the racialised simply does not obtain in the real world of exploitation, so the idea of a *pure* capitalist inequality, an actually independent form of domination does not convince. The very stakes of material reproducibility and survival that for Lordon are the keystone of the capitalist mode of domination are inextricably mediated by racialisation and gender.

Thankfully, Lordon does not take a full-on 'class first' approach, accepting the non-reducible and autonomous character of parallel and interlocking struggles – though at the risk of neglecting the latter's immanently anti-capitalist dimensions. Capitalism retains a strategic pri-

ority: 'Because it is placed in a superior position in the structural hierarchy [of dominations], a position from which it re-mobilises for its profit all other dominations, the capitalist relation, de facto, organises and practices ... the convergence of dominations.'<sup>47</sup> Lordon also recognises the political role of the affects and tendencies underlying, *inter alia*, the fascist potentials of the psychological wages of whiteness, in what he nicely calls 'penultimate passions', those 'intimate strategies of imaginary reparation' for those one metaphorical rung from the bottom: 'The next-to-last are furnished with the last, who, precisely, allow them to live as the non-last, and from which they will then differentiate themselves all the more violently in that they are objectively the closest'.<sup>48</sup>

*Figures* is brought to a close by a long letter by Félix Boggio Ewanjé-Epée (the interviewer-interlocutor for *Vivre sans?*), who challenges in an original and engaging way the parameters of Lordon's disarticulation of racial and capitalist domination, principally by reconsidering from both political-economic and more strictly political grounds the intrinsically racialising dimensions of imperialism as a driving logic of capital – and affirming the ongoing relevance of a Marxist archive of debates on race, class and anti-systemic strategies that Lordon largely neglects.

*Figures* is very much in keeping with the more radical turn taken by Lordon's work of late, and complements in both its polemical and propositional dimensions the critical anatomy of the imaginary of the far Left rehearsed in *Vivre sans?* While brisk and engaging, it is certainly a less systematic book than one might at first imagine; the trace of it having been first drafted in multiple blog posts is tangible (which conversely also accounts for its flow and readability). One also wonders about the decision to begin a nominally propositional book with a critique of progressive bourgeois reason which, while hitting the (easy) target, also surveys positions that a more radical readership may have already dismissed. The book can also be cursory verging on the cavalier in its stated decision to do without any but the most oblique discussion of 'actually-existing communism' – which, whether we're thinking of workers' councils, Cuban experiments with medicine, socialist planning, or what have you, certainly harbours pertinent lessons and materials for present debate. And yet Lordon insists on bypassing any immanent critique of communist historical praxis, all too quickly

seeming to accept (namely in the introduction) the idea that between his communism and those historical experiences there isn't much in common. This is comprehensible if limiting as a strategy of persuasion but it takes away from the substance and coherence of Lordon's untested 'figures'.

The classic problems of transition that bedevilled and preoccupied Marxist traditions from the 1870s to the 1970s – concerning the generation of bureaucracies, the ossification of parties and leaderships, violence and power, the management of war economies, etc. – would certainly have been germane to some of the problems of scale, agency and desire articulated by Lordon. Closer to our own moment, while he demarcates himself from some of the 'communisms' voiced by veterans of *les années rouges* like Badiou or Negri, Lordon evades any real reckoning with the mutations in class composition, consciousness and agency that lie in the back of those theoretical developments (the crises of the mass worker and workers' identity, the trajectories of Maoism or *operaismo*), and which led to rich conjunctural and strategic debates in Marxism into the twilight of the 1980s. There is a danger that the sheer starkness of capitalist domination and social inequality in the present is taken as a substitute for the work of inquiry, organisation, re-composition and political reskilling without which communism remains a dead letter, or devolves into another species of radical populism. While the answer won't look the same, the Bolshevik question abides: 'Who, whom?'

The 'figures' of the title make for a compelling sketch, but a sketch nonetheless, not a programme: the exact forms that political deliberation over production will take remain vague, and many questions arise as to whether the 'value' governing this transitional phase retains the features (and the power and the violence) of value in capitalism. In other words, it would have been nice to see Lordon tackle the problems limned by Marx's 'Critique of the Gotha Programme' and related literatures (beginning with Lenin's *State and Revolution*) – problems which, however much they require 'stretching', remain on the agenda of any foreseeable communism. Notwithstanding these issues, and the severe limits in his considerations of the strategic nexus of race, class and gender, Lordon does set out in a compelling way the problems of scale, power, resources and the division of labour which any consequential challenge to capitalism would need



to grasp and resolve, while grounding his arguments in the Spinozist political-anthropological realism advanced in other recent works. Here we see, in the leitmotiv of *consequence*, how Lordon's communist realism works simultaneously to challenge an ultra-left ambience that does not fully consider the conditions of possibility for a real exit from capitalism *and* a progressivist bad faith that imagines ecological and egalitarian transitions taking place within the undisturbed confines of capitalism.

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## Notes

1. For a bio-bibliographical sketch of Lordon's trajectory, see Alberto Toscano, 'A Structuralism of Feeling?', *New Left Review* 97 (2016), 73–93. For a recent Marxian critique of Lordon, which claims that his work can envisage only the regulation but not the abolition of capital, see Benoît Bohy-Bunel, *Contre Lordon. Anticapitalisme tronqué et spinozisme dans l'oeuvre de Frédéric Lordon* (Albi: Crise & Critique, 2021).
2. For Lordon and Nuit Debout, see this 2016 interview: <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2833-frederic-lordon-with-nuit-debout-the-fire-didn-t-catch-hold>.
3. The convergence between Agamben's writings on the Covid-19 pandemic and the recent anonymous *Manifeste conspirationniste* attributed to Julien Coupat of the Invisible Committee exceeds the remit of this essay, though it could prove an interesting testing ground for some of Lordon's hypotheses about antipolitical radicalism. Incidentally, Lordon has been rather charitable in his interpretations of the popular appeal of conspiracy theories, see his 'Narratives of the Dispossessed', *Le Monde diplomatique*, June 2015, <https://mondediplo.com/2015/06/10conspiracist>.
4. Frédéric Lordon, *Vivre sans? Institutions, police, travail, argent... Conversation avec Félix Boggio Éwanjé-Épée* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2019), 19.
5. *Ibid.*, 20.
6. *Ibid.*, 37.
7. *Ibid.*, 46.
8. *Ibid.*, 69.
9. *Ibid.*, 83.
10. *Ibid.*, 134. On this dimension of Lordon's thought, see also my 'Foreword – Passions of State', in Frédéric Lordon, *Imperium: Structures and Affects of Political Bodies* (London: Verso, 2022).
11. *Ibid.*, 105.
12. *Ibid.*, 115.
13. *Ibid.*, 139. For Lordon's pointed reflection on the contemporary police in France, see Frédéric Lordon: 'The police force we have is fucked up, racist to the bone and out of control', trans. David Fernbach, *Verso blog*, 29 July 2021, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/5126-frederic-lordon-the-police-force-we-have-is-fucked-up-racist-to-the-bone-and-out-of-control>.
14. Lordon, *Vivre sans?*, 153.
15. *Ibid.*, 156.
16. *Ibid.*, 167.
17. *Ibid.*, 169.
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*, 217.
20. *Ibid.*, 189.
21. *Ibid.*, 195.
22. *Ibid.*, 240.
23. Quoted in Jean Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure of Hegel's 'Phenomenology of Spirit'*, trans. Samuel Cherniak and John Heckman (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 353.
24. Lordon, *Vivre sans?*, 225.
25. *Ibid.*, 250.
26. There is an unexplored resonance here with the account of the fusion and ossification of groups in Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason*.
27. For some reflections on the nexus between communism and abolition, see the last section of my 'Communism', in *Handbook of Marxism*, eds. Beverley Skeggs, Sara Farris, Alberto Toscano and Svenja Bromberg (London: SAGE, 2022).
28. Frédéric Lordon, *Figures du communisme* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2021), 9.
29. *Ibid.*, 15.
30. In 2021, La Dispute published a book-length dialogue between Lordon and Friot: *En travail. Conversations sur le communisme*.
31. Lordon, *Figures du communisme*, 17.
32. *Ibid.*, 18.
33. *Ibid.*, 54.
34. Andreas Malm, *Corona, Climate, Chronic Emergency: War Communism in the Twenty-First Century* (London and New York: Verso, 2020).
35. Lordon, *Figures du communisme*, 71.
36. *Ibid.*, 67.
37. *Ibid.*, 81.
38. *Ibid.*, 81.
39. *Ibid.*, 107.
40. *Ibid.*, 99.
41. This is the parable whose moral is clinched by Mr. Keuner's concluding statement, from which I've taken my title: 'Mr Keuner ran into Mr Muddle, a great fighter against newspapers. "I am a great opponent of newspapers. I don't want any newspapers", said Mr Muddle. Mr Keuner said "I am a greater opponent of newspapers. I want better newspapers." If newspapers are a means to disorder, then they are also a means to achieving order. It is precisely people like Mr Muddle who through their dissatisfaction demonstrate the value of newspapers. Mr Muddle thinks he is concerned with the worthlessness of today's newspapers. In fact he is concerned with their worth tomorrow. Mr Muddle thought highly of man and did not believe that newspapers could

be made better, whereas Mr Keuner did not think very highly of man but did think that newspapers could be made better'. Bertolt Brecht, *Stories of Mr. Keuner*, trans. Martin Chalmers (San Francisco: City Lights, 2001), 64.

42. Lordon, *Figures du communisme*, 126. Lordon's work could be here brought into dialogue with recent efforts in this direction by Nick Dyer-Witheford and Jonathan Beller, among others.

43. *Ibid.*, 196.

44. *Ibid.*, 201.

45. Consider Cedric Robinson's rejoinder to Wood: 'I would argue then that it is quite mistaken to assume – as one Marxist historian, Ellen Wood, put it quite recently, that: "The first point about capitalism is that it is uniquely indifferent to the social identities of the people it exploits. ... Unlike previous modes of production, capitalist exploitation is not inextricably linked with extra-economic, juridical or political identities. ... In fact, there is a positive tendency in capitalism to undermine such

differences, and even to dilute identities like gender or race, as capital strives to absorb people into the labour market and to reduce them to interchangeable units of labour abstracted from any specific identity.' Just how, one might ask Wood, could she justify the presumption that the human materials of capitalism – capitalists, labourers, managers, and cultural workers – could be "indifferent" to the history, culture, and politics of their formation? For it is precisely in those realms that race consciousness is embedded. The structures of meaning are not the mirrors of production'. Cedric J. Robinson, *On Racial Capitalism, Black Internationalism, and Cultures of Resistance*, ed. H.L.T. Quan (London: Pluto, 2019), 189. The interpolated quotation is from Ellen Meiksins Wood, 'Capitalism and Human Emancipation', *New Left Review* 167 (Jan/Feb 1988).

46. Lordon, *Figures du communisme*, 224.

47. *Ibid.*, 242.

48. *Ibid.*, 247.

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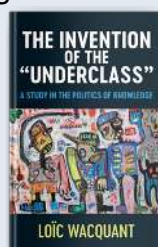


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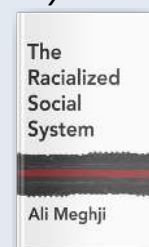
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