

Lumpendialectic

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We will have tragedies without fate.
– Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*

Demon of analogy...

‘Disappointment’ might be too mild-mannered a word to capture the horrors of relentless counterrevolution – ‘militant despair’ might be more apt – but it captures the untimeliness and illegitimacy of the current epoch: disappointment as belatedness (a missed appointment or assignation); dis-appointment as symbolic disinvestiture (the delegitimation of authority and office); disappointment as disillusion (the demystification of progress and other Enlightenment canards). Within the Marxist tradition, the *Eighteenth Brumaire* is the locus classicus for thinking about revolutionary failure, defeat, setback or impasse, which should be distinguished from each other. More people are reaching for the *Eighteenth Brumaire* these days; in an epoch of farcical imposture and authoritarian populism, it’s an easy reach, and this is so regardless of whether one joins the chorus of laments over a working class that has yet again failed to meet its historical appointment. These are analogies and possibly not the most apt ones for the current moment. But why the compulsion to analogise at all?

It may be time to loosen – I mean by this to stretch, thicken and broaden – our fixation on 1848. There are other dates on the calendar, other tunes on the playlist of defeat. But I want to wend my way back to it. There are many reasons to be reading the *Eighteenth Brumaire* today, Trump and company possibly the least adequate in the end, not because the analogies are not compelling, but because the spectacle, then as now, can distract us from seeing the full array of forces undergirding the present counterrevolutionary conjuncture. And ‘Bonapartism’ – not to mention ‘Caesarism’ (to revert back to

Bonaparte’s own preferred template) – is surely an insufficient paradigm to capture the global constellation of forces that define this conjuncture, with its dispersed mechanisms of power, global flow of capital, planetary plunder, carceral border regimes, eviscerated infrastructures, environmental infernos, forced migrations, intensifying settler colonial violence and blood-curdling genocides.

But one reason I want to dwell on the *Eighteenth Brumaire* today is because it provides a robust theory of analogy. Analogy is repetition compulsion. Analogy is calendar. Analogy is the bloat and float of language. It untethers words from their referential fixity. It detaches dates from their chronological rigidity. Analogy can be liberatory when – if – it is pried loose from a memory culture that has become repressive and inert. When they’re not stultifying or being commandeered to nefarious ends, analogies can be energising; they can force a historical reckoning, they can articulate elective affinities and affiliations, they can forge alternative kinships and solidarities. Analogies can channel what Walter Benjamin called the mimetic capacity or power: they can extract similarities from a history that would otherwise atomise into a spray of disconnected particles or dissolve into a mush of sameness. Analogy is a historical sinew: it can loosen the joints of a tradition that has become ossified and arthritic and can restore actuality – a peculiar synchronicity – to a time out of joint. Analogy is a historical muscle: it contracts, condenses, thickens time; it stores energy like a battery; it’s a time bomb that explodes the continuum of homogeneous empty time. That is why analogies are such a political minefield as we’re seeing today: Who gets to use them? Who gets to say ‘fascism’? Who gets to say ‘apartheid’? Who gets to say ‘genocide’? Who gets to say ‘holocaust’? Who gets to prescribe or proscribe the terms of comparison or even

to grant the right to compare? Politics, as Benjamin once said of philosophy, is a battle for the monopoly over a limited number of terms. Analogies are real estate in a colonial land grab where language is the terrain of an ongoing primitive accumulation.

This is because analogy is never a neutral historical judgment. It is an interpellation, a force of subjectification that draws its power from the historical conjuncture. The *truth* of analogy, in other words, is different than its propositional correctness. This is why analogies are constantly on the move. Marx teaches us to approach history in the same spirit as Freud approached psychoanalysis: ‘we can only describe things by analogies ... but we have to keep changing analogies, for none of them lasts long enough’ to stick.¹ This is why analogies are such fertile terrain for projection, fantasy, persuasion, forensic and ideological coercion (as Cicero and Quintilian were to emphasise in the wake of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*) but also why they so quickly become flattening and oppressive. They introduce form, intelligibility, consequence and as such can become formal, formulaic, deforming. Lenin, who was famously attacked for being a Jacobin (sometimes a Bonapartist, sometimes a Blanquist, occasionally even a Thermidorian) never stopped analogising. He constantly drew on the symbolic arsenal of the French Revolution to give shape and retroactive direction to the Russian Revolution – famously dancing in the snow on the day that the Bolsheviks had outlasted the 72 days of the Paris Commune – even as he relentlessly mocked the Menshevik (aka ‘Girondist’) obsession with analogies as petty-bourgeois phrase-mongering.² Analogy, like all citation, sways uncertainly between a ‘poetry of the future’ and a ‘poetry of the past.’ This can be disorienting.

Tragedy / Dialectic / Revolution

If it didn’t sound so cloyingly ‘literary’, I’d venture to say that there’s nothing more tragic than a botched revolution. I cringe slightly as I write these words, if only because tragedy is the favoured trope of the liberal historiography of revolution. The admonitory sorrow of this formula is mirrored by the elegiac mood of left melancholia. The first scenario rehearses the litany of *failure* – the pathos of finitude, the hubris of overreaching, the inevitable crashing of the loftiest ideals into the brutishness of

their execution. The second scenario rehearses the litany of *defeat*: the absorption of the most crushing disaster into the sublimity of the lost cause. Both scenarios aestheticise and de-historicise in equal measure. The first collapses event into structure. Stripped of singularity, the revolution is harnessed to the wheel of fortune or the balefulness of human nature. The second collapses structure into event. Marooned from history, the time of revolution contracts into the eternal present of the missed opportunity and the slumber of an everlasting Thermidor. In both cases, the invocation of tragedy has a sanitising effect: a calming of the passions, a cathartic cleansing, or one should rather say a dampening, of the political imagination. Both scenarios provide the comforts of spectatorial immunity: the funeral meats are served up cold as victory feasts or as fodder for endless theoretical rumination.

Both scenarios evacuate what’s most tragic about revolution and occlude the revolutionary kernel of the tragic – the explosive power of its collisions, its blinding insights, its forced reconciliations, its most intractable antinomies – freedom and necessity, individual and collective, subjective agency and objective process. The other revolutionary binaries – spontaneity and organisation, mass and party, movement and goal – unspool from this basic set of antinomies. (If I speak of antinomy, rather than old-fashioned contradiction, this is because I want to hold open the thought that mediation is not a given.) Both scenarios quarantine the sorrow they keep evoking: stripped of precedent and aftermath, suffering is rendered literally inconsequential. We lament the revolution’s failure and avert our gaze from the onslaught of the counterrevolution. Mesmerised by the violence, we numb ourselves to the ongoing history of violence of which revolution itself marks the punctuation and crisis. Spellbound by the trauma of the missed moment, we forget that the catastrophe is ongoing. The catastrophe is that everything keeps on going.

Can the category of the tragic be salvaged? If tragedy, like revolution, might seem to be tragically past its expiration date (different reasons for this obsolescence have been offered from opposite ends of the political spectrum), the point is not to restore its grandeur but to detonate what Benjamin called the ‘revolutionary power of the outmoded’, to deploy the frayed remnants of tragedy so as to extract from obsolescence itself its explosive ini-

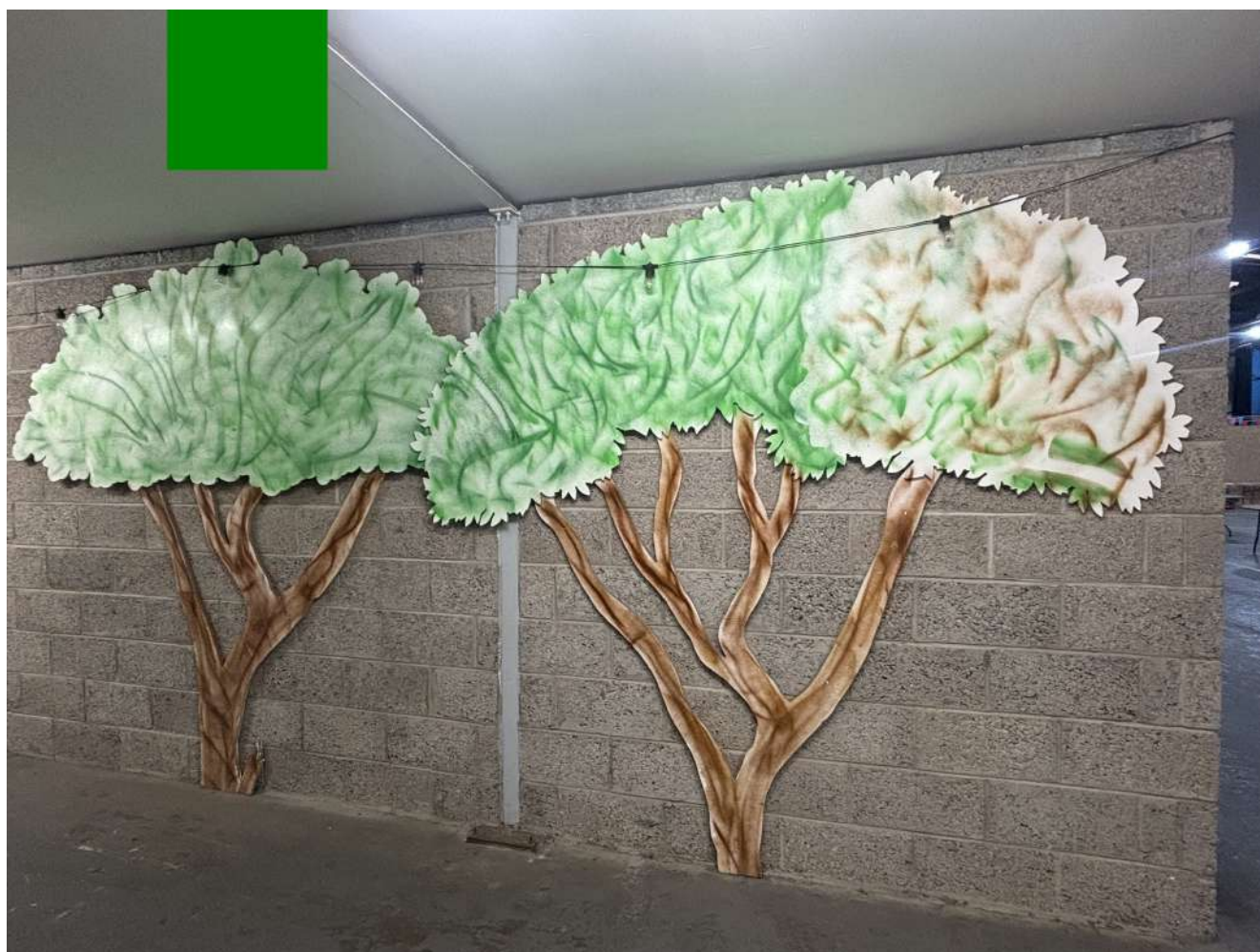
tiatory power. These tragic disjecta may also prove to be the most stubborn remainders of the dialectic. Tragedy, revolution, dialectic: their tattered remnants are intertwined.

Here's a counter-intuitive gamble. Benjamin described himself as a gleaner, rummaging through the garbage of the nineteenth century as Freud sifted through the detritus of the dream. 'I shall purloin no valuables ... But the rags, the refuse – I'll let these come into their own: by *making use* of them.'³ Characteristically, Adorno objected to this scattershot approach as being 'insufficiently dialectical.'⁴ But what if it's the leftovers of the tragic-dialectical-revolutionary trifecta that prove to be its most serviceable remainder? If we were rag-pickers, the salvage operation would go something like this. Tragedy without fate; revolution without progress; dialectics without the conciliatory blandishments that have embarrassed it from the start. This surgical or subtractive approach might seem rhapsodic and undialectical. For what it's worth, the scavenging began

on Hegel's deathbed, when the disciples gathered around the corpse – old Hegelians and young, right-wing and left-wing, the *Hegeliter* and *Hegelinge* (the 'Hegelites' and the 'Hegelists') – and started carving up the corpus: rational kernel vs mystical shell, method vs system, the living vs the dead ...

Poetry of the Revolution

I'll be drawing on Aristotle's framework in the *Poetics* in what follows – *hamartia*, *peripeteia*, *anagnorisis*, *catharsis* – but with one crucial caveat. Aristotle famously contrasts poetry and history. He privileges poetry on modal or metaphysical grounds. Whereas history deals with contingencies – things that merely happen to have happened (*ta genomena*) – poetry deals with *possibilities* (*ta dunata*), the *kind of things* that *could* or *should* happen (*hoia an genoito*), that are *likely* to happen, that *must* happen.⁵ History speaks in the indicative, poetry in the optative. That's why Aristotle considers poetry to be



‘more philosophical’ and ‘more serious’ than history. It reveals in the morass of facts a crystal of counterfactual potential. It paints on a bigger canvas. To show that *such a thing could happen* – not merely that it *did* happen but that it *could* happen, that it *must* happen, that it happened for a reason – is to recode an isolated event as a *kind* of event, *hoion*, repeatable, recognisable, generic, simultaneously *more* and *less* than itself: at once overlaid and limited by its own counterfactual surplus. A person becomes a *kind* of person, a type, a paradigm, a category, a style, a brand (an ‘analogue’, so to speak). Oedipus becomes Oedipal, Hamlet becomes Hamletian, Bonaparte Bonapartist; the proper name becomes adjectival, descriptive, normative, prescriptive, restrictive. The name ceases to function as a rigid designator. It nominates or interpolates a person to a role, a title, an assignation, an inheritance, an institution.⁶ Caesar (the familial *cognomen* or surname) becomes Caesar (the imperial title), Julius Caesar, the man, becomes a Caesar, a Tsar, a Kaiser, a Qaysar, a salad dressing. The name becomes both more and less than a single person can bear.

The magnitude of tragedy (*megethos*) can be uncoupled from the prestige of its protagonists, from the grandeur of its story or from any specific temporal or spatial extension. (Remember Aristotle’s flurry of stipulations: the play must be long enough to command our attention, short enough for us to take in and remember – bigger than a microbe, smaller than a thousand mile-long animal ...).⁷ It arises above all from the ‘more’ of its counterfactual surplus.

Tragedy is ‘more philosophical’ because it is simply ... *more*. In bestowing on the event a nimbus of exemplarity, poetry raises it to conceptual dignity.

But this also implies, although Aristotle does not engage this thought, that *such things might not* occur, that they need not, or should not have; that possibilities might be thwarted or aborted. The passage from *dunamis* to *energeia* can be blocked, diverted, even retroactively undone. There can be a tragedy of non-realisation and de-realisation. But revolution also expands the field of possibility. It recalibrates what self-evidently appears – what has been officially mandated – to be impossible. It transforms what has been deemed to be impossible into a necessity, and it shows ‘necessity’ itself to have been a matter of contingency all along. Revolution undoes

what has been done. It does what has been left undone. It repeats, remembers, re-elaborates the seemingly unworkable and therefore inexpungeable and ever repeated question/slogan: *What is to be done?*

Revolutions show that history too has its poetry. They show history to be an archive of possibilities rather than a storehouse of facts. In exposing history to its own latency, revolution is the perfect example of mediated immediacy. A revolution is a special kind of kind, one of a kind, a *kind* of one. Its singularity makes it repeat. In revolution, the mimetic structure of action becomes explicit. Revolutionary action is at once an action and the representation of an action: it is a representative or exemplary action, it redefines the terms of action, it is a call and cue for action. It is the pivot between the act and its own recapitulation or rephrasing. Aristotle’s genitive, *mimesis praxeos*, swings both ways. Revolutions spawn imitations because they *are* mimesis incarnate. But this also means they suffer the ambiguity that besets all acting, as a *claim* to acting, that it might be an impersonation of action, a semblance, a resemblance, a mimicry – an ‘act’. Revolutions are ‘dramatic’, they make a drama of their own doing (*dran*), not simply because they take place on such a grand scale or because they’re always announcing themselves with speeches and fanfare. The spectacle itself marks the essential pivot between the act and its own recapitulation or rephrasing. The storming of the Winter Palace needed its *Storming of the Winter Palace* – the re-enactments, the cinematic restaging, the circulating movie stills – repetitions that would outstrip and upstage the original in scale and dramatic effect and were sometimes taken as documentation of the event, and even as the event itself.⁸

Put simply: The revolution is never *sans phrase*. Collective action needs signposts; history needs captions. This is the function of the revolutionary slogan, a topic that so preoccupied Lenin that he would actually take time out in the summer of 1917, then of all times, to write an essay on the language of slogans, why he kept issuing directives on their correct phrasing and timing, constantly adjusting their cadences to the shifting gusts of politics, issuing each with a precise release date and withdrawing it from circulation the moment its time expired.⁹ *All power to the soviets ... The United States of Europe ... Soviets plus electrification* ‘Big words should not be thrown around carelessly ...’¹⁰. That there is an

expiration date is crucial: a slogan, like an analogy, is a historical intervention that derives its force from the 'concrete analysis of a concrete situation' to quote Lenin's apparently timeless hard-to-source slogan.

A revolution 'repeats forward' (to speak Kierkegaardian). It draws its poetry from a future under construction. Insurrection is an art, says Lenin,¹¹ like any art, it must produce the conditions of its own legibility; it must simultaneously discover and generate its own public. Revolutionary action produces its own language and language itself is a mode of action. Vulgar 'revolutionists', remarks Lenin, 'fail to see that the word is also a deed.'¹² A slogan is a messy performative – it makes (and unmakes) history in marking it. A revolution is itself a kind of slogan – a shortcut, a bit of shorthand: it abridges, it repeats, it circulates, it interpellates. A revolution condenses and punctuates history; it marks the point where the totality flashes into view in the crystalline moment of decision. Revolution is where history as a whole insists. That's why revolutionary dates and places acquire their explosive density – the so-called 'Aristotelian unities' find their abode here – but is also why their commemoration can be so stifling.

Possibility surges into visibility when the organic fabric of history rips. Revolutions show that possibility is not a lump of positivity, not an inert potentiality awaiting actualisation, a bouquet of utopian promises, a rainbow of regulative ideas, or the receding horizon of an infinite task, the endlessly deferred possibility, that is, the paralysing impossibility, of the Kantian 'ought' or *Sollen*. To summarise quickly in Hegelian shorthand (and we are again diverging from Aristotle): revolutions clarify the logic of 'absolute modality'.¹³ They demonstrate why possibility isn't a given but a *result* – a historical artifact rather than a natural capacity. Despite and because of their immediacy, revolutionary possibilities require mediation, they must endure a bristle of unforeseeable obstacles and contingencies to become what they are. They are retroactively activated or enabled, but this can also mean disabled and deactivated by what they enable. Revolution messes with the modal-metaphysical machine. This is not just a dialectical point of honour but a historical truth. Revolution rekindles the sparks of what official historiography – the history of the victors – has ruled improbable and out of bounds. It expands the field of possibility by enabling the unpredictable and improb-

able resurgence of insurgent hopes, longings, practices that have been cast into desuetude and oblivion by the forces of 'progress' or domination. Revolution digs into that archive. This is what Benjamin means by 'hope in the past' (a formula that is decidedly less upbeat than one might hope). In short: the terms of freedom are never settled.



This is why revolutions come into such sharp focus from the perspective of their lapsing. It's as a missed or expired possibility, even an impossibility, that a revolution makes its most urgent claims. I don't mean by this to fetishise failure but simply to question the self-desuetude evidence of success as the measure of revolutionary achievement. Freedom isn't a possession or acquisition that accretes temporally from generation to generation or expands geographically from centre to periphery (this obviously has post-colonial implications). It is not a good that can be hoarded, distributed, divided or bequeathed. Failure, not success, may be the motor and method of revolutionary succession. That's why every revolutionary interregnum is so fraught, as Hannah Arendt noted. She was thinking about the succession crises following the deaths of Lenin and Stalin, which she attributed to

the special pathologies of totalitarianism, but we don't need to subscribe to that dubious framework to see the problem. A revolution throws the dynastic order of transmission and transition into disarray.

It's not out of some cosmic or Sisyphean futility that revolutions keep repeating, that they stall and judder, constantly short-circuiting and lurching back to their starting point to start up all over again. There is a reason for this retroversion, namely that history can't wait. Paradoxically, it is *impatience* and not nostalgia that that turns the clocks back. Revolutions don't advance by steps and stages, each picking up where the previous one left off. History doesn't progress, it doesn't accumulate, it doesn't wait. Every aborted revolution undermines the achievements of the preceding revolutions and the heroic narratives inspired by these. The danger ripples backwards until the entire past is shattered by its power. It's in this sense that Benjamin will describe revolution as an 'emergency brake' forcing the locomotive of progress to a halt. But time doesn't stand still in the revolutionary standstill. The shock introduces a reverse thrust into history, forcing a return to the beginning where everything must begin anew. The entire tradition must be smashed, everything must start again, including the original beginning, which loses its foundational authority and ceases to be the beginning. The return to ground zero forces a complete reconfiguration of the political imaginary. It demands nothing less than a total reworking of the world. This is a melancholic, even a pessimistic, finding – we are confronted with the death drive in action – but not a defeatist one. *Pessimism must be organised*.¹⁴

In short: history has its tragic side. *People make their own history but not simply as they please*. We should try reading Marx's famous formula literally.¹⁵ *Die Menschen machen ihre eigene Geschichte, aber sie machen sie nicht aus freien Stücken*. History is something 'made' – a facture, a fabrication, a fiction. Praxis is poeisis: Marx revises Aristotle to Arendt's everlasting annoyance. But this is productivity of a curiously inhibited kind. History is neither a storehouse of raw material nor a trove of inspiring examples. It's a construction site, where the materials at our disposal are neither 'free pieces' (*freie Stücken*) nor 'pieces of freedom' but rather a rubble heap of broken off initiatives – bits of *unfreedom* jammed together *unfreely* – that both goad and hinder our agency with the pressure of unfinished business. We keep fall-

ing on snippets of interrupted performances from the past that impinge with the haunting insistence of half-forgotten melodies. (*Stück* can also mean a theatrical or musical 'piece' or 'number', a *Shtick* ...) History is this stumbling: praxis is parapraxis. That revolutions repeat, that the drama keeps replaying, shows something involuntary and mechanical – undignified, inhuman, even non-living – at the core of human life. You can call this the death drive, if you want, but this is also Bergson's definition of the comic, which has nothing to do with happy outcomes and is neither fun nor even funny: we convulse with laughter, our own bodies becoming rigid and machinelike, when we catch sight of the deadness 'encrusting' and interrupting the flow of life.

We're already deep in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*. The workers' defeat at the hands of their supposed allies had detonated a cascade of retroactive defeats that stretched back to the beginnings of the revolutionary epoch. The disaster of June 1848 – the 'ugly revolution' – proved to be neither an isolated accident nor a deviation from the glory days of 1789.¹⁶ The bloodbath spilled backward. It stained the 'beautiful revolution' of February – the 'revolution of universal sympathy' – when bourgeois and proletariats had briefly joined forces under the republican banner.¹⁷ It would stain the July Revolution of 1830, already tainted by the mediocrity of its own outcome. And the stain would keep seeping backward until it tarnished the foundational aspirations of 1789. It was no longer possible to represent the French Revolution as an unfinished or half-finished project, a promise awaiting fulfilment, the first act of a two-act drama. That had been Marx's wager: first *the* Revolution, the political revolution, then the *other* revolution, the social revolution, the revolution within the Revolution, revolution as repetition, repetition as redemption.

Marx had never lost sight of the vicissitudes of uneven development or assigned a fixed schedule or tempo for this two-act drama. In Germany, still stagnating under feudal absolutism, the bourgeoisie had been so slow to develop that by the time it reached political maturity, the workers would be hard on its heels. In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx announced that the long delayed republican prologue would need to be 'followed immediately' by its proletarian sequel without pause for intermission. The events of 1848 ruined this scansion: the second act never came, or it came too early and was stifled before

it could begin. In Cologne, Marx had briefly cautioned the workers to hold off on their bid to power until the bourgeoisie had secured their own, but it was too late. Terrified at the prospect of the workers' insurrection, the bourgeoisie stifled its own political ambitions and careened back into counterrevolutionary mode. But even in Paris, where the ground had been well-trodden, the time still wasn't right. It never would be the right time for revolution.

The June debacle demonstrated that the revolutionary inheritance cannot pass simply or directly from bourgeoisie to proletariat. The problem with the republican revolution was not that it failed to measure up to its concept, that its universalism was truncated, but rather that the concept itself was corrupted: 1848 exposed the essential illiberalism at the heart of the democratic liberal order. This would be confirmed by Bonaparte's landslide electoral success in the aftermath of the June massacre and his effortless coup d'état three years later.

In 1848, the Great French Revolution dropped its aura. It wasn't that the legacy was usurped or squandered, that the copy didn't live up to the original. The declension from genius to idiot, from Uncle to Nephew, turned the hero into a fool, the ancestor into a pretender. It wasn't that Little Bonaparte couldn't fill his uncle's shoes but that his uncle couldn't fill them either. Like many an uncle before him (Creon, Claudius, maybe even the great Caesar himself), the Uncle was already an usurper. This made mockery of Napoleon Bonaparte's claims to have 'finished' the Revolution in a glorious (self-)apotheosis.¹⁸ Napoleon had compared the completion of the revolution to the conclusion of a novel: 'We've finished the novel of the Revolution: history must begin.'¹⁹ *La Revolution, c'est finie*:²⁰ the Revolution is concluded, finalised, fulfilled. The events of 1848 unwrote the final chapter turning the Uncle's boast inside out. *C'est fini*: The Revolution is cancelled, liquidated, done in. The ambiguity of this endedness – completion, termination – allowed Louis Bonaparte to ride his uncle's coattails in opposite directions at once, revolution and counterrevolution rolled into a single discordant extravaganza and enabled his overwhelming electoral and then plebiscitary success. A cacophony of cries could be heard throughout the country. *Vive Napoléon, vive la République! Vive Napoléon, à bas la République*.²¹ Long live Bonaparte! Long live sausages! The tragedy of 1848 turned 1789 into a farce. *This*

is tragic.

Why farce? A repeat performance, a parody, a diabolical inversion: counter-revolution masquerading in the faded insignia of the Revolution. The travesty will reach its pitch when Louis Bonaparte assumes his uncle's name and nominates himself Emperor Napoleon III. Farce may not fully capture the cocktail of populism and authoritarianism, spectacle and violence, buffoonery and terror, that will reach its climax in the Second Empire. Mocking Hegel, Marx describes this tumultuous scene as an endless twilight, 'grey-on-grey', where despite and because of all the fireworks nothing is happening and everything stays the same. Marx waxes Yeatsian. 'Passion without truth, truth without passion; heroes without exploits, history without events; development driven solely by the calendar and wearisome through constant repetition of the same tension and release.'²² Tension and release, stretch and sag, push and pull, snap and slack. This is how you put on a counterrevolution.

Repeating Hegel

You've just heard the reference to Hegel's grey-on-grey, and it's jarring to find Revolution 2.0 soaked in the monochromatic hues of reaction. The *Eighteenth Brumaire* is bursting with allusions to Hegel, starting of course with the tragedy/farce meme, and it can get tedious to track them. But Marx's repetition of Hegel goes beyond literal citation and allusion. It operates at an inconspicuous formal level of grammar and syntax. Form is never a merely 'formal' matter; it gives expression to a real material impasse. Two well-known examples will suffice. The first is flamboyantly, even hyperbolically, 'dialectical', the second brazenly 'undialectical'. In good dialectical fashion, they form a pair.

The first is a passage toward the end of the *Eighteenth Brumaire*. Marx is describing the comeuppance of a class that has tossed away every one of its political gains to protect its economic assets. Knowing instinctively that 'it must forfeit the crown to save its purse' – it must be prepared to relinquish democracy to safeguard its property – the bourgeoisie rehearses its irreversible exit from the political arena.

It deified the sword; now the sword rules over it. It destroyed the revolutionary press; now its own press is destroyed. It put public meetings under police surveillance;

now its own salons are under police surveillance. It disbanded the democratic national guard; now its own national guard has been disbanded. It imposed a state of siege; now a state of siege has been imposed on it. It supplanted juries with military commissions; now its own juries have been supplanted by military commissions. It submitted public education to the control of the church; now the church subjects it to its own education ...²³

As history grinds to a halt, the dialectic stutters. Everything is reversing, everything is backfiring, everything is turning around – and yet nothing is happening. Marx's syntax is as staccato as a fusillade – the dialectical machinery at its most unstoppable. There's almost *too much* dialectic; circle upon circle, and yet the wheels just spin, the gears don't catch, the locomotive won't budge. Too much tragedy and therefore no tragedy at all.

The cascade of inversions harbours a distorted echo of tragic *peripeteia*, and herein lies the farce. The bourgeoisie's reversals of fortune are unaccompanied by *anagnorisis* or self-recognition and yield no moral uplift. Distracted from its historical assignment and blind to the significance of its concessions, it is incapable of recognising the stakes of its own downfall and cannot claim the role of tragic hero. This misprision is structural. 'Parliamentary cretinism' (as Marx unaffectionately calls it) expresses the idiocy specific to the liberal democratic form, but this blindness harbours a canny insight, namely, that to maintain its monopoly on power the bourgeoisie must dismantle this power. It would rather submit to total executive power than open the tiniest foothold to the working class.

If in every stirring of life in society it saw tranquility imperiled, how could it want to maintain at the head of society a regime of unrest ... the parliamentary regime, this regime that ... lives in struggle and by struggle? The parliamentary regime lives by discussion, how shall it forbid discussion? The struggle of the orators on the platform evokes the struggle of the scribblers of the press; the debating club in parliament is supplemented by debating clubs in the salons and bistros ... When you play the fiddle at the top of the state, what else is to be expected but that those down below dance?²⁴

And so: parliament signs its own death-warrant; it literally talks itself to death.

Despite their formal similarity, there's a marked difference between the torrent of grammatical inversions

in the first passage and the bold dialectical reversals pulsing throughout Marx's early writings and surging to a climax in the *Communist Manifesto*. In the earlier text, written on the eve of the 1848 revolutions, capitalism itself had been roiling with revolutionary energy, and the bourgeoisie had played the role of tragic hero, undoing itself in outdoing itself, hurtling unstoppably towards its own destruction. There's nothing tragic about the bourgeoisie's self-destruction after 1848. Marx describes the parliamentary implosion as a 'fizzle' and 'fade-out' – 'not a blow-up'. *Es verpufft*. '[The bourgeoisie's] history has ceased forever.' And yet they linger. Long after its political defeat, the bourgeoisie keeps coming back to replay the non-event of its own demise. Decrepit, impotent – '*sans eyes, sans teeth, etc*' (Marx's snatch of half-remembered Shakespeare captures this senility perfectly) – already defunct before it has reached maturity, the bourgeoisie keeps returning to the stage as if it's forgotten or hadn't yet noticed that its hour is over. Like Kafka's Hunter Gracchus, it has missed the moment of its own death. It has 'prepared its last will and testament', but having failed or refused to acknowledge its successor, it lives on past its expiration date if only to keep testifying to its own demise. There's a Beckettian slapstick in this perseveration (it would take a King Lear to transform the indignities of senescence into a grand tragedy of overliving), and this accords with the grey-on-grey of the décor.

The problem is not exactly useless or unemployed negativity in the sense of an untrammelled excess beyond the clutches of the dialectic. It's not that the machine isn't working but that it's working all too well: it's in overdrive and caught in a frenzy of overproduction. In its prodigious hyper-efficiency, the dialectic – history itself – has become threadbare and formulaic. It keeps generating climaxes that turn out to be anti-climaxes, reversals that are empty inversions, contradictions that keep collapsing into the wooden binaries of the understanding, 'antagonisms that seem to work up to a climax only to lose their sharpness and fall away without resolution.' The crisis is only formally a crisis; it is a turbulence that forestalls revolutionary rupture. It fails to detonate the antagonism that would catalyse real social transformation, it is 'insurrection within the limits of reason alone', as Marx neatly puts it. The Kantian reference is nice. Dialectical contradiction has collapsed into the churning of

antinomies that go nowhere, generate nothing, functioning only negatively to place a brake on reason and to protect the world from reason's onslaught. (This, for Hegel, had been the ideological function of the *Kantian* dialectic – an 'excessive tenderness for the world' that prompted Kant to suction off its contradictions and to sequester them safely within the precinct of thought.)²⁵ The catastrophe is that there is no catastrophe; the state of emergency has become the norm. Dialectical stammer is the dialect of the state of siege.

It's not that the machine is jamming or spewing out globs of inassimilable heterogeneity, as some Bataille or deconstruction-inspired readers of the *Eighteenth Brumaire* have argued. (This was notably neither Bataille's nor Derrida's own approach.) Those readings are usually inspired by Marx's outrageous diatribe against the 'scum, offal, refuse of all classes', that swarm of disjecta that keeps coagulating into a force of reaction. The class that is no class, leaking across class boundaries and threatening to erode the integrity and agency of the once-universal class: workers who are not working, unemployed or unemployable, not yet or no longer integrated within the productive economy, pushed into the shadow economy or the criminal underworld, historical and geographical migrants, caught in the temporal interregnum between feudal past and capitalist present and in the spatial limbo between town and country, forced off the land but unassimilated into the city, ejected or excluded from the proletariat while hollowing it out from within and bubbling to its surface as scum – *Lumpenproletariat*.

This brings me to the second passage.

Marx's exuberant description of this 'passively rotting mass' has been deplored and adored in equal measure. It scandalises for obvious reasons. But the passage is also often admired as a virtuoso set-piece of wild undialectical heterogeneity. The famous sentence pops off the page.

Alongside decayed *roués* with dubious means of subsistence and of dubious origin, alongside ruined and adventurous offshoots of the bourgeoisie, [were] vagabonds, discharged soldiers, discharged convicts, escaped galley slaves, swindlers, charlatans, *lazzaroni*, pickpockets, tricksters, gamblers [or actors, *Spieler*], *maquereaux* [pimps], brothel keepers, porters, *literati*, organ grinders, ragpickers, knife grinders, tinkers, beggars – in short, the whole indefinite, disintegrated mass, thrown hither and thither, which the French call *la bohème* ...²⁶

I want to return in a moment to the formal aspect of this congeries, noting also that the Lumpen-prefix is an empty or vagabond signifier that eventually attaches to *all* classes – proletariat, peasants, bourgeoisie, aristocrats, Louis Bonaparte himself, 'chief of the Lumpen-proletariat' – ruining classification and the idea of class itself. It's impossible to identify a single feature uniting this motley group. There's something of the ragpicker, *Lumpensammler*, in Marx's own gleaning; the list seems to close in on itself and to find itself as one of its own elements. Adding 'literati' to the heap doesn't exactly clarify things (although it does remind us that someone is writing and reading these words).²⁷ The ambiguous term *la bohème*, with which Marx wraps up the series ('in short'), only adds another item to the series, producing yet another wrinkle of confusion. Marx's summary 'in short', *kurz*, in short, makes the list even longer; the promised summation again delays the end of the sentence, throwing it hither and thither, introducing another flurry of qualifiers that further frustrate the desire for a conclusion. Note also the jangle of foreign words.²⁸ Note finally that in German the sentence is ungrammatical, lacking the minimal coordination of a copula.

And that's the point. The *Lumpen* are the epitome of a community that has nothing in common; they're the force of disaggregation incarnate. What they share is a disaffiliation from every (existing) communal bond. Marx's exaggerated parataxis captures the systematic 'attack on linking' that defines the asocial sociability of this motley crowd. But in their disconnection lies their indissoluble connection. In this respect, the Lumpen are the exception that is the rule: while excluded from all the privileges of civil society, they epitomise the atomism that defines this society: they embody the centrifugal force of the money they lack. That's why they're so easily absorbed into the counterrevolution, and recruited to the military, cajoled into Bonaparte's coterie, or by whoever pays the price.

And the rot extends from the Parisian underbelly to the swindlers at the top of the food chain – the stockjobbers, the landlords, the financiers – in whose unembellished corruption we witness the 'rebirth of the Lumpen-proletariat on the most prominent stages of bourgeois society.' What connects these social extremes is the penumbra of 'unproductive' labour that sustains and shadows the industrial economy at both edges. This includes not

only the service economy in the down-market sense (sex workers, knife-grinders, organ-players), but the parasites at the top – the financial elite whose sources of profit are drawn not primarily or directly from the abstract but finite labour time of commodity production but rather, from the seemingly inexhaustible extraction time of rent, speculation and interest.

Sweeping up all these undesirables within the swoop of a single run-on sentence, Marx skims off these not-really-working workers from the ranks of the proletariat proper. His description of the so-called dangerous classes, such as the vagrants, prostitutes, criminals, social deviants, and simply the poor, resonates with those of the reactionary press and popular fiction. The crucial difference, of course, is that for Marx the danger of these individuals is that they pose no danger: far from presenting a threat to the regime they buttress it.

There's a superficial contrast between the hyper-dialectical endlessness of the chain of chiasmic inversions and the undialectical endlessness of this list of disaggregated *Lumpen*. But the effect of this hectic accumulation is the same. Both series deflate the suspense they generate through their unstoppable accretion. The tightly organised chiasmic syntax becomes aimless and paratactic through its relentless parallelism while the string of disaggregated particles loses elasticity and momentum. But from this similarity will emerge a deeper contrast: the manifestly 'dialectical' instance will prove flaccid and undialectical, while the seemingly undialectical instance may turn out in the end to be the more dialectically robust.

As a formal trope – call it *enumeratio* – every list is modally and temporally ambivalent: it opens onto a future and releases a possibility that it all too easily forecloses. You never know what will come along next: every new item introduces a retroactive reconfiguration of the series and promises an opening to unpredictable assemblages and solidarities – horizontal, metonymic, associative – that disturb the homogenising force of capital. (This is one of the things that has always made the category of the *Lumpen* so engaging for thinking about forms of non-class and subaltern alliances). That's the utopian promise. And yet, and here's the ideological retraction, there's something listless and compliant in this compulsive seriality. Unfettered by the constraints of grammar, the list draws attention to a tyrannical agency

behind, before, or even in the words themselves, someone or something making you wait, or simply 'reality' itself rolling out its items like a bureaucrat administering the staff or a general mustering the troops.²⁹ Either way, narrative comes to a halt and the action freezes. But this standstill might harbour a spark of revolutionary insistence.

Enter the Revolution

But what are all these people doing on the stage and where are all the others? As the word suggests, farce is the overstuffed genre, like Bonaparte's sausages, that stretches to contain multitudes. Hence the multiplication of actors, accompanied by a shrinkage of good speaking parts and by the bombast of a player-king stupid enough to 'take his comedy for world history.' The pageant explodes into a carnival of minor characters while the real historical actors are swept off stage. Removed from visibility – massacred on the barricades, deported, incarcerated, ejected from the city centre by the forces of gentrification – the workers have retreated to a shadowy offstage arena – 'another scene' – invisible, inscrutable, unknown perhaps even to themselves.

The revolutionary 'subject of history' (a Lukácsian term not used by Marx) no longer appears in person or as a collective personality. It's no longer the bourgeoisie, which has regressed from its glory days and quivers before its own revolutionary past. It is not (yet) the proletariat, which has retreated to a murky offstage existence. It is not (yet) the peasants, at that time some 80% of the French population, who are mired in nostalgic imperial reveries while buried under a modern avalanche of rent and taxes – monads *sans* pre-established harmony, literally windowless in their hovels, as disaggregated as a 'sack of potatoes'. And Marx has notoriously abandoned hope in the ragged multitude as a force of insurrection. Everyone is off-beat and out of time. Everyone has arrived too early or stayed too late for the party. (Also: there is no Party....) Both time and space are out of joint, crammed together in unwieldy packets of past and future, town and country. Capitalism is simultaneously lagging behind and overleaping its epoch, still haunted by the outcasts of feudalism while already pressing forward to its financialised future. The ongoing drama of primitive accumulation is taking place beyond the factory floor –

in the banker's chambers, in the notary's offices, in the stock-exchange where one can speculate on the price of Californian gold without having to leave town. The revolutionary drama will play out beyond the factories and barricades, in abodes even more hidden than the hidden abode of production, where the class struggle churns invisibly in plain sight: in the city, in the country, but also beyond the metropolis, across the continent, in the colonies (let's stretch a little) – on the expanded stage of a world still to be made.

Marx declines to give a name to this obscure revolutionary agency, opting for 'the Revolution' as personified agent of history. Personification may not quite capture an agency that is straining the category of the human: it turns out to be a small, hungry animal that's doing all the work. And work may not quite describe this creature's blind, voracious, seemingly aimless, destructive toil. Here's another famous passage.

But the Revolution is thorough [*gründlich*]. It is still on its journey through purgatory. It goes about its business methodically. By 2 December 1851, it had completed half its preparatory work [...] and now it is completing the other half ... First it developed parliamentary power in order to be able to overthrow it. Now that it has achieved this, it is developing the executive power, reducing it to its purest expression, isolating it, confronting it as its *sole antagonist* in order to concentrate all its powers of destruction against it. And when it has completed this second half of its preparatory work [*Vorarbeit*], Europe will jump up and cry out: Well grubbed, old mole!³⁰

With the hypertrophy of executive power, counter-revolution condenses into a single unified opponent, a 'sole antagonist' against which the Revolution can and must rally its forces. Marx embraces the coup for its unvarnished display of power. The tragic binary reasserts itself in the decisive stand-off between two clearly opposed antagonists – a simplification, clarification, cathartic purification of the class struggle just where it had seemed most uncertain. Where negativity keeps dissolving into a semantic fog of disaggregated differences or fissuring into a syntactic maze of empty inversions, Marx retrieves antagonism at the point of its greatest attenuation. Politics becomes the locus and focus of class struggle – 'the dangerous turn that transforms every struggle against state power into a struggle against capital itself.'

But who, or what, then, is 'the Revolution' and why

personify it? The opaque abstractness of the noun mirrors the motley concreteness (which is of course another kind of abstractness) of the teeming *Lumpen*. But the abstraction is a 'real' one – the disconnect is materially generated and, like all abstraction, is experienced at a visceral bodily level. It registers the difficulties of locating political agency in a world where the terms of action are constantly changing. The challenges are practical (tactical, organisational) but they are also epistemological and representational or aesthetic. They pertain to the changing velocities and scalar slippages of the revolutionary theatre. What is a revolution, what are its ends and limits, when does it start and stop, how do you know it when you see it, where does it go when its players are dispersed, exiled, or driven underground? What is the difference between an interruption and a termination, between fatigue and exhaustion, between failure and defeat? How long can an intermission last before it ceases to be an intermission, what happens when the stage gets too empty or too crowded, when there are either too many players (this problem was rehearsed by Euripides) or not enough (this will be explored by Beckett)? How do you represent a subject whose edges both exceed and undershoot the limits of subjectivity?

How do you represent a collective protagonist (is there such a thing as a collective protagonist?), what is revolution in the absence of a clearly defined revolutionary class? This is less the structural causality of an (Althusserian) 'process without a subject' than a process in *search* of a subject that is generated in and by the search itself. There is no class consciousness, and therefore no class, prior to or outside the class struggle. Character is subordinate to plot: Marx pushes Aristotle's *Poetics* to its Nietzschean extreme: There is no doer behind the deed. The agent of revolution is – the Revolution. Or maybe simply: Revolution.

This is not the first time the Revolution has assumed the corporate *dignitas* of a quasi-person. It acquired its majuscule as soon as 'it' was recognised as a 'revolution' in the first place – when the multiple upheavals erupting spontaneously across France over the summer of 1789 coalesced into a singular event, a *revolution*, turning rapidly into *the Revolution*, the one and only, unprecedented, unrepeatable and for this reason perpetually renascent, *fons et origo* of subsequent revolutions – the charismatic object of transference in an unending tragedy of succes-

sion, betrayal, usurpation, displacement. Abstraction hurts. It has the sharpness of a cut, a 'real' severance or dragging (*abstrahieren*), and so the loss of an abstraction is a compound or redoubled loss: loss supervening upon loss. This is why, as Freud reminds us, the loss or disappointment in an intractably opaque, or 'unknown' object – 'fatherland', 'party', 'Revolution' – can trigger such powerful melancholia. Revolution is the ultimate lost object.

But why is the Revolution playing the role of Old Hamlet and who will take on the role of avenger? That old script might augur ill for the future of revolution. For the young Hegelians, still stuck in the 'waiting room' of history, clinging to the shreds of a dialectic that had failed to detonate, lamenting a revolutionary modernity that would not be theirs to inherit, Germany was Hamlet – inaction, indecision, overthinking.³¹ Marx presses forward: 'When it has completed this second half of its preparatory work [*Vorarbeit*], Europe will leap up and cry out: Well grubbed, old mole.'³² The applause might seem premature, given that by Marx's own reckoning the play has barely begun, the (peasant) chorus has not yet found its footing, and the main protagonist – (the?) Revolution – has yet to make its appearance. There is nothing before or after the play, the preparation for the drama has been folded into the drama and the audience's reaction folded into the action. The temporal sequence of beginning-middle-end has collapsed – no 'Aristotelian unities' on the horizon – along with the spatial division between onstage-backstage-orchestra, not to mention the social or class division between actor, stage-hand, and spectator. We have arrived late for the first act and the end is still outstanding. Which is another way of saying that we are participants in history and never simply observers. We make history, but not under circumstances of our choosing.

For Hegel, the old mole was the providential figure of reason in history, Spirit's irresistible movement towards the daylight, tunnelling ever onward and upward – *Fortschreiten, Fortarbeiten* In the last lecture of his course on the *History of Philosophy*, reviewing the seemingly aimless but it turns out purposeful itinerary of Spirit's burrowing through the centuries, Hegel recalls Hamlet's jocular words to his father's ghost who has been moving erratically beneath the stage floor like a stagehand in the cellarage, prompt book in hand, reminding the players

of their lines. ... 'Well done, old mole.' *Brav gearbeitet, wackerer Maulwurf*.³³ Spirit congratulates itself for having reached the finish line in time to complete its 'most serious labour'.³⁴ *Die Weltgeschichte [ist] das Weltgericht* – world history is the world's court of judgment – and Judgment Day always arrives on time.³⁵ As in the ancient Roman law courts where the proceedings had to be concluded by nightfall, the verdict of history is delivered just as dusk is falling. As the mole makes its breakthrough to modernity, it breaks ground from *below* – not from above, in Cartesian fashion, not by making a *tabula rasa* or clean sweep of history, but by undermining the edifice from the ground up, breaking through the crust of an ossified tradition, leaving traces of its itinerary in its wake.

As it emerges from the wreckage and dusk turns to dawn, the old mole straps on the 'seven-league boots' that will catapult it over the epochs of world history in a single leap.³⁶ Before bidding his students farewell, Hegel offers a breathtakingly abridged summary of the highlights of the entire history of (European) philosophy crammed into a few short pages. Hegel's mole is the opposite of Benjamin's angel of history; where the angel is unable to make whole what has been smashed, seeing only an accumulating pile of rubble, the mole – has it metamorphosed into the owl of Minerva? – has encyclopedic hindsight.

It was a perverse but inspired choice of animals on Hegel's part. Perverse if only because 'enlightenment' is what a normal mole avoids most; nocturnal and 'light shy', a mole has an unlimited capacity for underground existence and every reason to avoid surfacing. (Hamlet's father returns to the underworld at the stroke of dawn). Yet there's something oddly fitting about the metaphor. The mole's appetite is endless and its powers of assimilation prodigious; it consumes up to half its own body weight each day (a true diet of worms); and in a near parody of Spirit's capacity to self-metabolise, to make its exterior its own interior, the mole is endowed with a special kind of hemoglobin that enables it to breathe its own carbon dioxide – it literally inhales its own exhalation, it consumes its own waste – beyond the limits of normal endurance. It is thus uniquely poised to survive the *longue durée* of a history that would be suffocating for any other living being.

It was Marx who turned the old mole into one of the buzziest of all buzzwords, in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* it

probably comes second only to the tragedy/farce meme for quotability, and in a text bursting with *bons mots* that's saying a lot. Smelling a Hegelian rat, Deleuze, and then Hardt/Negri will reject the bouncy optimism of the figure – the seemingly old-fashioned teleology, the outmoded topography of depth and surface, the (so to speak) 'molar' stolidity – proposing the snake as a more suitable insurrectionary agent in a world of global flow and connectivity where everything is slithering on the surface in a horizontal rhizomatic network.³⁷ Not to be outdone, Žižek proposes the kraken, a giant squid, as more appropriate for the eruptive intensity of Revolution now retrofitted Lacanian-style as the monstrous obscenity of the Real.³⁸ Derrida, for his part, pauses at the figure of the 'fretful porpentine': it is not the ghost himself who answers to the Revolution but his anxiously bristling descendant.³⁹ I rummaged around in the bestiary to see if I could come up with something better. I thought for a long time about the *Tigersprung* – that anamnestic leap into the past that Benjamin famously invokes in

the fourteenth *Thesis on History* (one of his most pointed engagements with the *Eighteenth Brumaire*) when describing the explosive power of citation. Revolution is a tiger: it has the power to blast a past epoch from the continuum of a 'homogeneous empty time'.

But I think I'll stick with the figure of the old mole, not least in homage to the subterranean passageways and tunnels (also of course lifelines) of the Palestinian resistance. It captures the intermittencies, the latencies, the 'invasive absences'⁴⁰ – for disappearance can be as much a strategy as a practical necessity – and unforeseeable eruptions that, to a disengaged onlooker, or to those with an investment in seeing 'barbarism' everywhere, might appear random, irrational, extravagant, as sensational as a Hollywood horror film. There's something compelling in the stubbornness of the dig – the push and pull of soil, back and forth, resistance and persistence, obstacle and obstinacy – the hypervigilance of a creature endowed with an uncanny, almost extrasensory intelligence, vibratory, olfactory, tactile.



We can surely also acknowledge in this repetitive pulsation the force of fantasy and the drive. Revolution moves at different velocities above and below ground. There's a difference between the deep, geological time of the unconscious and the rapid time of organisation where pacing and timing are all. It's the old mole who undertakes the repetitive action of revolution – exhaustive, exhausting, tiresome, toilsome, often tedious, but never routine, habitual, or predictable. Rosa Luxemburg, who revived the figure of the old mole, insisted on this 'long, slow movement, itself patient, of impatience.'⁴¹ The day before her murder, she remained undefeated as she rehearsed a long history of defeats, while 'order reigned in Berlin' and the echoes of the slaughtered Communards still resounded in the streets of Berlin, Warsaw, and beyond.⁴²

The *Hamlet* reference is essential. It underscores the spectral power of the command, the oath, the testamentary injunction. But it points to an inheritance of a peculiar kind. The old mole scrabbling erratically beneath the stage floor is no longer a sovereign authority asserting a power reserved for kings and patriarchs. The Ghost is a dethroned king, a debased, humiliated, or at least humbled father, certainly an earthy or earthly one, passing on a legacy that is uncertain and that is no longer his own to bequeath. The 'tradition of the oppressed' is not a dynasty, the revolutionary heritage – freedom – is not a property or possession. The line of descent is ruptured and unstable. When Hamlet's father makes his next and final entry, another surprise appearance, this time in Gertrude's chamber in the third Act, he appears not as a king in shining armour but shabbily attired in humble nightclothes. Maybe he's just woken, maybe he's lost his way, maybe he's broken curfew. Noting his father's plebeian appearance, Hamlet calls him a 'king of shreds and patches'. Or, in Tieck/Schlegel's translation, which Marx would have certainly have been aware of, *Lumpenkönig*.

Ex machina

In his 1885 Postface to the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, Engels praises Marx's ability to parry the slings and arrows of revolutionary misfortune: 'Nothing surprised Marx'. The theory of historical materialism has 'brilliantly withstood the test' of history. It is tempting to accuse Marx of philosophical wizardry of a vulgar-Hegelian sort, wresting vic-

tory from defeat, peddling the threadbare remains of providential eschatology – what Emil Duhring called the old 'dialectical crutch'.⁴³ It turns out that the reactionary excrescences that had been sabotaging the machinery of revolution were all this time oiling it. The impediment to revolution turns out to be its enabling condition. This might seem to be the cunning of reason at its most cunning; the corpses of the insurgents can finally be consigned to the slaughter-bench of history as collateral damage. 'The (bourgeois) revolution is dead – Long live the (proletariat) revolution.'

Engels, who supplied Marx with the tragedy-farce meme (even Marx's original turns out to have been a citation) had joked about 'old Hegel' stage-managing the *Eighteenth Brumaire* (of Louis Bonaparte) from beyond the grave, and one might wonder if the same might be said of the *Eighteenth Brumaire* (of Karl Marx).⁴⁴ Is dialectic a *deus ex machina* brought in at zero hour, is it the stage crew, is it the chorus commenting on the confusing spectacle, is it the souffleur hiding in the cellars supplying the Revolution with its lines, is it the ghost in the machine, is it the machine itself?

Dialectic is the motor of history and suffers the vicissitudes of all things historical: it can become creaky with overuse and stale through habit. Its own motility can be the greatest impediment to change. Running on overdrive, it can be mobilised without having been fully assimilated, formally subsumed without being assimilated, becoming a vestigial remnant of itself – a shadow without a body, grey-on-grey, an *éminence grise*, a shadow authority, a personification, a *dramatis personae*, a personality, a name, a phrase, a form, a formula, a motto, a slogan – 'the Dialectic'.

In the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, Marx compares the challenge of assuming revolutionary freedom to the difficulty of learning a new language. The sign of fluency is when you can forget the old one, when you stop repeating, when you suddenly find yourself moving around freely in your adopted language unencumbered by the reminders of your mother tongue. Repetition is the symptom of a hyperactive memory and a moribund imagination. But repetition is also the way to learn a new language: you recite meaningless syllables, you make lists, you keep repeating and repeating until it trips naturally off your tongue. You chop language into bits and pieces, you turn a living language into a dead language so that it can be-

come a living part of you as if you'd never had to learn it. And repetition can be a way to unlearn an old language. Try it: keep saying the same word over and over and over until it becomes weird and incomprehensible, keep repeating the most tired phrases until they become mysterious and opaque. Keep repeating the poetry of the past until it gleams with an uncanny power to surprise.

This is precisely how Hegel had described the work of the mechanical memory (*Gedächtnis*) in the *Encyclopaedia*. The most startling achievement of thinking is not, as one might imagine, a labour of interiorisation or remembrance (*Erinnerung*) but rather a toil of rote memorisation – a 'learning by heart' (*auswendig lernen*), a turning and learning outward.⁴⁵ Language is pulverised into a spray of arbitrary and disconnected signifiers, sounds stripped of meaning, without syntactical or grammatical connection, recited idiotically, without understanding, scansion, or 'accent', while the mind is reduced to an 'empty bond' (or: 'empty volume' [*leerer Band*]). Hegel finds something 'supremely marvellous' in this vacancy: 'For it is the very essence of mind to be in its right mind, but here the mind is estranged and its action is like machinery.' Far from signalling a defectiveness or impediment to thinking, this automatism marks the paradoxical 'transition to thinking' proper. Purged of either intrinsic or acquired meaning, reduced to its most threadbare and formulaic, language becomes an array of empty ciphers available for resignification, while the mind becomes an empty or open book awaiting reinscription.

Marx was never one to write recipes for the cookbooks of the future. Every historical construction is cobbled together from the detritus of the past. Among these readymades is the flotsam of a dialectic that has become paralysed or slack with overuse. In mechanically repeating Hegel's words and syntax, Marx makes them strange. He keeps the machine idling while a new one is being forged. It might take this to extract the poetry of the future from the grey on grey of capitalism – a Faustian universe in which 'all theory is grey, and only business is green.'⁴⁶

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Notes

1. Sigmund Freud, 'The Question of Lay Analysis' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 20 (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-74), 195.
2. See, for example, most pithily, 'A Revolution of the 1789 or the 1848 Type?' (1905) in V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 8 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1962), 257-9. For Lenin's repeated attack on the Menshevik misuse of analogy to derail the Revolution see, for example, Lenin, *One Step Forward, Two Steps Backwards* in V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 7. 'Comrade Axelrod is probably aware that the division of present-day Social-Democracy into revolutionary and opportunists has long since given rise – and not only in Russia – to "historical analogies with the era of the great French Revolution". Comrade Axelrod is probably aware that the Girondists of present-day Social-Democracy everywhere and always resort to the terms "Jacobinism", "Blanquism", and so on to describe their opponents. Let us then not imitate Comrade Axelrod's "truth-phobia"'. See Lenin, 'One Step Forward, Two Steps Back' in *Collected Works*, Vol. 7 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964), 379. The most intense use of analogy to condemn (and distinguish) the 'Bonapartist' and 'Thermidorian' trajectory of the French Revolution is of course by Trotsky in *The Revolution Betrayed*. Like Lenin, he would also excoriate 'undialectical' uses of the Thermidorian analogy. See, for example, the aptly titled 'Once Again and Once More Again on the Nature of the USSR' in *In Defence of Marxism* (London: New Park Publications, 1966), 29-39. For a detailed account of the mobilisation of French Revolutionary motifs in the Russian Revolution – phases, stages, costumes, anthems, names, places, etc. – see Jay Bergman, *The French Revolutionary Tradition in Russian and Soviet Politics, Political Thought, and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).
3. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 460.
4. See most pointedly Adorno's letter of August 2, 1935, in Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, eds., *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910-1940*, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 494-503.
5. Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1451a38-1451b7.
6. I'm following Kojin Karatani, *History and Repetition*, ed. Seiji M. Lippit (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).
7. Aristotle, *Poetics*, 450b34-1451a15.
8. Recall the anecdote about Nikolai Evreinov's staging of the *Storming of the Winter Palace* in 1920, a 'prolet-

ariat mass action' performed before a crowd of 100,000 with a panoply of army tanks and enormous cast of extras: when the canon fired, passersby panicked that another 'storming' was underway. Retouched photographs of the performance would be circulated as documentary images of the (much less spectacular) event of 1917. See Lars Kleberg, *Theatre as Action: Soviet Russian Avant-Garde Aesthetics* (London: Macmillan, 1993); James von Geldern, *Bolshevik Festivals, 1917–1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Frederick C. Corney, *Telling October: Memory and the Making of the Bolshevik Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004). Sometimes these photographs were taken to be stills from Eisenstein's *October: Ten Days that Shook the World* (1927), a film that had yet to be made.

9. Lenin, 'On Slogans' (1917) in *Collected Works*, Vol. 25 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), 185–192, and 'The Revolutionary Phrase' (1918) in *Collected Works*, Vol. 27 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974), 19–29. For illuminating discussions see Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *A Marxist Philosophy of Language* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 97–104, and Frank Ruda, 'I the Revolution speak' in Victoria Fareld and Hannes Kuch, eds., *From Marx to Hegel and Back: Capitalism, Critique, and Utopia* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020). For the *locus classicus*, see Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Athlone Press, 1988).

10. V.I. Lenin, 'The Immediate Task of the Soviet Government' (1918) in *Collected Works*, Vol. 27 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), 265.

11. Lenin, 'Marxism and Insurrection: A Letter to the Central Committee of the R.S.D.L.P.(B.)' (1917) in *Collected Works*, Vol. 26 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), 22–27.

12. Lenin, 'Two Tactics of Social-Democracy in the Democratic Revolution' (1905), in *Collected Works*, Vol. 9 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), 70.

13. G.W.F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 486; see also Rocío Zambrana, 'Actuality in Hegel and Marx' in *Hegel Bulletin*, 40:1 (2019), 74–91.

14. Walter Benjamin, 'Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia' in Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith, ed., *Selected Writings, Volume 2: 1927–1930* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 216ff. (citing Pierre Naville's 1926 *La Révolution et les intellectuels*). (This paragraph is drawn from my *On Persistence* [Calcutta and London: Seagull Books, 2026].)

15. All quotations from *The Eighteenth Brumaire* are taken (with occasional revisions) from Terrell Carver's translation in Mark Cowling and James Martin, eds., *Marx's*

'Eighteenth Brumaire': (Post)Modern Interpretations (London: Pluto Press, 2002), 19–109.

16. Karl Marx, 'The June Revolution' (1848), in *The Revolutions of 1848: Political Writings, Vol. 1*, ed. David Fernbach, (London: Verso, 2010), 131.

17. Karl Marx, *Class Struggles in France*, in *Surveys from Exile: Political Writings, Vol. 2*, ed. David Fernbach (London: Verso, 1973), 60.

18. 'La Révolution, c'est moi'. Proudhon is the source of the possibly apocryphal account of Napoleon's claim to incarnate the Revolution as the Sun King incarnated the state. See his *Les Confessions d'un révolutionnaire* (Paris: La Voix du Peuple, 1849), 11.

19. 'Nous avons fini le roman de la Révolution : il faut en commencer l'histoire ...' – Napoléon Bonaparte to the Conseil d'État on the day after the coup d'état of 18 Brumaire (9 November 1799). See Bernard and Monique Cottret, *L'Europe des Lumières 1680–1820* (Paris: Perrin, 2005).

20. 'La Révolution est fixée aux principes qui l'ont commencée: elle est finie.' Quoted in Thierry Lentz, *Nouvelle Histoire du Premier Empire, Vol. 3: La France et l'Europe de Napoléon 1804–1814* (Paris: Fayard, 2007).

21. André-Jean Tudesq, 'La légende napoléonienne en France en 1848', *Revue Historique* 218 (1957), 71ff., cited in Markus J. Prutsch, *Caesarism in the Post-Revolutionary Age: Crisis, Populace and Leadership* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 70.

22. Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, 40.

23. Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, 95.

24. Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, 56–7.

25. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 201.

26. Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, 63.

27. Terrell Carver conspicuously omits the word in his translation.

28. *Lumpen* is itself a notorious untranslatable, at least when applied to things other than rags and ragpickers. Its meaning in German is unstable, sliding between 'rag' and 'rogue', between material and ideological, between description and moralising imprecation. When speaking of the *Lumpenproletariat* in their non-German writings Marx and Engels are hard pressed to come up with local synonyms, 'the dangerous class' (in quotation marks), the 'mob' (sometimes 'the swell mob' when referring to the financial scoundrels and their cronies).

29. Compare the proliferating inventories that contribute to the 'reality effect' of the naturalist novel, for example in Zola, whom Lukács notoriously deplored. In traditional epic, the trope of the list is tied to the assertion of imperial triumph: the catalogue of ships, the military parade, the procession of captives, the display of spolia.

30. Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, 98.

- 31.** 'Deutschland ist Hamlet'. Ferdinand Freiligrath, 'Hamlet', in *Ein Glaubensbekenntniß: Zeitgedichte* (Franz Daniel Bassermann, 1844), 253–257. See also Peter Marx, ed., *Hamlet-Handbuch: Stoffe, Aneignungen, Deutungen* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2014).
- 32.** Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, 98.
- 33.** I'm taking the liberty of citing from Michelet's mash-up of the various student transcriptions, presumably pulling from the 1829/30 or 1830/31 transcripts, which are still awaiting publication in the critical edition. See Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie III*, in *Werke*, Vol. 20 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1971), 456; *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Vol. 3, trans. E. S. Haldane and Frances H. Simson (London: Kegan Paul, 1892–96), 546. A different variation on the mole motif can be found in Hegel's partial transcript of the Introduction to the 1830 lectures (we still await the concluding lecture).
- 34.** Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction: Reason in History*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 197. There are some interesting translation moves in the relay from Shakespeare to Hegel to Marx. Whereas Hegel gives Shakespeare's 'Well said' the performative force of a doing or working ('Well done'), Marx rematerialises the mole's labour by returning it to the grubby earth.
- 35.** G.W.F. Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970), §340, paraphrasing Schiller. *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen W. Wood, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge University Press, 1991).
- 36.** Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie III*, 456; *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Vol 3, 546.
- 37.** Gilles Deleuze, *Pourparlers* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1990), and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2000), 57f.
- 38.** Slavoj Žižek, *Disparities* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).
- 39.** Jacques Derrida *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 117.
- 40.** Daniel Bensaïd, *Strategies of Resistance* (London: Resistance Books, 2009), 136.
- 41.** See Bensaïd, channelling Luxemburg's dialectic of urgency and patience, victory and defeat, progress and setback, in *Strategies of Resistance*, 137.
- 42.** 'What does the whole history of modern revolutions and of socialism show us? The first flare-up of the class struggle in Europe – the revolt of the silk weavers of Lyons in 1831, ended with a severe defeat. The Chartist movement in England – with a defeat. The rebellion of the Parisian proletariat in the June days of 1848 ended with a crushing defeat. The Paris Commune ended with a dreadful defeat. The whole path of socialism, as far as revolutionary struggles are concerned, is paved with sheer defeats ... Revolutions have brought us nothing but defeat till now, but these unavoidable defeats are only heaping guarantee upon guarantee of the coming final triumph.' Rosa Luxemburg, 'Order Reigns in Berlin' (1919), in *Die Rote Fahne*, No. 14 (14 January 1919), in Peter Hudis and Kevin B. Anderson, eds., *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004), 374ff.
- 43.** Eugen Dühring, *Kritische Geschichte der Nationalökonomie und des Sozialismus*, 2nd edition (Berlin: Verlag von Theobald Grieben, 1875), 502–3. For Engels's retort, see *Anti-Dühring*, Part I, Ch. 13, in *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 25 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1987) 120.
- 44.** Engels, letter to Marx of 3 December 1851: '[I]t really seems as though old Hegel, in the guise of the World Spirit, were directing history from the grave and, with the greatest conscientiousness, causing everything to be re-enacted twice over, once as grand tragedy and the second time as rotten farce, Caussidière for Danton, L. Blanc for Robespierre, Barthélemy for Saint-Just, Flocon for Carnot, and the moon-calf together with the first available dozen debt-encumbered lieutenants for the little corporal and his band of marshals. Thus the 18th Brumaire would already be upon us.' *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 38: *Letters 1844–51* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1989), 501. Engels was in turn riffing off Proudhon's earlier account of the February Revolution of 1848. 'Drunk on historical novels, we have given a repeat performance of the 10th of August and the 29th of July. Without noticing it, we have all become characters from some farce.' Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *Selected Writings*, trans. Elizabeth Fraser (Garden City, NJ: Anchor Press, 1969), 154. There are numerous other precedents, too many to rehearse here, in Heine and Hugo and the popular press.
- 45.** G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, trans. W. Wallace and A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), §463. The following quotes in this paragraph are from this passage.
- 46.** Marx, letter to Engels, 20 July 1862, in *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, vol. 41, *Letters 1860–1864* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1996), 411. Marx continues sardonically: 'Unfortunately, I have come to realize this too late.'