



On Bringing the New World into Being: Theory, Ontology, Politics, and Action – An Interview with AK Thompson

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AK Thompson got kicked out of high school for publishing an underground newspaper called *The Agitator* and has been an activist and social theorist ever since. Most recently a Visiting Professor of social movements and social change at Ithaca College, his publications include the books *Black Bloc, White Riot: Anti-Globalization and the Genealogy of Dissent* and *Premonitions: Selected Essays on the Culture of Revolt*, as well as the co-edited volumes *Keywords for Radicals: The Contested Vocabulary of Late-Capitalist Struggle* and *Spontaneous Combustion: The Eros Effect and Global Revolution*.

For over a decade, Thompson has been a key voice in debates relating to questions of power and authority, social movements and forms of revolt, and the political potentials of popular culture. His 2010 monograph *Black Bloc, White Riot: Anti-Globalization and the Genealogy of Dissent* has become an underground classic, and has recently been the subject of a special issue of the journal *Theory in Action* to mark its tenth anniversary and explore its enduring relevance (Ruggero 2021b). Here, as elsewhere, Thompson urges activists to develop a novel analytic approach to the question of political violence and the limits of representational politics, and to embrace violent action as the true domain of the political. In light of the interconnected crises of the present and the renewed prominence of the riot on both the plane of theory and the plane of history during the last decade or so, *Coils of the Serpent* was eager to talk to him about theory and practice, culture and politics, ontology and violence, and about what it means to be political in a burning world. The interview was conducted via email in October and November 2021.

Florian Cord: My first question to you is a rather general one. Since our journal is dedicated to producing relevant theorizations and analyses of forms of power, to start us off I would be interested to hear about your main theoretical influences in this respect. In other words: Which thinkers and activists, theories and approaches have significantly shaped your own thinking about questions of power and resistance? Which do you consider most relevant with regards to the present moment?

AK Thompson: Although I've always felt a strong cultural affinity with anarchism, I became interested in Marx as a young activist and his work continues to anchor my



thinking today. Nevertheless, I am often troubled by the way that Marxism tends to get elaborated both within movement contexts and in the academy. In particular, I've found that strictly economic interpretations of Marx are a disservice to his contributions and even undermine their utility for struggle. In opposition to this economistic tendency, I gravitated toward the work of my mentor, Himani Bannerji, who showed how Marx could help us to make sense, not solely of economic patterns, but of social and cultural ones as well. Bannerji was central to the development of anti-racist Marxist feminism during the 1980s and 90s, and her work showed how culture itself could be analyzed as a kind of mirror of class, a field that gave expression to – but that was not simply determined by – dynamics unfolding within the social base (Bannerji 1998).

Bannerji's contributions were heavily informed by the insights of the feminist sociologist Dorothy Smith, who developed institutional ethnography as a means of doing sociology for people and from below. Rather than trying to explain the world using the categories inherited from the relations of ruling (including designations minted in fields like law, medicine, sociology, and psychiatry), Smith began instead from the standpoint of situated experiences within everyday life. At the point where bifurcations arose between experience and the extension of ruling relations through coordinated processes of conceptual induction, that's where investigation would begin (Smith 1990). The trick was to map outward from that point, to see how the local situation was trans-locally coordinated through textual mediation and the inscription of coordinating concepts.

Smith developed this orientation to social research through her engagement with Marx's treatment of ideology. For Marx, ideology was not merely a prescribed content (a catalogue of ideas) but rather a method of orienting to the world (Marx/Engels 1998: 101-02). With this orientation, a dramatic inversion takes place, and the concept advanced by the ideologist comes to order (and, *a fortiori*, even to produce) the world it claims merely to describe. In the process, the dynamics of the world are reduced to a mere instance of the concept said to denote them, and this greatly facilitates the organization, development, and extension of ruling relations. Smith's student George Smith developed this critique to show how institutional ethnography could be used in street-level organizing contexts. His "Political Activist as Ethnographer" remains a central reference point in my thinking (G. Smith 2006).

Bannerji was also among the first to alert me to the importance of Walter Benjamin's work. Like Dorothy Smith, Benjamin was interested in how small fragmentary pieces of reality could serve as the starting point for broader investigations; however, the procedures he used to conduct these investigations were somewhat different. Rather than starting with experience, Benjamin tended to start with social artifacts, and rather than mapping trans-local textual coordination, he sought instead to reveal how – through a multifaceted process of reflection – social fragments could be



forced to disclose the characteristics of the whole. By paying attention to citations across time, and by finding the expression of one phenomenon embedded in another, Benjamin sought to gain access to “the entire course of history” (1968b: 263). From this position, it became possible to imagine how the unfulfilled dreams and promises of the past might finally be realized in the present. Utopian thinking is pushed toward decision through “profane illumination” (1978: 180).

Through his creative synthesis of the best aspects of Marxism and psychoanalysis, Benjamin showed how material culture could itself be approached as a manifestation of a kind of collective dream work through which our underlying desire for a classless society found refracted expression. Following from this observation, he developed an analytic approach that could facilitate the process of working through by drawing attention to those moments in which we confront the possibility of redemption while simultaneously becoming aware of the means by which it might be achieved.

Part of this involves breaking with myth, and Benjamin made clear that myths arise not solely within material culture, but within fields like law and politics as well. Here, belief in progress and aversion to violence lead us away from our own “*weak* Messianic power” (1968b: 254). For this reason, Benjamin called upon us to synthesize the anarchic with the “constructive, dictatorial side of revolution,” to work toward a direct correspondence between being and doing so that myth might become superfluous (1978: 189). This position echoes the one elaborated by Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*, where violence breaks down myth, and where people in struggle must confront the decision forced upon them by their generation’s entry onto the stage of history (1963: 206).

Such ideas have had a tremendous effect on me, and I’ve found them to be helpful when trying to make sense of the dynamics of struggle today.

FC: My own academic background is in cultural studies, particularly in what is often (somewhat misleadingly) called “British cultural studies” or, in reference to the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies which existed at the University of Birmingham from 1964 until 2002, the “Birmingham tradition,” associated with names like Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart, Stuart Hall, Angela McRobbie, Paul Gilroy, or Lawrence Grossberg. I am curious as to whether this intellectual tradition has had an impact on your thinking as well. Reading your reflections on the inadequacy of economism and the need for an alternative conception of the base/superstructure relation and of ideology, your emphasis on the centrality of culture or on the value of experience, I was actually reminded of many key debates and arguments within my field. Of course, in your co-authored introduction to *Keywords for Radicals* (Fritsch/O’Connor/Thompson 2016), you explicitly refer to Williams and his keywords project (later continued by Tony Bennett, Grossberg, and Meaghan Morris), but aside from that, as far as I can see, there



are few (open) references to cultural studies in your writing. Nevertheless, not least with a view to your interest in struggles over meaning or representation (after all, chapter 1 of *Black Bloc, White Riot* is entitled “Semiotic Street Fights”) or your continued engagement with popular culture, it seems to me that there are a number of interesting overlaps with this tradition – in terms of both, the theoretico-analytical level, but also your distinct ‘mode’ of theorizing. Is this impression correct?

AKT: Considered from the standpoint of substantive interest or methodological disposition, I’d say there’s definitely a strong overlap between the intellectual projects I’ve pursued and those developed within the tradition you describe. Raymond Williams was an obvious touchstone for me as I tried to think through the contests over word usage and meaning that arose within radical circles and that became the basis for *Keywords for Radicals*, and Angela McRobbie’s classic essay on the arcades project (1992) did much to highlight the promise of a fruitful exchange between Benjamin and cultural studies. Elsewhere, Stuart Hall’s analysis of representation and Richard Dyer’s classic study of whiteness (1997) shaped my thought in important ways.

Recently, my affinity with cultural studies has brought me into the orbit of *Lateral: Journal of the Cultural Studies Association*, where I’ve published two articles on Benjamin’s enduring relevance (Thompson 2019, 2020). My engagement with the journal also led to an invitation to share some of my work on protest, contagion, and collective subjectivity during a plenary at the 2021 Cultural Studies Association meeting, where I spoke alongside Yumi Pak and Swapna Gopinath. *Lateral* editors are now working on a book about *Cultural Studies in the Interregnum*, and I’ve been asked to contribute a chapter (I promised something on the development of conspiracy as a political mode). So, yes, cultural studies does seem increasingly to be a reference point for me and my work.

In many ways, this confluence makes sense. During the early part of the twentieth century, Marxist thinkers had to come to terms with the challenges to political organizing that arose within modern nation states that had developed into liberal democracies with expanded consumer markets – challenges that Marx himself had been unable to foresee. Foregrounding problems of consciousness that exceeded the difficulties of perceiving the dynamics of exploitation within the hidden abode of production, these thinkers turned their attention toward culture, consumption, and other “superstructural” matters.

In his famous essay on the work of art, Benjamin summarized the problem when he wrote: “When Marx undertook his critique of the capitalistic mode of production, this mode was in its infancy. [...] The transformation of the superstructure, which takes place far more slowly than that of the substructure, has taken more than half a century to manifest in all areas the change in the conditions of production. Only today can it be



indicated what form this has taken.” (1968a: 217-18) In response, Benjamin proposed that the superstructural material should itself be subjected to analytic scrutiny and intervention. This insight proved to be no less important for the emergence of cultural studies a generation later. Although the theoretical touchstone for this latter development was more frequently Gramsci than Benjamin, I’ve tried to show in some of my recent work how their political and intellectual projects aligned (Thompson 2021).

Since the genesis of the Birmingham School, however, and especially owing to the distortions it endured as a result of its migration to the United States toward the end of the twentieth century, cultural studies – already eclectic by disposition – seemed to lose its radical edge. Consequently, my initial encounters with the tradition were marked by ambivalence. On the one hand, cultural studies scholars seemed to build upon and even extend the insights of those early-twentieth century Marxists who first confronted the spectacular chaos brought on by mass consumption and fascism. On the other hand, we got a million books that approached cultural phenomena as texts that could be subjected to endless “readings.” This latter tendency corresponded with Fredric Jameson’s observation that, under late capitalism, the struggle to read the world in a deep way (where superficial phenomena are thought to express realities that could not yet be perceived directly) began losing ground to a desire for “play” in which one might slide endlessly across the skin of culture, now perceived to be depthless, or along the chain of signification (1991: 12).

I would never claim that there’s no value in such explorations, and it’s certainly true that books of this kind have generated important insights. At the very least, they’ve been fun to read. Nevertheless, it seems clear that they’re engaged in a different intellectual project from the one that unites western Marxism and cultural studies in its Birmingham mode. Given this epistemological ambivalence, which gets concealed when “cultural studies” is invoked in a big-tent way, I’ve not felt a strong urge to align myself with the discipline. At the same time, however, this ambivalence suggests that there’s a fight to be had within cultural studies – and I’m hoping that my newfound traction within the field might someday grant me an opportunity to throw down on the side that must win.

FC: One of the characteristics of cultural studies has long been its “serious” engagement with the various forms and manifestations of popular culture – even though here too (or especially here), the ambivalence you mentioned can be observed. Nevertheless, in the wake of thinkers like Hall, who famously referred to it as a “constant battlefield” in the struggle for hegemony, an “arena of consent and resistance” (1981: 233, 239), many scholars in the field have adopted a distinctly political perspective on popular culture. You too have frequently discussed popular cultural phenomena with a view to their political significance (e.g. the Hollywood blockbuster *Avatar* and the film *Fight Club*, hipster coffee shops, the unavoidable Che Guevara t-shirts, or the tabloid fascination



with murderers and terrorists). In this context, you have repeatedly made use of Benjamin's notion of the "wish image" and the category of "myth" (or "mythic identification") – in a way which, interestingly, seems to me to point towards a somewhat more "generous" approach to cultural commodities than the one found in, say, the analyses of the Frankfurt school (and perhaps, to a certain extent, also in some of the more recent critiques of "retromania" [Reynolds 2011]). Could you elaborate a little bit on these issues, on your own take on popular culture and your understanding of its role(s) in or for political struggle?

AKT: For me, there's no doubt that radicals should orient toward popular culture; the problem is *how*, and what questions we might ask of it. Following Benjamin, I maintain that popular culture should not be approached as though it were an object in its own right. Instead, investigation should aim at determining the basis and implications of both its characteristics and its resonance. When approached in this way, the cultural artifact becomes a trace, which might alert us to the *ur*historical desire for freedom underlying human activity while at the same time disclosing the specific conditions that foretold its emergence. By casting ourselves as witnesses to the collective, historical process of working through that takes place within material culture, we can learn to force its artifacts to confess – to alert us to the challenges we confront and the desires by which we're impelled.

This analytic orientation has implications for how we proceed strategically too. If we take mass resonance to be important, the inadequacy of the object-as-given cannot be said to invalidate it. Still, it remains common for radicals to conceive of critique as a process – not of completion, or of working through – but of rendering inadmissible. In contrast, my own investigations have often circled around the most popular of popular artifacts, since their mass resonance suggests that the social tensions to which they give expression are both widely felt and have developed to a critical state. The challenge is to identify the revolutionary potential inherent within the desire that prompts cathexis so that it might be decoupled from its posited object resolution. In dialogue with Ernst Bloch, Benjamin likened this process to splitting the atom (1999: 463) – a procedure that remains impossible if we presuppose that desire is the same as, inseparable from, or somehow resolved by its object cathexis. Meanwhile, people drawn to wish images are not likely to commit to a conscious and deliberate process of working through if our first move as radicals is to shit on their object.

You mentioned my study of *Avatar*, in which I asked why radicals struggled to understand how (when taken together) the film's mass resonance and its unresolved character could – and, indeed, on some occasions did – lead people toward decisive action (Thompson 2010b). More recently, this same impulse led me to constellate Edvard Munch's *Scream* and Macaulay Culkin's signature performance in the John



Hughes classic *Home Alone* (Thompson 2020). Brought into reflection, I came to see these images as bookends of sorts for the popular culture of the twentieth century. Munch's symbolist breakdown went on to become one of the most frequently reproduced images arising from the European oil painting tradition, while Culkin's insufferable turn as Kevin ensured that *Home Alone* would become (and remain) the top-grossing live-action comedy of all time. United by what Benjamin once called a citation "without quotation marks" (1999: 458), these images, when brought into constellation, force us to contend with the twentieth century in new and disquieting ways. Here, the analysis is not of the artifacts per se, but of the challenges and opportunities to which they alert us.

In contrast, critiques that work to make the object inadmissible leave us with few options, strategically speaking. On the one hand, they seem to encourage sanctimonious posturing – and here we might recall Adorno's regrettable commentary on jazz (1989). On the other hand, meanwhile (and often as a result of what went down previously), such critiques provoke a "subcultural" explosion that leads to the development of alternative motifs and spaces. Although I feel grateful for such spaces and may even owe my life to them, it's clear that cultivating alternatives of this kind can in no sense be seen as capitalism's antithesis. They develop within its purview and embolden it – or else they decompose, leaving a trail of broken hearts and broken bones. The neoliberal refinement of niche marketing has further entrenched this complicity. Operating as we do under conditions in which there are fewer truly mass cultural phenomena and where subcultures have been valorized by the market, we must remain attentive to those moments in which everyone becomes fixated on the same thing at once. When this happens, the question cannot be whether the object is good or bad (it is always bad). Instead, we must ask: what compels people to cathect, and how else might their desire (finally, truly) be resolved?

The significance of this last question becomes apparent when we recall that wish images can be "resolved" in more than one way, and this is what makes them both a point of promise and a terrain of struggle. Fascists often affirm people's identification with wish images but provide them with mythic resolutions. Our aim must be to capture these images and push them in the direction of concrete reckoning.

FC: I am also interested in your assessment of some of the more recent theoretical developments. Scholars have of late declared a novel, "nonhuman turn," comprising a number of approaches all "engaged in decentering the human in favor of a turn toward and concern for the nonhuman, understood variously in terms of animals, affectivity, bodies, organic and geophysical systems, materiality, or technologies" (Grusin 2015: vii). This includes theoretical formations such as actor-network theory, the new materialisms, speculative realism and object-oriented ontology, affect theory, animal



and plant studies, or new media theory. Many of these new approaches have been the subject of intense, and often fierce, debates within the humanities and social sciences over the last couple of years. You briefly engaged with some of them in your entry on “agency” in the *Keywords* book. In theoretical as well as political terms, what do you consider to be the relevance or irrelevance of these? Which approaches do you find helpful or useful, which are you skeptical of? When I think, for instance, of recent critiques of representationalism, there seem to be interesting points of contact with your work, but there are obviously also various points of friction. How do you approach these new theories? Do you see possibilities for a productive encounter, an articulation, a cross-fertilization? Of course, especially in view of the heterogeneity of the nonhuman turn, such questions are far too broad to be answered exhaustively in the present context, but perhaps you can nevertheless indicate how you generally position yourself in these current debates?

AKT: Although I’ve learned a great deal from some of the theorists associated with these trends (and here I’m thinking of Sara Ahmed, Karen Barad, and Lauren Berlant, though there are surely others), so much of the work to which you refer has struck me as being old wine in new bottles. In keeping with the professional demand to deliver fresh goods to the marketplace of ideas, these projects have yielded a rehearsal of familiar postures carried out in new costumes, with a well-worn script marked up in the new nomenclature, and a dazzling new sign on the crumbling marquee.

Still, it’s important to recall that the reason we keep returning to these themes is precisely because they continue to pose problems. The critiques of anthropocentrism raised by object-oriented ontologists, for instance, arise in response to an intellectual tendency that has persisted across fields ranging from ecology to psychology despite its obvious negative consequences. More positively, efforts to focus on the precise attributes of the object – to perceive these ontological configurations in their dynamism and beyond some previously imputed essence – can help return us to questions of *being* despite the fact that (exceptions notwithstanding) questions of *meaning* have dominated social theory for nearly half a century.

I’m grateful for this return to ontological questions, and I like the emphasis on the dynamic and relational, where claims about being must give way to explorations of process, co-constitution, and becoming. Moreover, these theories are useful in pointing out that things have an existence prior to and independent of either their recognition or their conceptualization. Problems arise, however, if we presuppose that the recognition of an object is therefore not part of the object itself (Barad has worked to address this problem with their concept of “intra-action” [2007]).

From my perspective, “object” is itself best understood as an epistemological procedure, a content-unspecified concept that arises from our practical need to parcel



the world so that we might orient toward it in purposeful, generative ways. On this basis, we need to distinguish between objects and matter, and to note that only the latter can be said to exist prior to conceptualization. And while the world can be parceled in different ways, some configurations (some objects) only become available to us belatedly, and under definite conditions.

Within the context of object-oriented ontology, theorists start with and ground their analysis in the attributes of the object itself (up to and including, infamously, its “agency”). Nevertheless, and though it’s at odds with their intention, these theorists reiterate the anthropocentric convention of describing how such an object appears *to us*, from our vantage, at a given moment and under definite conditions. Indeed, they cannot do otherwise. My problem, then, is not so much with the claim that an object might somehow have agency or that agency comes into being solely through a relational, intra-active process; instead, it arises from the presumption that people could be anything *other than* anthropocentric.

As a concept and orientation, anthropocentrism needn’t be inscribed with negative normative connotations. Analytically, the term denotes the situated and necessarily partial character of our embodied perspective. In other words, it accords with a reality that feminist scholars at the turn of the century had to insist upon in their struggle to discredit the “god trick” of claiming to see everything from nowhere (Haraway 1991: 189). It is only through our circumscribed engagements with the world that we can come to know it. Through this exchange, the world is transformed and so are we. Moreover, this “we” (this subject that becomes its own object) is itself impossible to conceive without first indexing it to the historical transformations to which it contributes and of which it is part.

Marx provided a clear outline of this orientation in his “Theses on Feuerbach”, and important parallels can be drawn between his characterization of what he referred to as “all hitherto existing materialism” (1978: 143) and the approaches favored by thinkers developing object-oriented ontology today. We can draw similar parallels, I think, between the limitations of contemporary critiques of anthropocentrism and those that hobbled the poststructuralist critique of “humanism” a generation ago. By perceiving humanism primarily as a dangerous and refutable normative claim, these scholars dug the hole into which their progeny then fell. While there’s no doubt that, historically speaking, such normative claims were advanced and were used to justify domination, it’s also true that, as an intellectual project, humanism set out to grasp a plastic object (namely ourselves) from which we had become estranged. In the end, there is no “human” beyond what humans do, and none of what we do is beyond the concept’s purview. We must place this doing – with all its finitude and the partiality of its



perspective, with all its historical accumulations and residues – at the very center of our analysis.

FC: Within left theory, a renewed interest in the writings of Herbert Marcuse seems to have taken hold in the last decade or so. After his popularity significantly decreased and his work somewhat fell out of fashion with the rise of poststructuralist theorizing, a number of scholars, you among them (e.g. Del Gandio/Thompson 2017; Thompson 2017b), have recently returned to his thought in their analysis of contemporary capitalism as well as present-day social movements and radical politics (cf., e.g., Power 2009; Lamas/Wolfson/Funke 2017; Kirsch/Surak 2018; Reitz 2019; Fisher 2018, 2021). For you, what is it that makes Marcuse particularly relevant for thinking and addressing the challenges of the present?

AKT: I came to Marcuse largely through the work of his student George Katsiaficas, who developed and popularized the idea of the eros effect (1987). Although Katsiaficas and I have our disagreements (some of which have been explored, I think productively, in print [Katsiaficas 2021]), I've always found his work to be an important corrective to the scholarship being produced in the field of social movement studies. Owing to their desire to break with earlier collective behavior theorists who perceived crowds in basically pathological terms, social movement scholars in the late twentieth century began producing accounts of movement activity that often seemed like grotesque rational-choice caricatures. In contrast, and following Marcuse, Katsiaficas put eros at the center of his analysis and foregrounded the powerful experiences of collective subjectivity that can arise in struggle.

Jason Del Gandio had been working to develop and extend Katsiaficas' notion of the eros effect by focusing on its communicative dimension, and the two of them reached out to me while lining up a panel for the International Herbert Marcuse Society conference back in 2013. Although I did not think of myself as a Marcusean, Katsiaficas and I had done a few things together (he wrote a nice blurb for *Black Bloc, White Riot*, and I conducted an interview with him to mark the fortieth anniversary of May 68 [Katsiaficas/Thompson 2008]), so I suppose the invitation made sense. At the conference, I got to meet Andy Lamas, Arnold Farr, and other scholars who were working with Marcuse in a serious way.

Since then, I've come to realize how useful Marcuse's analysis of repressive desublimation, which he developed in *One-Dimensional Man* (2002), can be when making sense of late-capitalist culture. In a context where virtually any longing can be addressed through the gratifications of the market, and where gratification itself is valorized as the mark of an enlightened, non-judgmental disposition, Marcuse encourages us to ask, not whether we like something, but rather why we like what we like. Moreover, repressive desublimation forces us to consider how the erotic energies



that might otherwise prompt people to rebel against the present's inadequacies are now, through their valorization, channeled into perpetuating it.

Lately, I've been thinking about the role that pornography has come to play in the social reproduction of the commodity labor power. During the industrial era, capitalism demanded the repressive management of libidinal drives, and this corresponded to a situation in which the family was the basic unit. Work was over when the whistle blew, and the worker had to be home for dinner to ensure that the cycle could be resumed the following day. For many workers today, the basic unit of social reproduction is no longer the family but rather the individual tied to the service economy. Life and work bleed together in a 24/7 cycle, and the strategy for managing eros shifts from conservation to channeling surplus and, if possible, commodifying it. Sex moves from the "production" side of the ledger to the "consumption" side, where it gets bound up with niche markets and the fashioning of identities.

Corresponding to these new conditions, the consumption of pornography has become ubiquitous. It is coextensive with managerial strategies demanding "wellness" on all fronts, and it also reflects a classic strategy of repressive desublimation. Longing, which is disruptive because it forces us to confront (and ultimately to address) the inadequacy of our present, gets buried beneath unending pleasure. Only too late do we discover that the feast has left us hollow, and that the pornographic management of erotic energy cannot resolve the latent desire for connection that underwrites our thirst. Recently, the non-resolution of this foundational desire, this desire that makes struggle inevitable, has prompted a series of comedic explorations through the popular "yeah sex is cool but have you ever..." meme.

I think Marcuse can help us to make sense of such developments, and to recognize the radical implications of people's growing disaffection with simulacral cornucopias. In my own investigations, I've tended to arrive at this point by Benjaminian means, but Marcuse also owed a debt to Benjamin – and here we might recall how *One-Dimensional Man*, the work for which he is most well known, gives the final word to Benjamin by citing from his 1925 essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities* (Marcuse 2002: 261). Still, if people find themselves drawn to Marcuse, I think they should go for it. There's a lot to be gleaned from his texts, and his unapologetic Romanticism remains inspiring, even today. While I've quarreled with some of his specific formulations (mostly in footnotes), I think his broader synthesis of Marxism and psychoanalysis remains sound.

FC: You mentioned Marcuse's Romanticism. Certainly, this is one crucial point where many poststructuralist thinkers have parted ways with him – one need only think of Foucault's (1978) famous refutation of the "repressive hypothesis" here. After the linguistic turn and the critique of representation, for these theorists there simply was no authentic, unmediated being or desire to which we could ever hope to gain access – no



outside, that is, to the structures of signification and power in which we are always already inevitably caught.

It seems to me that your own work marks a more or less decisive break with this paradigm. Earlier in our conversation you emphasized the importance of experience as a starting point for political analysis and action, of desire as foundational and fundamentally disruptive, and of the goal of overcoming simulacra and achieving “a direct correspondence between being and doing.” I believe that remarks such as these are characteristic of your thinking, insofar as, even as you underline the significance of struggles over representation (we talked about this earlier), you argue that, ultimately, representation is precisely *not* the domain of the political, but merely a proxy that, in the final analysis, always serves to maintain the status quo. Instead, you urge those committed to emancipatory struggle to abandon the bourgeois public sphere and the “path of incremental tinkering that ends by legitimating the opposition (our enemy, constituted power)” through “disavowing representational seductions” (2017b: 166) and to “find the means of reconnecting with the world lying in wait beyond its representational proxy” (2010a: 27). In this context, you speak of radicals working “to heal the divide between signifier, representation, and consumption, on the one hand, and the signified, the real, and production on the other” (2010a: 161). For you, the principal means for this is violence: “the movement from representational distortion to politics proper passes through violence” (2010a: 22).

In a way, some of this reminds me of the thought of Georges Bataille (e.g. 1985) or certain writings of Jean Baudrillard¹ (e.g. 2003) (for whom Bataille was a major influence; though Baudrillard was much more skeptical of any straightforward [re-]connection with authentic being). Would you confirm that there are such connections, and would it then be fair to say that there is something of a Romantic element, tendency, or legacy in your work as well?

AKT: Bataille doesn't tend to feature in my studies, though he has sometimes appeared in the background unexpectedly. Contre-attaque, the anti-fascist group of which he was part, held its meetings in the Parisian attic where Picasso painted *Guernica*. That painting became important to me for providing a concrete visual approximation of the attributes Benjamin associated with the dialectical image (Thompson 2011). A little later, Bataille took advantage of his role as a librarian in the Bibliothèque Nationale to ensure that Benjamin's notes for the arcades project (a study in which the dialectical image featured centrally) were hidden from the Nazis during the occupation. As for Baudrillard, I found his analysis of material culture in *The System of Objects* (2005) to be

¹ A brief engagement with the work of Baudrillard can be found in Thompson 2010a: 163-65.



compelling, and even to complement Benjamin's project; however, as his work began taking on a more poststructuralist inflection, I found myself losing interest.

While I've learned a lot from poststructuralist theory, my thinking has tended to put me at odds with its presuppositions. Still, I don't think identifying the presence or absence of foundations adequately captures the difference. Poststructuralism developed along anti-foundationalist lines, it's true, and Foucault's critique of the repressive hypothesis clearly takes issue with Marcusean premises. At the same time, however, his recourse to "bodies, functions, physiological processes, sensations, and pleasures" (1978: 152) in *The History of Sexuality* suggests that, even as Foucault aimed to reveal how these foundational realities co-evolved with technologies of power, he remains much closer to the psychoanalytic analysis of drives than he would care to admit. Similar problems arise for Judith Butler, who spoke in *Gender Trouble* of gender norm "sedimentation" without ever coming to terms with the living, breathing, desiring body underlying our accumulated-through-repetition "corporeal styles" (1999: 178).

In contrast, and for my part, I've operated under the premise that people partake in an *urhistorical* longing for a classless society that's passed on phylogenetically. I've also maintained that this longing corresponds to those drives, identified by psychoanalysis, which point in different ways toward absolution.² On this basis, my work might be said to be unapologetically foundationalist; however, here too, we must be careful. My critique of representation, for instance, does not proceed by rehearsing the classic distinction between phenomena and noumena. Instead, it rests on the distinction between representation and production. From this perspective, if there is such a thing as a "thing itself," it comes into being through practical activity in much the same way as our perception of it does. And while we might never be able to tell the truth, we will always produce it through the course of our struggle against the world's finitude.

My relationship with Romanticism is perhaps similarly ambivalent. As a movement, Romanticism was always riven by inconsistencies, and this was especially true of its politics. In one study, Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre produced a typology in which they identified six different possible Romantic orientations, running the gamut from restitutionist and conservative to reformist and revolutionary (2001: 58). Despite these variations, however, they found that all were united in their opposition to capitalist modernity. In my view, Romanticism arose as a response to the unresolved character of the bourgeois revolution and to the epistemological antinomies that sprung up in the breach. It developed as an anti-capitalist critique that sided with the waning subjective idealism of bourgeois consciousness so that it might go to war with the ascendant objective empiricism that was leading to a disenchantment of the world. Siding with the

² Clare O'Connor, with whom I work closely, recently outlined this argument in an essay published in *Communication, Culture and Critique* (2021).



antithetical term, however, is not a reliable strategy for overcoming contradictions. Indeed, it can even lead to their perpetuation by serving as a kind of stabilizing ballast.

Despite this, I think radicals should bolster Romantic tendencies wherever they struggle to find expression even as we subject them to ruthless criticism wherever they prevail. Benjamin's analysis of reflection in his doctoral dissertation makes clear that, in opposition to the discrete objects produced by bourgeois positivism, the Romantics moved toward something like a reflexive materialist conception of the world. From this perspective, criticism meant completion. It was achieved by "absolutizing the reflection" within a given object, and by coming to perceive all objects as "moments in the medium" (2004: 158). Although it began from within the realm of metaphysics, this Romantic approach to the world had much in common with Marx's materialism – especially when we recognize that materialism to be concerned with "internal relations," as Bertell Ollman has proposed (Ollman 1976).

Considering the problem from the standpoint of strategy, Romantic conceptions are generally more likely to inspire people than are the exacting gestures of a precise materialist analysis. Raoul Vaneigem's *Revolution of Everyday Life* is a serious study based on sound analytic premises; however, the bit that no reader will ever forget is his declaration that "anyone who talks about revolution and class struggle without referring explicitly to everyday life – without grasping what is subversive about love and positive in the refusal of constraints – has a corpse in his mouth" (2012: 11). Still, we must be careful. Like the wish image, Romanticism is ambivalent. It can lead to fascist conclusions or revolutionary ones depending on what else gets added to the mix. For this reason, I don't think it can serve as the foundation of our politics, and I've often found myself trying to exorcise the Romantic inclinations that still shape my worldview. Better, though, would be to work them through, to push them toward some point of completion.

FC: In an essay from 2017 (also included in your book *Premonitions*), you enter the (once) heated debates about the meaning of the 2011/2012 Occupy movement, and of the strategy of "occupation" more generally, and find these discussions to raise "a fundamental question who's answer continues to elude us: what does it mean to be political today?" (2017a: 180) I think it is safe to say that this is a question that defines or drives your work in its entirety. And I believe it is one that today arises with ever more urgency. There are countless domains in which radical change is urgently needed – and yet, things mostly progress only slowly and incrementally (if at all). You have elsewhere argued that the experience of an "endless present" has come to an end in the face of the looming climate catastrophe (in Ruggero 2021a: 17), but is this really the case? Or are we not, rather, confronted with a situation in which, for large segments of the population, "capitalist realism" (Fisher 2009) still persists, coupled with a form of



“cruelly optimistic” (Berlant 2011) and “passionate attachment” (Butler 1997) to the status quo? And does not every climate summit affirm the enduring reality of “post-democracy” and the “post-political” (Rancière 1999; Crouch 2005)? In many ways, isn’t the future still, sadly, “cancelled” (Berardi 2011; Fisher 2014)?

What does it mean to be political in a burning (and drowning) world? Whereas some argue in favor of hegemonic politics and emphasize the significance of central planning and the state (Srnicsek/Williams 2016), others make the case for (post-)anarchism, for self-government and free, spontaneous organization in autonomous zones beyond the state (Newman 2016). Then there are those who pin their hopes on the emergence of a revolutionary “multitude” (Hardt/Negri 2001), while yet others seem to wait for the absolute rupture of a quasi-messianic “event” (Badiou 2005). Of course, these are just some of the many positions within the contemporary left. Another one maintains that the only way out today is militancy. Indeed, over the last couple of years, there has been a notable return to the question of political violence, to issues such as rioting and looting, crowds and masses (e.g. Badiou 2012; Butler 2015; Clover 2016; Dean 2016; Malm 2021; Osterweil 2020; Schmitt/Nitzke 2020). You yourself have of course long emphasized the limits of representational, demand-based politics and stressed the centrality of militancy for social movements. In fact, ever since *Black Bloc, White Riot* was released in 2010, you have consistently urged us to see that “violence is ordinary” (2010a: 23), written into our social relations and everyday acts, and argued for an ontological understanding of violence, according to which violence and politics are inseparable – as you’ve put it: “the basic unit of politics is not representation, as our bourgeois rulers have insisted, but regicide” (Jasper/Thompson 2016: 222). Thus, not unlike several other contemporary thinkers, you have suggested that under the present conditions, “violence is required to open up the space for politics” (2010a: 25).

Against this background, could you elaborate upon how you position yourself in this context today, with regards to both, the recent theoretical debates as well as political praxis and strategy?

AKT: You’re right that the question of what it means to be political has been a major preoccupation in my work. It’s at the heart of my critique of representation, which developed as a political mode in lockstep with the process of white racial formation in the US, and it underwrites my efforts to see political action in ontological terms and as a process of production. How, and on what basis, do we create our world and – by extension – ourselves? While framed in terms of productive activity, these are political questions of the first order. The answers we devise determine everything from how surpluses are allocated to what human capacities are allowed to develop and flourish. Representation is one of the means by which we’ve been expelled from this field.



Acknowledging politics as a field of productive activity means recognizing that – like production more generally – politics itself is always underwritten by violence. The human labor process transforms the world in accordance with our ever-developing needs, and the application of labor to nature leaves nothing as it was. This violence is constant, but it's rarely recognized as such. Only when we are invested in the object as previously constituted or when we try to produce something (whether object or relation) that is genuinely new does it come into view. Conceived in this way, violence is omnipresent and inescapable. But while we can never escape it, we can and must democratize violence so that we might finally, collectively, decide what we will produce and on what basis.

Because it presupposes an anti-mythological, genuinely historical awareness of the kind that Fanon described in *The Wretched of the Earth* (where, through violence, the colonized take history itself into their own person), contemplating such questions has become difficult under late capitalism's endless present. For this reason, and for the time being, I think that the pedagogical function of political violence remains more important than what it produces concretely. As people become aware of the need to reconnect with politics beyond representation, however, "what" questions become more conceivable. As Fanon recounts, violence gives the masses a "voracious taste for the concrete" and, in the process, makes mystification impossible (1963: 95). I should clarify, however, that in the interview you reference, I said that the last vestiges of the endless-present experience had been *undermined* by the climate reports that put a date for our demise on the calendar. I didn't say that the experience had come to an end.

At the end of the twentieth century, the cultural feeling of an endless present coincided with the strategies of ruling favored by capitalists in the global north. Following September 11, however, the ruling class announced an end to the US "holiday from history." For a time, the endless-present experience continued, though it began to take on increasingly dystopian characteristics – and here we might think of the recent pop culture fascination with time-loop narratives, which speak both to the experience of flattened temporalities and to the desperate need to ensure that the moment of repeating is followed by the more arduous tasks of remembering and working through.

Recently, this posture has become less tenable. We're now at a point where there's a broad awareness that things can't go on as they have *and* that the ruling class is incapable of initiating the radical changes needed to prevent global ecological collapse. Biden's electoral proclamation that "nothing will fundamentally change" suggests a return to the strategy of ruling that prevailed at the turn of the century; however, this posture no longer coincides with people's cultural experience, and it certainly conflicts with the mounting evidence underscoring the world's finitude. So even as we might collectively immerse ourselves in catastrophe movies to rehearse the problem and work



it through mythically, we're still being forced into a position (to follow Schmitt's exacting maxim concerning sovereignty) where we will have no choice but to become the ones who can decide on the exception.

That decision will be marked by violence. Although the uprising that kicked off following George Floyd's murder in the summer of 2020 was multifaceted, there was a widespread feeling that the rioting was justified and even felicitous. Like the anti-fascist mobilizations that preceded it, the George Floyd rebellion did much to unsettle popular sentiments regarding non-violence that have prevailed since the Civil Rights movement. Still, we see how quickly these breaches can close, and how quickly people can be returned to the endless present and subsumed within the representational sphere. Although there were many factors that contributed to the movement's decline, the need to defeat Trump at the polls (which, in practical terms, meant bringing out the vote for the Democrats) was probably the most significant.

So what do we do? Although I'm reluctant to propose a program at this time, I do think there are a number of interlocking habits that radicals can adopt that might be of use when trying to work through our current impasse. The first is to intensify our collective experience of irreconcilability, however it might first find expression, and to push all myths and fantasies toward the point of concrete reckoning. The second is to foster active identification with the possibilities that arise whenever violence opens a breach in the representational field, and to encourage the proliferation of such breaches even when they develop outside of the field of politics as normally conceived. The third is to nurture collective experiments in sovereignty, however modest the scale, and to reduce the bid for recognition to (at best) a strategic proposition. The fourth is to make clear that, while many strategies have been proposed for collapsing the interval between ontology and politics (and here we might think of immediatism, standpoint theory, and prefiguration, though there are surely others), the two shall remain unresolved so long as politics is not understood to be a field of production and production is not recognized to be a modality of violence.

FC: Where do you see the role of the university in all of this? What part can or should "we," as academics, play? There is, of course, a long tradition on the left of championing the radical, subversive, politically engaged intellectual ("organic," "specific," "exilic," etc.), the one who "speaks the truth to power," produces "insurrectionary scholarship" (Edward Said), and empowers her audiences (though, needless to say, this tradition is far from homogeneous, but internally riven and contested). Does the profound neoliberal restructuring of the university (and the education system at large) of the recent decades impede or preclude such a role? Today, what is the relationship between theory and practice – what could it be? What type(s) of knowledge practice and theory, of knowledge, and of pedagogy can help us as we struggle against the status quo?



AKT: For the past several decades, students in the United States have embarked upon their postsecondary careers knowing that the undergraduate degree was the baseline educational expectation for most jobs, regardless of whether what they'd learned in school was in any way relevant to the work they'd be doing. This credentializing development was made possible by the massive expansion of the college sector during the postwar period, and by the corresponding movement of the US economy toward capital-intensive, technologically mediated, post-industrial modes. At the same time, these modes led to a massive reduction in the need for workers outside of the service economy. With few other prospects, however, the number of students at the postsecondary level continued to grow – and this despite the massive expense, the hobbling debt, and the sneaking suspicion (now fully confirmed) that the undergraduate degree no longer guaranteed anything. A similar dynamic has played out at the postgraduate level, with doctoral programs now minting more PhDs than the industry in its current form will ever place.

Given these conditions, it seems clear that today's university functions primarily as a tool of labor market regulation. By tying up workers in credentializing pursuits and downloading the cost of social reproduction onto their shoulders, postsecondary education keeps people off the market – and out of the streets, where they might retaliate against shrinking prospects. This regulatory strategy mirrors the economic function now played by mass incarceration, which manages surplus labor at the other end of the spectrum, where the working class bleeds into the lumpenproletariat. As an institutional trend, mass incarceration developed around the same time that college became the baseline requirement for employability.

Little wonder, then, that students in my classes have often expressed extreme ambivalence about what they're doing. They know they must plan for the future and do whatever they can to improve their chances in a game that's hopelessly rigged. At the same time, however, the very idea of "the future" has come to seem cruel and absurd. Making plans that presuppose a biographical trajectory that conforms to anachronistic norms seems naïve when, everywhere one looks (from the economic to the ecological to the political), it's clear that nothing is stable and everything is up for grabs. I don't think this means we have to abandon the institution and run out to whatever frontline seems most urgent and beleaguered, but I do think it forces us to change how we think about what we're doing here. More than anything, I think it means learning how to fight where we stand.

Over the past few decades, one means by which this fight has developed has been through the uneven but significant growth of proletarian consciousness among academics who were previously reluctant to think of themselves as workers. Union density in the sector has increased significantly, and strikes by adjuncts and graduate



student workers have sometimes won gains. I'm proud of the contributions I've made to campus-based labor organizing, and of the benchmark collective agreements I've helped to win. These fights have been important in their own right, but they've also been training grounds for larger struggles. Moreover, given the role played by colleges and universities within the labor market more broadly (producing as they do both the commodity labor power and the means of its social regulation), campus-based labor struggles might – when pushed to their logical conclusion – allow people to intervene at the level of the social organization of the productive forces as such.

Another way that the institutional fight can develop is within the classroom itself. While I was teaching at Ithaca College, students in my classes would regularly conduct research that was of direct relevance to the campaigns they were waging against the school's administrators. This delighted me, not only because I shared their hatred of our common enemy, but because they had found a practical application for the material I'd assigned. As their campaigns developed and became more confrontational, these students would often reach out to me to strategize. Learning that began in the classroom was no longer constrained by it, and their ability to draw meaningful, practical conclusions from course material left me feeling like maybe I wasn't wasting my time. Several of these students have gone on to become active contributors to campaigns beyond the academy, and I can't wait to see what they get up to next.

As for me (and perhaps for the very reasons just described), it remains unclear whether I'll ever truly find a home in academia. But this had been Benjamin's lot too – and the same was true for Simmel, and for others who became canonical, albeit posthumously. I find some solace in this. And I'm reminded that, even as economic insecurity can make intellectual production more difficult, my exclusion thus far has also saved me from some of the worst aspects of our industry. American sociology, which claims to love C. Wright Mills despite never seeming to learn from him,³ remains deformed by the positivist ticks it developed while compensating for the inferiority complex that overwhelmed it while measuring itself against the natural sciences. And social scientists more generally remain reluctant to develop their work in prescriptive ways.

In contrast, I've had the space to proceed as a craftsman, as Mills proposed (1959), and to see learning and doing as inseparable. "Man must prove the truth, that is, the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking in practice," said Marx (1978: 144). To the extent that academics can embrace this maxim, they may find a corresponding

³ In her 2019 Presidential Address to the American Sociological Association, Mary Romero highlighted both the problem of the discipline's positivism (which precluded acknowledgement of the important role played by normative, engaged, and applied work in sociology's development) and the ambivalent position of C. Wright Mills in the American sociological canon (2019).



role in bringing the new world into being. For the rest, however, and regardless of the poses they strike, I think they'll find themselves running quality control on the ship as it sinks.

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