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Guido Barbi

The return to prominence of the notion of a ‘new normal’ at the start of the ongoing pandemic crisis underscores the contemporary relevance of Jürgen Link’s ambitious *Normalismus und Antagonismus in der Postmoderne. Krise, New Normal, Populismus*. The goal of Link’s book is to update and expand his discourse theory of normalism, which he first put forward in his *Versuch über den Normalismus* published in 1996. Normalism postulates ‘normality’ as the central discourse of modernity, whose main trait is the functional substitution of traditional normativity with the quantitative average of the ‘normal’ in constituting subjectivity. The starting point of Link’s updated take on normalism is the *apparent* diagnosis of post-modernity as an age in which all antagonisms are overcome, for which view Francis Fukuyama’s ‘End of History’ represents the most well-known example. Questioning this diagnosis, Link’s book asks “whether the historical tendency at the beginning of the 21st century points in the direction of a definitive normalization of the globe, which would be identical with a gradual but definitive extinction of historical antagonisms – or whether this tendency implies the insistence of antagonisms and thus points in the direction of a definitive denormalization”¹ (18). To answer this question, Link’s exposition aims at integrating antagonism in his discourse theory as the negated counter-concept of normalism: where normalism reigns, antagonism is denied. In pursuing this goal, the book is structured along three major conceptual axes corresponding to its main subdivision. In the first part of his work (ch. 2-9), Link traces the conceptual origin of normalism at the intersection of modernity and postmodernity, sketching a genealogy of his theory. The second block (ch. 10-15) develops the concept of normalism and its relation to antagonism systematically, offering an update of normalism as a theory and the integration therein of the concept of antagonism. Finally, the latter half of the book (ch. 16-26) endeavors to apply the interpretative paradigm of normalism-antagonism to contemporary issues, ranging from the 2007 financial crisis (ch. 17) to the 2015 refugee crisis (ch. 24). Moreover, most chapters conclude with the discussion of a paradigmatic literary text or figure displaying a wide variety of literary references, such as Stephen King (52-54), Sybille Berg (224-226), or Michel Houellebecq (393-396). While often insightful in and of themselves, these short

chapters are only intended to add expository substance to the already complex conceptual structure of the book – I will therefore ignore them in the remainder of this discussion.

The first part of the book pursues the aim of tracing a partial conceptual genealogy of normalism in reverse, whose central passages are the discussion of Heidegger (ch. 4) and Hegel (ch. 5). Both are seen as establishing an interdiscoursal space, bridging diverse specialized discourses, which is the main locus of normalizing discourse, and spilling over from there into ‘elementary’ (everyday) and ‘specialized’ (expert) discourses. Precisely because normalizing discourse takes place within interdiscoursal practices, Link argues, ‘normalism’ can easily deactivate antagonistic discourses and devices. The remainder of this part of the book is dedicated to establishing the category of ‘cycles’ as the key notion linking normalism and antagonism. The normalizing discourse integrates the anormal in the normalization of historical cycles, thereby silencing the antagonistic conflict between contradicting poles, as in the classical antagonistic couple capital-workforce and its embeddedness in cyclically understood crises (97). Thereby modernity is characterized by the coexistence of a diverse plurality of such cycles – e.g. the economical, the technological, or the scientific – which are interrelated in a complex nexus, which Link calls the ‘cyclological compound’.² By identifying the ‘cyclological compound’ as the “generative apparatus for the configuration of normalities, denormalizations and normalizations” Link wants to reveal the non-dialectical nature of antagonism. Fundamentally, “the relation between generative apparatus and normalistic configurations is neither reducible to a few overarching laws nor is it fully contingent – instead, it is of the type of tendential regularities and resulting dominant tendencies” (113). Antagonistic conflict itself can be identified as such a tendency but it is most often silenced in the cyclical balancing of competing forces. Thereby antagonisms are suppressed and they can only really come to the fore if the inner logic of a cycle is disrupted, or if two or more cycles enter into conflict with one another. However, it is impossible to fully forecast which conflicts will indeed be able to break free of the normalizing cycle.

Having established the conceptual link between normalism and antagonism, Link proceeds, in the second thematic block of the book, to discuss normalism systematically. A variety of topics are discussed in this part: the increasing relevance of data in modern society as a necessary but insufficient condition for normalization (ch. 10); continuity as the central principle of

normalism (ch. 11); media discourse as normalizing through ‘subjectivation’ of objective data (ch. 12); prognosis as expression of the cyclical continuation of the normal against real antagonisms (ch. 13); the role of normalism as an interdiscoursal device bridging specific discourses within society and avoiding their antagonistic contraposition (ch. 14); and, finally, the normalized and atomized mass as mass-subject (ch. 15). These chapters contribute towards establishing a complex theory of normalism and of its interaction with antagonism, which cannot be discussed in detail here. One of its main goals, however, is to develop a non-dialectical understanding of antagonism as an irreversible denormalization that escapes from the cyclical normalization (239).

Drawing on this theoretical apparatus, Link finally endeavors to analyze a diverse array of contemporary issues, whose shared trait is their crisis character. Here the crisis of reference for Link appears to be the financial crisis starting in 2007. Its (provisional) peak event is identified in the 2015 imposition of fiscal austerity measures on Greece by the EU, the Greek referendum against it and, finally, the transformation of the newly ruling leftist government of premier Tsipras and his Syriza party into a ‘normalized’ center-left government – as Link describes it, “a rare example of radical self-normalization” (275). However, while all actors in positions of power involved – mainly Germany and the EU apparatus – strongly pushed for a return to normalcy, Link argues that the pre-2007 ‘normal’ has never been restored. In this regard, Link suggests that the ‘populism crisis’ in Europe is one of the main symptoms of the failure to reinstate normalcy after the financial crisis. This failure equates to the “intrusion of subjective (and possibly also objective) antagonisms into the ostensibly antagonism free management of a postmodern politics of normalcy” (280). Put differently, the normalized economic cycle has failed to be restored and hence the gears of the entire cyclological compound are in risk of jamming. Due to this, the potential for the emergence of an explicit antagonism is real. To strengthen this point, Link extends this to all other crises referred to in the latter half of his book – including, for instance, the populism crisis, the environmental crisis, and the refugee crisis. In opposition to this, the spread of big data is discussed as a tendency towards even more radical and intensive normalization (ch. 18), and the state of exception – referring mostly to terrorism and security – is discussed as a liminal case of normalism wherein a normalized anormality aims at deactivating an emerging antagonism (ch. 22). Fittingly, Link sees

only three scenarios as possible outcomes of the exceptional crises of the normalized cycles of modernity at the outset of the twenty-first century: 1) the provisional establishment of a ‘new normal’; 2) a mid-term maintenance of an ever-growing state of exception; and 3) a ‘transnormalist’ escape from the normalist cycle. It goes without saying that Link favors the third scenario, which he equates with the escape from a cyclical dynamism of growth in favor of de-growth alternatives. The final two chapters of the book are, hence, dedicated to both establishing the possibility of such a ‘transnormalist’ alternative and to evaluating its possible avenues of realization.

Jürgen Link’s *Normalismus und Antagonismus in der Postmoderne* is a very rich and often insightful work. However, it sometimes suffers from its overly ambitious scope of inquiry. It wishes all at once to establish a theory of normalism and antagonism, to explicate its genealogical origin, to apply it to contemporary crises, and, finally, to elaborate on alternatives to normalist society. Despite the clear organization of the chapters and their subsections, the book’s organic unity is difficult to grasp. The first part of the book (ch. 2-9) aims at establishing the plausibility of the normalist interpretative paradigm and of the relationship of normalist devices vis-à-vis antagonism. While largely successful in the latter aim, the establishment of a plausible genealogy of normalism remains unsatisfactory, and the selection of the discussed authors appears fragmentary and often arbitrary. Therefore, the function of the complex discussion of authors such as Hegel and Heidegger is difficult to understand. The second part (ch. 10-16), establishes the conceptual framework of analysis in more systematic terms and functions well in preparing the discussion of the contemporary crisis. However, while overall effective, in this part particularly the overabundance of neologisms and technical terms often obscures comprehension and makes the reader wish for a clearer and more stringent theoretical exposition. Some formulations aimed at describing complex links within the cyclical compound, especially, demand a lot from the reader. For instance, the formulation: “[f]rom the megachock of overempowerment from above, can arise an ‘awakening of the counterpole’ (formation of antagonistic we-subjects of antielitist masses) and thus a pheno-anatagonistic escalation”(170) can be considered characteristic of the book’s style. The final part of the book, encompassing almost half of its total length, is certainly the most successful and enjoyable to read. Its discussion of the current crises and of the contrast between normalizing and

antagonizing tendencies is stimulating, insightful, and on the whole, convincing. The broad final discussion of ‘transnormalism’ represents an appropriate conclusion for the book and raises a number of interesting questions and issues for further inquiry.

Overall, however, the book leaves some doubts as to the effectiveness of normalist discourse theory as a tool for fully capturing the logic of antagonism. One of Link’s goals is that of establishing a non-dialectical, ‘operative’ concept of antagonism. This should enable the avoidance of the downfalls of a dialectical conception of historical development and agency. However, it is at odds with the overarching dualism between normalization and the emergence of (real) antagonisms. According to the theoretical framework established by Link, the emergence of a ‘real’ antagonism can only be expected if the contemporary crises are indeed exceptional and, thus, expose the contradictions of the entire logic of the normalist ‘cyclological compound’. This raises two main issues: first, it is analytically questionable as to whether the twenty-first century crises are indeed as exceptional as stated – especially considering that the framework of reference starts in the early nineteenth century. Second, it is also theoretically questionable if the overarching dualism normalism-antagonism is as undialectical as originally intended. Nonetheless, normalist discourse theory has certainly a lot to offer to other non-dialectical conceptions of antagonism, as can be found, for example, in biopolitical or radical democratic theoretical frameworks (Negri 2017; Marchart 2018).³ However, it is doubtful if it succeeds in providing an overarching metatheory of antagonism as a disruption of the normal: after all, all disruption could be read as part of a normalized cycle. Despite the theoretical problems it leaves open, however, Jürgen Link’s *Normalismus und Antagonismus in der Post-moderne* constitutes a stimulating and enriching read.

Notes

1] All translations by the author of the review.

2] “Zyklologisches Kombinat”.

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Biography

Guido Niccolò Barbi is a PhD candidate in RIPPLE (Research in Political Philosophy and Ethics Leuven) at the KU Leuven and a lecturer at the University of Amsterdam (UvA). He is currently completing his FWO-financed doctoral project on ‘Technocracy and Political Truth’, which investigates the relationship between expertise, opinions and political judgment from an Arendtian and post-foundationalist perspective. He has held visiting research positions at UC Berkeley, the University of Vienna and the University of Chicago.