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EDITORIAL

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The first Krisis of 2016 will be the last issue before the re-launch and redesign of Krisis online. With a new website, Krisis will continue to publish articles that focus on contemporary issues as well as those that engage classic authors in a new light.

The articles of our current issue reflect both these aims. Femke Kaulingfreks opens the issue and analyses street protests, like the one in the Netherlands in reaction to the death of Mitch Hernandez in 2015, as cases of unruly politics. This opens the possibility of recognition for the politics of rioting and signals gaps in current structures of representation. Thomas Wells proposes in his article to ‘exile the rich’ by pointing to how democracy is undermined by unlimited accumulated wealth. The main problem for Wells is the way the rich gain independence from and command over others, instead of simply finding ways to curb wealth.

Sina Talachian dissects the shifting relationship between universalism and particularism in the work of Karl Marx. His article shows how a close reading of Marx’ work can still be relevant for contemporary debates on post-colonialism and intersectionality. In his essay, Merijn Oudenampsen considers the controversial but inescapable role of ‘utopia’ in the Dutch political and intellectual sphere. Through a critical reading of More’s classic text on utopia, Oudenampsen argues the need for utopian thinking in politics today.

In addition to articles, this issue Krisis presents a never before published interview with Richard Rorty by Mark Koster en Dennis Schulting. The American philosopher spoke about multicularism, right-wing and left-wing politics and intellectualism in the Spring of 1997, when he was Spinoza chair. The enduring pertinence of Rorty and this interview is introduced by Jappe Groenendijk.

Four reviews of new books of philosophy will close this issue. Beatrijs Haverkamp will review German philosopher Rahel Jaeggi’s Alienation. Eva Meijer read Animal Deliberation by Clemens Driessen. Sarah Ahmed’s latest monograph Wilful Subjects is reviewed by Eliza Steinbock. Finally Illos Willems will consider the newly published texts by Michel Foucault in Wrong-doing, truth-telling.

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De eerste *Krisis* van 2016 is ook het laatste nummer vóór de introductie van onze nieuwe website.

Femke Kaulingfreks opent het nummer met een analyse van straatprotest, zoals in Nederland in reactie op de dood van Mitch Hernandez in 2015, als voorbeeld van ‘unruly politics’. Dit biedt de mogelijkheid om de politiek van oproer te erkennen en toont de hiaten in de huidige structuren van representatie. Thomas Wells stelt in zijn artikel ‘exile the rich’ voor om de rijken te verbannen, aangezien, beargumenteert hij, democratie ondermijnd wordt door ongebreidelde accumulatie van kapitaal. Wells stelt dat het voornaamste probleem niet zozeer is om rijkdom zelf te in te tomen als wel de onevenredig invloed over anderen die het gevolg is van rijkdom.

Sina Talachian ontleedt de verschuivende verhoudingen tussen universalisme en particularisme in het werk van Karl Marx. Dit artikel toont dat een close-reading van Marx’ werk nog steeds relevant kan zijn voor het hedendaagse debat over post-kolonialisme en intersectionaliteit. Aan de hand van een kritische lezing van Thomas More’s *Utopia*, bespreekt Meijn Oudenampsen de controversiële maar onvermijdelijke rol van ‘utopia’ in de hedendaagse Nederlandse politieke en intellectuele context.


Tot slot, bespreekt Beatris Haverkamp *Alienation* van de Duitse filosoof Rahel Jaeggi, Eva Meijer behandelt *Animal Deliberation* van Clemens Driessen en Sara Ahmeds laatste monografie *Willful Subjects* wordt besproken door Eliza Steinbock. Ilios Willemars sluit af met een bespreking van de niet eerder gepubliceerde teksten van Michel Foucault in *Wrong-doing, truth-telling.*
Mitch Hernandez was on holiday, visiting family in the Netherlands in late June 2015. On a Saturday evening the 42-year-old man from Aruba, one of the Dutch Antillean islands, attended the festival “Night at the Park” in The Hague with some friends. A few hours later, he was laying in the back of a police van, passed out from lack of oxygen, his face bruised and swollen. A day later, he was dead. Word spread quickly that Hernandez had been violently arrested by the police, and that this arrest had caused his death. Soon after, riots broke out in the Schilderswijk, a working class and multicultural neighborhood in The Hague. Enraged crowds of young people threw stones at the police, broke windows, plundered a supermarket and demolished the interior of a local theater. For several days the unrest in the neighborhood continued. The events brought into mind the similar, but more extensive riots around Paris and other French cities in 2005, and around London and other British cities in 2011. In these three cases riots broke out after unarmed men of color died following a confrontation with the police. The majority of the ones involved in the disruptions were young men of migrant descent, their families often linked to Western Europe through its colonial history, living in neighborhoods affected by poverty. In the media and amongst authorities an immediate moral condemnation of the rioters prevailed; the events were predominantly interpreted as senseless, criminal disorder instigated by deviant ‘outsiders’, threatening the cohesion of society. Researchers, on the other hand, often focused on the sense of exclusion and socioeconomic deprivation which underlay the riots (Lapeyronnie 2008, Koko-reff 2008, Slooter 2015, Lewis et al. 2011, Bertho 2009, Body-Gendrot 2005, Sutterlüty 2014, Klein 2012 a.o.). While the motives of young people for engaging in riots and other public disturbances are often diverse and diffuse, certain shared frustrations and grievances can be noted across contexts. A pervasive sense of injustice, lack of opportunities, anger about surveillance and police brutality played a role in all three cases mentioned here; the French riots in 2005, the English riots in 2011 and the Dutch riots in 2015. In this article, I focus on the political implications of these shared grievances and the disruptive ways in which they are expressed. I investigate the political significance of riots instigated by rebellious adolescents of migrant descent in Western European cities such as Paris, London and The Hague.

Can certain uncivil or unruly behavior have political significance outside of an institutionally endorsed understanding of politics? It is this question which is often left insufficiently addressed in the analysis of unorganized civil disturbances, urban violence or riots. I use the term “unruly politics” to designate the political agency of people who are not recognized as worthy, or formal, political actors within the domain of institutional politics, but who nevertheless interfere in the political organization of society, while they do not abide by the formal, moral and legal rules of accepted practices of civil engagement and political participation. I state that the young rioters involved in the events here discussed can be seen as unruly political agents who express a denunciation of an unjust state of affairs in institutional politics. In what follows I first take the recent riots in The Hague as my main example to explicate how youth from deprived neighborhoods are often excluded from the accepted citizenry because they are associated with deviant street culture. Their disruptive public interventions are easily perceived as senseless violence. The ones involved are not recognized as political subjects but either seen as threatening ‘outsiders’ to society, or pre-political victims of exclusion. However, in reference to Jacques Rancière’s notion of politics as dissensus, I propose to consider dis-
ruptive interventions like riots as events of unruly politics. Despite the fact that unruly politics should not be seen as a conscious political strategy to establish social change, it makes political sense. Events of unruly politics are politically significant not because they offer clear-cut solutions, but because they indicate a problem. They confront us with existing inequalities and socio-economic deprivation and signal the flaws in the existing formal structures of political representation.

Rage about exclusion and desire for emancipation

Despite the fact that Mitch Hernandez was not a youth from the neighborhood, his death ignited a powder keg of rage and frustration, which had been filling up for quite some time in the Schilderswijk in The Hague. Young men, often from Dutch-Moroccan families, felt discriminated and unjustly treated by the police due to recurrent stops, identity-checks and searches, sometimes in front of their own home and often leading to mounting fines. Several violent arrests further increased the tensions between youth and the police in the neighborhood. In addition to the bad relationship with the police, inhabitants felt stigmatized by the media. In 2013 the national newspaper Trouw published an article based on investigative journalism in the Schilderswijk, announcing that a part of the neighborhood was informally ruled by the Sharia. This news caused quite a political stir. Right-wing politician Geert Wilders visited the neighborhood, where he commented that he felt like he was no longer in the Netherlands. Questions were asked in Parliament and Minister of Social Affairs Lodewijk Asscher promised that the government would protect the ‘central values of the Dutch democratic and constitutional state’ and prevent the emergence of ‘parallel societies’ where inhabitants take the law into their own hands. Despite complaints of several inhabitants who did not recognize their neighborhood in the media coverage, the Schilderswijk became easily associated with the territory of deviant, non-integrated and radicalized foreign elements, perceived as causing a threat to Dutch society. This image was further enforced when a small group of radicalized young Muslims demonstrated with an ISIS-banner in the neighborhood in the summer of 2014. The newspaper Trouw eventually withdrew the article about the so-called ‘Sharia-triangle’ in the Schilderswijk, after having discovered that the journalist responsible had invented sources. However, the negative image of the neighborhood persisted. Several researchers and community organizers warned that riots could break out if authorities would not make public efforts to recognize the sense of exclusion of the, especially, young inhabitants of the Schilderswijk. When Mitch Hernandez died at the hands of police officers from The Hague, this seemed to be the last straw. Violent clashes with the police followed and the division in the area between young people and the authorities was once again enforced. Ironically, the same image which led to mounted frustration was enforced by the riots: that of the Schilderswijk as an area where ‘outsiders’ undermine the well-being of Dutch civilized society.

It is not surprising that the riots were not readily recognizable as a political event, since there were no signs of a deliberate political, militant strategy. The disturbances emerged randomly, with social media bringing together young people who had never met before and who did not express clearly formulated demands or a clearly formulated political ideology. The rioters did not make public statements about their motives and were not represented by spokespeople who addressed the press. Without intentionally communicated vision or goals the riots were easily perceived as a haphazard, mindless provocation. Some, including the Mayor of The Hague, indicated the Ramadan and the outdoors heat as causes of the disruptive events. Due to these factors young Muslim people in the neighborhood seemed to be on edge, looking for excitement as soon as the sun set. However, others who themselves had participated strongly linked the riots to unequal opportunities and other experiences of unequal treatment by the authorities. On radio channel FunX, Yusuf said that after the riots he felt relief from his stress about the many times he was stopped and rudely treated by the police for only being a young brown man driving a nice car. Sky said that he wanted to target the government and that the death of Mitch Henriquez was not even on his mind when he joined the rioters. These statements indicate that the initial tragic event became a pretext for expressing a variety of latent frustrations. Large numbers of young people from outside of the neighborhood became involved in the disturbances. The violence seemed to be motivated by a variety of incentives, ranging from rage about regular confrontations with racism and dis-
crimination, to the pleasure of breaking the power monopoly of the police in the public domain, or the personal opportunism of obtaining material goods which are completely out of reach under normal circumstances. A journalist who observed the scene stated that the Schilderswijk became a ‘collection site of anger’. He quoted another rioter saying: “Everything that belongs to the state can be destroyed. (...) Talking does not solve anything. They are not listening. Once a white man, always a white man. We have to fight for our rights.” French anthropologist Michel Kokoreff also concludes that the structural ingredients in the pressure-cooker that lead to the emergence of riots are feelings of injustice and humiliation, most often inflicted by the police (2008, 19). According to Kokoreff, the violence of riots has two dimensions: an expressive dimension and an instrumental dimension. The expressive dimension reflects the feeling that the use of violence is the only way to convey discontent and to be heard by those in power, while the instrumental dimension reflects the wish to make the state and other public services aware of the basic resources that the adolescents involved lack in their lives (Kokoreff 2008, 18). It is both the rage about exclusion and the desire for emancipation that inspire riots. Even the looting which takes place during riots could be seen as an attempt of disqualified, poor young people to finally gain the tokens of success belonging to a dominant culture of consumption in neoliberal, capitalist societies (Bauman 2012, Winlow & Hall 2012). In this sense, the riots can be seen as a desperate act to make the state and the general public aware of the grievances of young people in marginalized positions. This brings the famous Martin Luther King Jr. quote into mind: A riot is the language of the unheard. However, the state is not inclined to listen.

Street culture versus civil culture

The fact that riots are not readily recognized as political events is emphasized by the reaction of state representatives, who are primarily focused on the maintenance of public order and deny responsibility for the root causes of the disturbances (Lamble 2013). Authorities offer a representation of the events as a certain state of exception that can only be rightly dealt with by effective risk-management and a repressive practice of policing. As a consequence, the events tend to be understood not in relation to, but in opposition to society as lawless deeds, inspired by personal frustrations or desires of abnormal young people who do not know how to behave like good citizens. This attitude of state officials enforces the perceived lack of representation in mechanisms of institutional politics of the young people involved.

In the case of the riots in The Hague a pattern can be distinguished which was also visible at the onset of the earlier riots in Paris and London (Sutterlüty 2014, 41-43). In all cases violence erupted after a confrontation with fatal consequences took place between the police and a man of color. The police initially refused to take responsibility for the events. In The Hague, the police announced that Mitch Hernandez had been fine before entering the police van, and had become unwell during transportation. However, video footage emerged showing that a group of officers held Hernandez in a choke-hold before dragging him into the van while he was already unconscious. Research later proved that police violence was indeed the cause of Hernandez’ death. Secondly, when peaceful protests started, representatives from the institutional domain showed a lack of recognition for the grief of those surrounding the victim, and a lack of respect for those expressing their frustration and discontent regarding the events. In The Hague the first violent skirmishes took place in front of the police station Heemstraat in de Schilderswijk, when demonstrators felt they were not sufficiently and seriously addressed by the police. Other state representatives added fuel to the fire by failing to recognize the frustrations leading up to the riots, and primarily focusing on the rioters as criminals. In the Netherlands, Prime Minister Mark Rutte called the rioters achterlijke gladiolen (retarded knuckleheads) and seemed to be more upset by the destruction of property in the neighborhood than by the death of Mitch Henriquez. Mayor of The Hague Jozias van Aertsen spoke about the brute violence of ‘vandals’ and denied the existence of police violence or discrimination in his city. The reaction of Nicolas Sarkozy, then French Minister of Internal Affairs, to the Parisian riots and the reaction of David Cameron, British Prime Minister, to the London riots were even stronger. Sarkozy described the youth involved in the French riots as criminal gang members and scum from whom the coun-
try should be liberated. British Prime Minister David Cameron analyzed the London 2011 riots as a sign of the “moral collapse” of a “broken society.” By stating that this moral collapse is manifested by a lack of parenting skills in “troubled” families, and that an “all-out war against gangs and gang culture” is needed, Cameron sought the origin of the riots in deviant socio-psychological behavior, youth culture and youth delinquency. He explicitly stressed that the riots were a matter of gang culture and not of poverty, discrimination or unequal social opportunities.

These statements indicate that the riots are not seen as an aspect of the social dynamics within society, but as a threatening destabilization of society by those who do not merit to be seen as fellow citizens. The riots are framed as originating from a deviant street culture which generally threatens the public sphere in Western European cities (Decker and Weerman, 2005), while possible political motives are not acknowledged. Frustrations in relation to discrimination, ethnic profiling, poverty and isolation are not recognized as valid incentives underlying the disruptive events and are consequently not seen as issues of injustice and inequality which could be tackled in the political arena. Hence, the rioters seem to be alien aggressors, affecting society from the outside. Politicians deny having a relation with these troublemakers, let alone take responsibility for addressing their grievances. Prime Minister Mark Rutte said he did not see the need to visit the Schilderswijk to engage in a conversation with the rioters because he considered them fools causing a scene.

A continuous emphasis on the ‘pointless violence’ in the actions of young ‘troublemakers’ places them outside of the body of ‘normal’ citizens, and inside a frame of deviant exponents of a dangerous street culture. Their abnormality is seen as being caused by social and educational deficiencies, alcohol and drug abuse, criminal tendencies and/or an aggressive, antisocial youth culture. This street culture seems to collide with the dominant, civil culture in society (Van Strijen, 2009) and seems to be devoid of any socio-political awareness. As a consequence of this dichotomy young rioters are easily placed outside of the moral structure and political rules of society. They are not recognized as political agents because their actions seem to lack a clear political goal and a strategy aimed at constructive and effective alternatives. This depoliticization of the riots becomes possible when political participation is defined within an institutional context. One acts politically if one either remains within the framework of political institutions by the practice of voting or membership of a political party, or if one aims to deliberately reform this framework of political institutions, by adopting social movement strategies such as demonstrations and strikes. The actions of young rioters do not fit in with this representation of politics.

I wish to contest this exclusion from the domain of citizenship and politics of young urban troublemakers, by stating that their disruptive interventions in urban space can be seen as a form of unruly political agency (Kaulingfreks 2015). In the act of rioting, marginalized young people can make themselves visible as citizens who are not sufficiently represented in the formal practice of politics. Their disruptive actions therefore have a political sense, even if they express themselves in unconventional ways, even if they operate outside of the domain of the law and even if they do not share a dominant culture, which is imagined as the foundation of good citizenship.

The apparent senselessness of riots

Before I take a closer look at rioting as a form of unruly political agency, it is important to indicate that the events are often interpreted as non-political or pre-political because the people involved are not recognized or represented within the political domain. Various analyses of the French riots of 2005 can serve as an example here, in which the lack of political agency of those involved is emphasized, exactly because they are positioned at such a distance from institutional politics. According to French anthropologist Alain Bertho, riots in general can be seen as an enraged and frustrated reaction to the painful distance between an officially recognized political discourse and the complicated social reality in which people living in precarious circumstances find themselves (2009). Riots thus indicate a profound rupture between the political domain of the state and the desire for political recognition of the people. Robert Castel equally states that riots in which youth from the French banlieues are in-
volved can be seen as a desperate call for attention of those who are not recognized as full citizens in possession of political agency (Castel 2006). The rioters cannot be political agents, because of their exclusion. Peter Sloterdijk explicitly looks at the Parisian riots in 2005 and states that a lack in the political system was painfully presented, but no political agenda was established. The rioters rage and “hatred against the status quo” were not effectively channeled by existing political movements and could not therefore be translated into one overarching project of transformation. No political parties took up the task to convert the violent and destructive energy of the riots into a constructive political strategy (Sloterdijk 2010, 206). The rioters therefore remained stuck in a senseless destruction of territory, infected by an “epidemic of negativity” (Sloterdijk 2010, 211). For Sloterdijk, the demonstration of a lack in the existing political order has no political meaning in itself. It is only in a profitable operationalization for actual and effective change that the violent expression of anger and frustration can make sense. He therefore makes a distinction between useless, and thus senseless, violence and the profitable operationalization of violence for a higher goal.

Michel Wieviorka and Étienne Balibar also emphasize the incapacity of young rioters to convert their violent disruptions into a constructive and effective political agency. Michel Wieviorka characterizes those who are involved in urban violence as “floating subjects” (2005, 292-293). The floating subject is not capable of translating his or her social demands into actions, which make sense within a socio-political frame of reference. Hence, the violent behavior of such a “floating subject” seems to be adrift, devoid of any connection to the rest of society. The floating subject seems to signal a “lack of sense,” and is characterized as non-social and non-political by Wieviorka. Étienne Balibar makes a similar analysis of the subjectivity of young rioters, with a slightly different conclusion. According to him, involvement in riots should be understood as a manifestation of “antipolitics” (Balibar 2007, 62). When citizenship is emptied of its content, because a group is not seen as a full part of the nation and therefore denied representation within the political system, we can speak of “antipolitics.” The revolt of rioters is in the process of becoming political (2007, 65). What makes it not yet political is its singularity, the lack of connections with other groups in society which suffer from similar injustices and mechanisms of exclusion. Alain Badiou analyzes the London riots of 2011 in a similar vein. Badiou describes these riots as an example of ‘immediate riots’. Such riots emerge as an immediate reaction “in the wake of a violent episode of state coercion” (2012, 22). Immediate riots are too premature to hold a political significance, because of their lack of organization and focus. Badiou reserves political meaning for events which lead to intentionally organized, militant uprisings. Such uprisings require a strong ideological proposition, around which the masses can be mobilized, and a strong political organization, which follows the initial events. Central to such events is the political organization of a universal emancipatory subject which could do away with “identitary fictions,” as they are applied by the state. The aim of such fictions is to separate groups of people with differently ascribed identities from the generic collective of the people, who could act affirmatively together (ibid., 92-93). In contrast, immediate riots have an “impure subject” (ibid., 26) because the intentions of the involved actors cannot be ascribed to the same universal revolutionary aspirations.

Within these reflections on the riots it is assumed that in order to act politically, a certain political subject intentionally applies violent measures in order to reach a predetermined goal. The distinction between senseless violence, which stands alone, and purposive violence as a means to an end can be inscribed in a more general analysis of the political meaning of public, violent agency. Discussions of the political meaning of violence are often understood in a relational setting between means and ends, revolving around the question of the legitimacy of an instrumental use of violence in light of a higher political goal. The central question here is whether violence can be legitimized as a temporary tool to be used in the project of the creation of a better, more equal and more just world, in which the very violence itself can later be completely abolished (Welten 2006). Violence appears to be senseless if it has no clear instrumental value in relation to an external, recognizable goal. The more riots seem to emerge as singular events, which “just” seem to happen because it was hot, and/or the opportunity was there and the adrenaline took over, the easier they are discredited as acts of senseless vandalism.
It is this “autotelic” aspect of senseless violence that is the most frightening and the least understandable (Schinkel 2010). Autotelic violence is pure and immediate since it is not focused on anything other than its own performance (Schinkel 2010, 100). While a form of violence which is purely autotelic is hard to imagine, every kind of violence is at least partially inspired by a certain attraction to violence itself and is therefore partly autotelic. Cases of urban violence can easily be seen as examples of autotelic — and therefore senseless — violence because of their sudden, unpredictable appearance, irrational development and lack of clear focus. It is the random element of destruction and also the apparent enjoyment of the violence by its instigators which makes them an ideal cause for moral panic amongst the general public (Schinkel 2008, Cohen 1972). The fact that urban riots seem to defy all laws imaginable, even those of militant strategies, makes them intensely threatening. The general public cannot understand the motivation underlying the riots and is shaken by its effects. The riots’ autotelic element clarifies comments that describe them as a danger to national security, civil peace and shared solidarity, and makes measures like a declaration of national emergency understandable (Goodwin et al. 2012, Ossman and Terrio 2006, 6).

Riots to indicate a lack in the political system

The shock effect and singularity of riots could also be interpreted differently, if we perceive them not as expressions of a traditional political conscience (Belhaj Kacem 2006). However, the fact that they cannot be inscribed in a political strategy which is generally understood to be rational and constructive, does not make them politically insignificant. Belhaj Kacem speaks of a political “inoperativeness” that is expressed by the young people involved in French riots (2006, 10) — a certain “unworking” of political structures. Their actions are testimonies of precisely those aspects of the political system that do not work, at least not for them. As far as explicit claims can be read in acts of rioting, such events allude to something that is radically missing. This is a fundamentally different mode of expression than that of an organized political insurrection. Slavoj Zizek emphasizes that this inoperativeness of riots is not devoid of political significance, even though we cannot inscribe this significance in a traditional framework of emancipatory political agency. In his book “On Violence,” Zizek describes the riots that took place around Paris in 2005 as a wild and uncontrolled outburst of violence without a future perspective of transformation (2008). This “outburst with no pretence to vision” seems to be an illustration of the “post-ideological” times in which we live (Zizek 2008, 63). No realistic alternatives were proposed for experienced injustices; only an uneasy feeling of resentment without explanation was transmitted. However, Zizek sees the riots as a “direct effort to gain visibility” (2008, 65) of those who are excluded from the domain of social and political organization. “[T]hey found themselves on the other side of the wall which separates the visible from the invisible part of the republican social space” (Zizek 2008, 66). Here, the riots become significant not in order to offer a solution, but in order to indicate a problem: the problem of those banned from society and confined to a status of the “outlaw.” Therefore, it is precisely in the riots’ apparent senselessness where their political sense can be found. The disorder which riots imply seem senseless from an organized perspective on politics, but make political sense if we look at them as a violent condemnation of an order which has become unacceptable because of the injustices it produces. The perceived senselessness of riots is caused here by a lack of recognition for the less visible systemic violence against which it is opposed.

These qualifications of the riots bring Rancière’s notion of politics as dis-sensus into mind. As Jacques Rancière mentions, a disruption of the status quo in politics can have a political meaning even without a deliberately developed political strategy, precisely because it calls attention to a lack of representation within institutional politics. Not surprisingly, Mustafa Di-keç identifies the 2005 riots around Paris as “unarticulated justice movements”, in reference to Rancière (2007, 3900 kindle edition). For Rancière, politics does not imply a negotiation of interests of identity-based groups within a neutral sphere of parliamentary debates, nor does it imply the exercise of power (2010, 27). Instead, politics begins where the exercise of power is interrupted, and the orderly organization of society is disturbed, in the name of those who are excluded from that organization. As Douzinas states, Ranciere places the excluded at the heart of politics (Douzinas 2013, 113). Politics should therefore not be sought in the do-
main of ruling institutions, but rather on the level of disruptive interactions between people without any status and those ruling institutions. Rancière takes the expression of dissensus as a point of departure for considering his notion of politics, even if it carries us across the boundaries of lawful political participation. He explicitly focuses on the role that marginalized groups, which are not recognized as taking part in any existing political process, can play in the emergence of a new, political evocation of equality. Politics, in his opinion, emerges in the moment that people express their disagreement with an order of governance which falsely pretends to reflect the equal distribution of “social parts and shares” (Rancière 2010, 35,37). Rancière speaks of a disagreement which is fundamental to such an extent that it cannot be solved by aiming at a consensus under the same shared terms, because the one party does not even recognize that the other party is communicating something. Both parties disagree because they not only speak a different language, but also because at least one party is not recognized as an equal addressee or an equal adversary in the same discussion (Rancière 1999, xii).

This kind of radical disagreement involves not only situations in which the language used by a party is not recognized as meaningful language, but also — and even more often — situations in which the very existence of a group of people is not recognized as the existence of a meaningful part of society. According to Rancière, those who are marginalized because they are poor, or because they deviate in other ways from the accepted norm, are structurally kept in their subordinate place. This happens not only because they are not taken seriously as actors in the public domain, but because their utterances, whether linguistic or not, are not recognized as having any meaning at all (Hewlett 2007, 97). A failure to recognize someone as a “political being” begins by “not understanding what he says” (Rancière 2010, 38). This happens, for example, when expressions of certain people are not recognized as meaningful in the public domain, because they are confined to another domain. An example would be the situation in which rebellious young people are confined to the domain of street culture, which is seen as detached from the domain of civic culture. In that situation, these young people are not recognized as “political beings,” since their public interventions are seen as senseless vandalism, which does not conform to the political rationality of “normal” citizens. Yet, if we follow Rancière’s understanding of politics, it is precisely those who disturb the existing socio-political order who are acting-out politically. The act of disruption in itself gains political significance. Young rioters can reveal who is not included within the system of governance, and hence confront us with the very limits of the majority’s dominant understanding of politics.

Riots as events of unruly politics

Ranciere’s analysis clarifies how those who disrupt an exclusionary political order can be seen as political agents. When people stand up to declare their own equality to others, and also if they do not conform to dominant norms of good citizenship, this is an act of political subjectification, according to Ranciere. In such a case, the division is denied between those categories of people who can share in the construction of a political order, and those who cannot, and it is recognized that “equality cannot be received, because to receive equality is already to be less than equal to the one who bestows it” (May 2008, 71).

Because politics as disagreement causes a sudden awareness of the equal presence of certain excluded groups, its emergence is always simultaneously embedded within a particular situation, and causes a deregulatory effect within that situation. Riots emerge in a direct reaction to a specific practice of political governance, which does not guarantee civic equality (Sutterlüty 2014, 49). Rancière offers a general, structural analysis of disagreement and disruption as politically meaningful. I propose to understand the riots here discussed as events of unruly politics, because in these cases the disruption of the political order is explicitly subversive, violent, and law transgressing32. The perceived senselessly violent nature of the events and the perceived incivility of those involved indicate how much unruly politics can differ from accepted forms of political agency. It defies the boundaries of dominant rules. Rioters take the law into their own hands, when the existing laws no longer correspond with the principle of justice as they perceive it. However, even though riots and other cases of urban violence manifest themselves outside of the ruling legal order, they do not lack every relation to the law. Such violent events emerge out of a discontentment with — and therefore a direct engagement with — that...
legal order, rather than a complete detachment from that legal order. Unruly politics does not spring out of nowhere. It might be the only option left, if disadvantaged groups feel that their moral outrage about their situation is not shared by the general public, and if laws and institutions represent only a narrow sense of justice, serving the interests of certain privileged groups in society (Shelby 2007, 157-158). In the uncomfortable and disruptive act of street disturbances and rioting, it becomes apparent who is excluded from the political game, as it is played in the conventional way. Young rioters often do not feel that they are part of the system of political representation at all. This feeling of exclusion can become a legitimation for rebellious young people to design their own rules of the game. In this sense, unruly politics is not about creating a state of total anarchy, but rather about creating “subversive ruliness.” The translation of justice into a system of laws is not dismissed as useless or unnecessary altogether; it is the functioning of existing laws which is questioned.

To sum it up: Unruly politics is a name for describing the interventions of those who disrupt the framework of institutional power relations, because they are in a position which leaves them no other option for influencing the organization of society other than to disrupt the status quo, which does not represent their needs. It is a practice of politics that would not make any political sense if we were to define politics only within the limits of the institutional political game.

Unruly politics, as we define it, is political action by people who have been denied voice by the rules of the political game, and by the social rules that underpin this game. It draws its power from transgressing these rules – while at the same time upholding others, which may not be legally sanctioned but which have legitimacy, deeply rooted in people’s own understandings of what is right and just. This preoccupation with social justice distinguishes these forms of political action from the banditry or gang violence with which threatened autocrats wilfully try to associate them. (Khanna et al. 2013, 14)

Unruly politics demands “a new mode of political enquiry which spills outside of traditional notions of politics, and in which the relevance of acts and events is not reduced to the effect they have on formal structures of the political establishment” (Khanna et al. 2013, 11). Expressions of unruly politics do not allow themselves be translated into the language of negotiated demands and interests, within a setting of parliamentary mechanisms (Khanna et al. 2013, 10). They do not abide by the logics of representative politics, but rather enunciate a political meaning which is unmediated, which does not let itself be represented or translated in another context, in another moment or for the benefit of other people. Unruly politics is always situated in a specific time and place, engaging specific people. It cannot be reduced to fit into general procedures, designed to bring a plurality of people together in one body of manageable citizens. At the same time, expressions of unruly politics evoke a deep wish to live a dignified life and be treated justly by state representatives, regardless of the particular envisioning of what a dignified life might entail in each different situation, for every different person. It is not carefully designed as a party-political campaign, nor is it driven by great revolutionary aspirations or clearly defined ideologies, but rather emerges in unexpected events. It does not only take place at sites that are specifically designed for public and political debate; it also politicizes spaces which are meant to be neutral or private, such as the streets.

Unruly political agency is necessarily critical towards the legitimacy of the state, as long as the state does not safeguard justice and equality for all, regardless of people’s social and economic privileges, or their citizenship status. Those who lack a formal citizenship status, or who feel impaired in making use of their formal citizenship status, literally gain space for their lives in informal or extra-legal ways. Through these same informal channels they sometimes have considerable impact on the formal domain of politics. The more the range of unruly political events expand and become publicly known, the more chance they will gradually transform into a more conventional mode of political agency and be incorporated into the domain of formal politics. After the flames are extinguished and the smoke clears, politicians can feel the pressure to recognize the grievances of rioters, and new social movements can emerge from the initial, violent and disruptive events. In relation to the English riots of 2011, Nunes states that the events were politically significant as a starting point for further politicization, even though a variety of motives and incentives was apparent and not all participants were consciously ‘doing politics’. The
events showed tensions, but also possibilities for solidarity between a young gentrifying lower-middle class and a young underclass in the neighborhoods where the riots took place, for example (Nunes 2013, 572-573).

In this sense, the notion of unruly politics is similarly related to the domain of institutional politics as the “informal politics” which Asef Bayat describes in his book “Street Politics” (1997). Bayat explores the political agency of the urban poor and marginalized in the Middle East, who have no ‘institutional power of disruption’ (1997, p. xii), but rather disrupt institutional power constellations with their day to day struggles to gain, sometimes literally, a place in society. What Bayat names street politics, is first and foremost a movement of ordinary people who wish to secure the necessary means to make a living for themselves and their close ones, while suffering from a “lack of an institutional mechanism through which they can collectively express their grievances and resolve their problems” (Bayat 1997, 9). At the same time, the fact that many people struggle simultaneously for their personal survival makes it possible for a shared political sense in these singular struggles to emerge. The streets are the domain where they meet and form occasional alliances (Bayat 1997, 17).

These people live perforce without the support of official state institutions, yet, at the same time, they often deeply distrust any state interference in their lives. Out of fear of being regulated, controlled or disciplined by formal state procedures, they search for autonomous and alternative ways to sustain themselves and gather in informal communities in which they are free to mind their own business. They do not feel the urge to make publicity for any claims of general interest or to recruit allies in the perspective of a general transformation of society. These struggles are related to what James Scott named ‘everyday forms of resistance’, which are less concentrated in singular, public, violent and explosive events such as urban riots. Informal street politics therefore differs from unruly politics. However, it can be similarly differentiated from both institutional politics and the ‘contentious politics’ of new social movements (Lettinga & Kaulingfreks 2015). In contrast to social movements, both the urban poor who engage in street politics, and young rioters who instigate events of unruly politics, do not form a coherently structured collective around clearly formulated, shared political claims or a collective ideology. Bayat prefers to speak of “nonmovements”, in reference to “the collective actions of noncollective actors; they embody shared practices of large numbers of ordinary people whose fragmented but similar activities trigger much social change, even though these practices are rarely guided by an ideology or recognizable leaderships and organizations” (Bayat 2010, 14). Other than in social movements the emphasis is placed on the undertaking of collective ‘action’ (sometimes out of self-interest) rather than on the articulation of collectively-shared ‘meaning’ (Bayat 1997, 7). Conflicting motives, convictions and agendas are common in the domain of street politics as well as in events of unruly politics, and strong leadership is absent. Bayat’s analysis further clarifies how the agency of people with similar experiences, who do not organize themselves into political pressure groups or social movements, can nevertheless make political sense in an unruly way.

Recognizing the rioters

The analysis of unruly politics is aimed at finding political meaning beyond the borders of formal governance. These considerations should not be understood as a simple celebration of violence, illegality and incivility. It is not a matter of celebrating unruliness as the only true political option here. As I have emphasized before, unruly politics takes place in an inextricable relationship with formal political institutions and cannot be seen as an alternative replacement for these institutions. However, a critical examination of our imagined political community cannot take place without listening to the voices of those who express themselves in unconventional or undesirable ways, but who nevertheless share the social world with us. Whether we condemn or support their actions, young rioters co-exist in the same society with “familiar”, law-abiding citizens, and we therefore have to consider the possible political meaning of their actions before we make further judgments.

If we a priori dismiss the involved actors of riots and other unorganized civil disturbances as not having any relation to the practice of active citi-
Citizenship and politics, the lack of recognition and representation which they experience is enforced. An analysis of said disruptive events in the light of unruly politics prevents such immediate exclusion. We should merit the political sense of unruly political actions, such as riots and public disturbances, as acts in themselves, without immediately demanding an effective outcome. In a situation in which structural social changes are hard to imagine for a young generation growing up in times of crisis and polarization, one should not measure their political conscience by their ability to propose alternative models for society, but with their ability to open our eyes to the flaws in the existing political model of representation.

Femke Kaulingfreks (1981) received her Masters degree in Philosophy at the University of Amsterdam and completed her PhD at the University for Humanistic Studies in Utrecht in 2013. Her dissertation consisted of an interdisciplinary research into the political meaning of public disturbances and urban violence caused by adolescents with an immigrant background from deprived neighborhoods in France and the Netherlands. She currently teaches Political Theory at Webster University in Leiden and works as a researcher in the research group “Diversity and Citizenship” of the The Hague University in Applied Sciences. She has published in Business Ethics: A European Review, Ephemera: Theory and Politics in Organization, the Journal for Humanistics and the Magazine for Resistance Studies. In 2015 a monograph based on her dissertation, entitled “Uncivil Engagement and Unruly Politics”, will be published by Palgrave MacMillan. As a freelance researcher she also cooperated with partners such as Forum: Dutch Institute for Multicultural Issues, Hivos (Dutch organization in development cooperation), the Municipality of Amsterdam, Vrijwilligers Centrale Amsterdam (Association of Volunteers Amsterdam) and de Doetank. Besides her teaching and research work Femke regularly organizes youth exchange projects and is engaged in activism related to housing, migration and social justice issues.

References


Cooper indicates that the riots were framed as ‘mindless criminality’. Dutch media headlines about the riots in the Schilderswijk in 2015 predominantly focused on the arrests and legal convictions of rioters.

1 Bystanders said that Hernandez made a somewhat improper joke right before he was arrested. He had bragged about having a gun while grabbing his crotch. This appeared to have been the reason for his arrest.


4 In her study of responses in the printed press on the French riots of 2005, Costelloe notes that an image is created of violence instigated by immigrant minority groups who fundamentally differ from mainstream French society. Bristow notes about the British riots of 2011 that the media discourse focused on the narrative of a generalized moral collapse, the problems of ‘troubled families’ and a problem of discipline. Cooper indicates that the riots were framed as ‘mindless criminality’. Dutch media headlines about the riots in the Schilderswijk in 2015 predominantly focused on the arrests and legal convictions of rioters.

5 I use the term “uncivil” to describe events, people and behavior that are placed outside of a civil order. I wish to emphasize the double meaning of the term. Uncivil has both a social and an ethical connotation. It indicates the negative of behavior that can be ascribed to a citizen, who is seen as a member of a specific society, and as the negative of behavior that is in accordance with the mores of that society. It is used to indicate behavior of those who do not fit into the social structure of society and those who do not fit into the approved moral codes of that society.
The use of the term “urban violence” is controversial, because it tends to focus on the deviancy of rioters’ behavior and therefore facilitates a dismissal of the political character of riots in favor of an interpretation of riots as being nonsensical and irrational (Laponie 2009). The term “urban violence” also tends to undervalue racism as a central dimension of the riots in question (Mbembe 2009). I make use of the term urban violence here, first of all because the riots do imply violence which takes place in an urban setting. I recognize the fact that racism plays an important role in the riots here discussed, but this does not lead me to use a different term, such as “race riots,” since in the riots around Paris in 2005, the riots around London in 2011 and the riots in The Hague in 2015, race was not the principal characteristic that distinguished those involved.


In relation to the French riots of 2005, Balibar notes that the term “uprising” was hardly used to describe the events, since it is suggestive of a deliberate revolutionary tradition of oppressed classes rising up against dominant powers. Such an uprising seemed irrelevant to most commentators in the case of the riots, since no traditional revolutionary political statements were made (2007).


http://www.volkskrant.nl/binnenland/wat-zijn-de-oorzaken-van-de-rellen-warmte-ramadan-of-racisme~a4093838/


21 In Paris, in the northern banlieue of Clichy-sous-Bois, two boys were electrocuted when they were hiding in a power substation after fleeing a police check. The police initially denied that the boys were fleeing the police and insinuated that they were involved in criminal activities. However, the boys did not have a criminal record. In London, a young man from the impoverished Broadwater Farm estate in Tottenham, was shot dead by the police in an attempt to arrest him. The police initially insinuated that the victim had fired a gun first, which was not the case. (See, Kokoreff 2008 and Lammy 2011, amongst others).


23 In France major riots broke out after the police threw a tear-gas canister at the entrance of a mosque where a commemoration ceremony was held for the electrocuted victims. In London riots started when a peaceful demonstration including family members of the shot victim was not addressed by a senior police officer.

24 See: “Vriend, het was de Ramadan’: De Schilderswijk is nog steeds licht ontvlambaar.’, De Groene Amsterdammer. November 4, 2015.

25 See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UdxztyfJGc0&feature=youtu.be


31 The reflections of Hannah Arendt, Jean-Paul Sartre and Franz Fanon on the use of violence in a political context show how this means-end logic can offer different reasons for either accepting or rejecting violence as a political strategy (Arendt 1970, Fanon 2004). The distinction between the legitimate and illegitimate use of violence as a means is first made in relation to the state and its role as the protector of law and order, and the revolutionary power of the people, who in certain cases feel the moral duty to replace the existing state with a better one. The question then becomes whether a political transformation of society can be brought about by violent means in contestation of the law, or
whether the law should be respected as the final resource of justice, and politics as a practice, which can only be performed through deliberative means. However divergent the conclusions of Arendt on the one side and Sartre and Fanon on the other, their positions demonstrate the dominance of an instrumental approach to violence, for the sake of conceptualizing its political significance.

32 Because of this explicit violent and subversive nature I do not describe the riots as a form of civil disobedience. Like unruly politics, civil disobedience can be expressed when citizens doubt the constitutionality of the measures of government, or if they can no longer sufficiently influence the government by standard means of participation. However, when understood in the Arendtian tradition, civil disobedience should always be non-violent, directed at the laws and policies of the government, and openly expressed in public. Civil disobedience becomes permissible when it is expressed by “organized minorities that are too important, not merely in number, but in quality of opinion, to be safely disregarded.” (Arendt 1972, 76). Here Arendt emphasizes that acts of civil disobedience should be well organized, rooted in a rationally defendable position and related to clearly formulated demands. This is not the case in relation to the riots here described. Jacqueline Rothfusz proposes to stretch the criteria that Arendt defined for civil disobedience, in order to include expressions of discontent which are violent and not directly addressed at governing authorities (2012, 24). She proposes to identify a broader borderland between criminality and civil disobedience. The expressions of dissent of young rioters could thus be labeled as civil disobedience. I do not adopt this interpretation of the term civil disobedience, since the young rioters here discussed do not represent an accepted minority voice within the public debate, but rather have the position of outsiders to the very domain of civil participation. Given the characteristics of their expressions, and the fact that they are not accepted as a valuable part of civil society, it is not civil disobedience but rather “uncivil” disobedience, which is expressed by young urban troublemakers. Costas Douzinas discusses the term ‘democratic disobedience’ as an alternative in cases where the defense of fundamental rights or their implementation in specific policies is not prioritized, but the entire operation of the political system and social hierarchies are at stake. He also states that it is doubtful whether this term extends to contemporary cases of resistance and revolt, in which the democratic deficit is enormous (Douzinas 2013, 95). Lastly, the disruptive interventions of young rioters are very distinct from other, more activist-oriented examples, which are understood as civil disobedience – such as the Occupy movement and feminist movement FEMEN – because of their spontaneous and chaotic character, as well as their lack of a clearly formulated organization and political agenda. Instead of using the same term – civil disobedience or democratic disobedience – to describe all these disruptive actions, the additional term ‘unruly politics’ can help to clarify certain important distinctions.

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THOMAS R. WELLS
EXILE THE RICH!

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These days the rich are very rich indeed. Increasingly, they also seem to be
more or less in charge. They negotiate directly with our elected officials
about government policies; they own the media companies that set the
agenda for our national political conversations; they cultivate private rela-
tionships with political candidates dependent on their financial support;
they fund ‘grass-roots’ political movements; they even run as political
candidates themselves. They are hailed not only as the ‘job-creators’ of
our economy, but also, in their guise as philanthropists, as our saviours: of
our public services, such as education (Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg); our
politics (the Michael Bloombergs and Silvio Berlusconis); the discipline of
economics (George Soros); and so on. George Clooney even has his own
spy satellite pointed at Sudan (the Satellite Sentinel Project). The rich
have become public figures with the status of celebrities and ‘thought
leaders’ whose lavish lifestyles, minor life-events and superficial opinions
on the matters of the day are considered of great public significance.

I think there is something very wrong with this situation. In fact I think it
may be a crisis, in the technical sense of a stage in a sequence of events at
which the trend of all future events is determined, for better or for worse. My
concern is well summarised by a famous quotation from the US su-
preme court justice Louis Brandeis, whose career spanned a previous gilded
age.

We must make our choice. We may have democracy, or we may have
wealth concentrated in the hands of a few, but we can’t have both. (Dilliard
1941, 42).1

This essay tries to clarify the nature of the crisis and how it may be ad-
dressed by examining the character of the rich and the character of de-
mocracy. The rich have two defining capabilities: independence from and com-
mand over others. Those two features make being rich very pleasant indeed.
But they are also what make the rich bad for democracy, and indeed even
for capitalism. Democracies are extended moral communities whose
flourishing, and also mere survival, depend on the general interdepend-
ence and approximate equality of their members. The rich do not only
have no place in this kind of community, their very presence undermines
it.

This essay is not about social justice. Perhaps it is morally wrong that
some people are rich and others are poor, and perhaps it would be morally
right to redistribute wealth from the rich to the poor, and even from
wealthy countries to poorer countries, but from this perspective that de-
bate is a distraction. What I’m concerned with here is the sinking ship -
the threat the rich pose to democracy itself – not the proper (re)arrangement of deck chairs between first and third-class passengers.
Hence my modest proposal: if we believe our democracy is worth preserv-
ing, we should offer the rich a choice: give up your money or give up your citizen-
ship.

A Political Not a Moral Problem

The normative definition of the rich is always those who have ‘too much’. Yet there are various ways of defining this in the contemporary literature
on social justice. Some, egalitarians such as John Rawls (Rawls 1999), take
the equal distribution of wealth as the starting point for thinking about
social justice: inequality is illegitimate unless specifically morally justified. Others criticise the legitimacy of the processes by which the present concentrations of wealth in our society arose (including even libertarians, when they take Robert Nozick’s historical account of entitlement seriously3). Yet others focus on the inefficiency of great inequality. The utilitarian Peter Singer (2009), for example, argues that ordinary middle-class people in the west have much more than enough (anyone with annual income over $35,000 is in the global 1%) while a great many (around 2 billion) live in appalling absolute poverty. The richer you are, the less benefit you will derive from having one more dollar to spend because all your most important needs and wants have already been satisfied; for the same reason, the poorer you are the more good that same dollar could do for you. So the relatively rich should give away our money to the poorest people we can find, where it will do the most good. And we should keep giving up to the point that we have to sacrifice something of comparable moral significance (which seems pretty far).

These various approaches to thinking about justice problematise wealth in different ways (unfairness, illegitimacy, inefficiency). Although I won’t be making direct use of any of them, it is worth noting what they all have in common: identifying the problem of the rich as ‘absolutely relative’. In other words, the rich pose an objective problem of justice not because of how wealthy they are in absolute terms (how much they can buy) but because of the problematic relation in which they stand to others. I employ the same foundational idea - just as seawater is good for fish but poisonous to humans, so extreme wealth is wonderful for individuals but poisonous to democracy. However, my approach is different from that of the justice theorists because I focus on the political problem of wealth and not its moral problems. So I am not directly concerned with identifying injustices in the distribution of wealth, nor with making its distribution more just, for example by making the rich give their money (back) to the poor. My reasons for focusing on the political dimension rather than the moral are two-fold.

First, it seems to me that a threat to democracy has a more existential character and thus possesses an urgency that issues of social injustice lack. In particular, while the relationship between social injustice and concentra-

trations of wealth seems relatively linear (on most accounts), the relationship between democracy and individual wealth may include a threshold above which a dramatic failure of democracy becomes very likely. If our society makes mistakes about justice, we can hope to remedy them later. If we make mistakes with our democracy, we may not get a second chance.

Second, there is a strategic advantage to politicising wealth-holding rather than moralising its distribution. People with very different moral views can appreciate the importance of democracy, and of saving democracy, precisely because of the scope for pluralism and public reasoning about justice that democracy permits. It seems to me that many people who disagree about exactly how wealth should be distributed in society—including those with egalitarian, libertarian, or utilitarian moral intuitions—can nevertheless come together to condemn extremes of wealth that threaten a polity’s capacity to debate justice at all.

The Bourgeois Character of Democracy

Democracy as we know it is the invention of the American republic, and, as Alexis de Tocqueville analysed, is fundamentally government by and for the middle-classes, the bourgeoisie. Indeed, the flourishing democratic societies of the world are all politically dominated by a middle class; as the political scientist Barrington Moore famously put it, “No bourgeoisie, no democracy”. This may not be a feature of many philosophical accounts of democracy, but it is a fact about modern liberal democracies, the only ones that seem to work. For example, the mere possession of formal democratic institutions like parliaments and elections is demonstrably insufficient for the successful practice of democracy, as poor countries such as India demonstrate.3

Successful democracies are bourgeois because middle-class circumstances are particularly amenable to the spirit of democracy. The bourgeois live in circumstances of moderate abundance: neither so poor as to be utterly dominated by circumstances or powerful persons, nor so well-off as to be
free from inter-dependence on the goodwill of other people for success. This is the sweet-spot of sufficient independence to think for oneself, and sufficient inter-dependence to be sensitive to the interests and concerns of other people; the conditions for the thriving of the civic habits and dispositions on which a democratic polity depends.

A democratic society is organic, not a construct of high theory. Its heart is equality of political status, or what some would call 'dignity' - the freedom of all from domination, whether by government or other people. A real democracy must pass what the political philosopher Philip Pettit calls the 'eyeball test': is every person free to look any other in the eye, without fear and trembling?

The brain of a democracy is its ability to make legitimate collective choices in a way that everyone finds acceptable even when they disagree with the conclusions. That sounds like an abstract adding machine - and the terminology of social-choice theorists doesn't help. But actually it's about community and common sense. Democratic procedures for social choice work so long as everyone recognizes that we are all in this together, and that we have a shared interest in and commitment to making things better for everyone even though we may disagree about how to do so. The members of a bourgeois society have an orientation toward co-operation, even with those we disagree with, because we are fixed in relations of interdependence with each other and have no choice but to try to make this society work.

So what's the problem with the rich? Their circumstances of life are distinctly different from the bourgeoisie. At the extreme, the combined assets of Walmart’s Walton family have been calculated to be equal to that of the bottom 150 million Americans combined. Great wealth changes people and their relationship to society as a whole. As Michael Sandel puts it, “Democracy does not require perfect equality, but it does require that citizens share in a common life.” (Sandel 2012, 205).

The rich are independent of the rest of us. Obviously they are materially independent so long as their property rights remain recognized. They can achieve what they want by themselves, that is by buying it from others or paying someone else to do it for them. But this power of command also generates a social distance from society that allows them to become 'ethically independent'. Since they don't depend on the goodwill of others to succeed - for example, few of them have recognisable jobs - they may become less concerned in general about whether they deserve goodwill. They are thereby freed from the disciplinary power of bourgeois social norms and standards, and, it often seems, even from the laws that apply to ordinary people. I’m sure that sense of liberty must be quite exhilarating. But it also means that the rich aren’t really like the rest of us.

There is some worrying social psychology research about what the rich are like, suggesting that society’s nobility are not actually very noble (e.g., Piff et al. 2012). The rich appear to have a more positive attitude to greed than the rest of us, and this is expressed, for example, in feeling entitled to opt out of ethical standards - to lie and cheat when it suits them - and a lack of compassion toward others. Though recent events should teach us not to build castles on the findings of social psychology, such research chimes with what all of us see and hear every day of the self-centredness and self-servingness of the rich, from Donald Trump’s use of the US presidential election to promote his business brand, to Warren Buffet’s exploitation of his political connections to lobby for public subsidies of his investments in Goldman Sachs and railroads. The ‘ethical independence’ of the rich from the rest of society thus has political implications, since, to put it mildly, it does not suggest that the rule of the rich is to the benefit of all.

For the rich the spirit of cooperation on which democracy depends is only an option, not a necessity. When the rich engage in politics they are not under the same constraints as the rest of us to find a mutually agreeable solution, since their fortunes are not fixed to the success of this society as ours are. They can always buy their way around the absence of public goods, or leave for somewhere nicer.

That means that the rich don’t have the same political interests as the rest of us (Page, Bartels, and Seawright 2013). They aren’t worried about crime (their gated communities come with private security) or the quality of public education (their kids go to the fanciest schools money can buy) or
affordable accessible health care, pensions, job security, public parks, gas prices, environmental quality, or most of the other issues that the rest of us have no choice but to care about, and to care about politically since they are outside of our individual powers to fix. The political concerns of the rich do not lie in the provision of public goods, but in furthering their private interests, whether their personal wealth and power or their political whimsies. That is why Adam Smith, the father of economics, warned us so vehemently in *The Wealth of Nations* to be suspicious of their self-serving rhetoric.

It is an unfortunately widespread fallacy that democracy is a means to achieve one's interests, rather than a space in which the public interest can be deliberated. Thus some people seem to believe that elections work in the same way as the rest of our modern consumer society: one orders what one wants at the election and then two weeks later it should arrive. Then, if it doesn’t arrive, they think democracy must be broken.

However, for the rich, politics actually does work somewhat like this, because they have the power to intervene non-democratically in our politics. They can and do use their wealth to command outsized political influence, in the ways I outlined above: bargaining and schmoozing privately with our politicians (Kalla and Broockman 2015); buying a media megaphone to transmit their opinions to voters and drown out counter-speech, and so on. The rich act this way because they believe that their opinion deserves to be heard because it is theirs, and their wealth means that it does indeed receive more attention. This is the logic of the market, of course, and it converts politics from a democratic forum into a market for influence.

First, it introduces a principle of political inequality. The rich achieve extraordinary influence over the character and direction of our society, and thus over how our individual lives will go, yet they have no qualification for that political role except their wealth. Like a feudal aristocracy, their special political status derives from a prior asymmetry of power combined with a personal sense of entitlement, rather than democratic selection.

Second, it undermines the democratic legitimacy of our political institutions, the perception that even if we don’t personally agree with their outcomes they genuinely reflect the will of the people and we should go along with them. Every ideological faction wants to get their own way. Liberal democracy deals with the threat of factionalism not by suppression but by transforming it into a vibrant pluralism that is maintained by a transparently fair social-choice process. Everyone still thinks their own views are right and true and seeks to persuade others of them, but in a democracy everyone agrees that practical legitimacy derives from popular consent. Those ideas that win a democratic mandate have a *prima facie* legitimacy to govern, subject to the checks and balances that protect opposing (minority) views. The rich are a particularly dangerous faction because of their ability to upset this principled *modus vivendi* by translating economic command into political influence greatly out of proportion to their numbers (cf Gilens and Page 2014).

Moreover, while as individuals they may have differing views about what society’s political priorities should be, ranging from converting the public education system to independent charter schools to defending Israel, they also have what may reasonably be called a class interest in the institutional arrangements that maintain their personal wealth, such as tax codes that favour income from capital over earned income. A democracy converts to a plutocracy gradually, as more and more of the business of politics is turned over to the rich: their interests, their values, their opinions, their policy proposals. Even though popular elections continue to be held, the link between political success and a democratic mandate to govern will crumble away. Political outcomes will no longer be understood as a reflection of the will of the people, but rather of the machinations of the rich or squabbles between them, as in modern plutocracies such as Ukraine and Moldova. As people come to realise that the system is rigged the legitimacy of the political regime will no longer rest on democratic grounds, but on some other grounds, such as economic prosperity or fear of even worse.
Why the Economy Doesn’t Need the Rich Either

At this point I would like to address a common counter-argument to the claims I have been making. This is that there is a trade-off between democracy and material prosperity: it is claimed that even if great concentrations of wealth undermine democratic ideals, this is a price that most people think is worth paying and thus has a certain democratic legitimacy in its own right. As I will show in a moment, this underestimates the threat the rich pose to capitalism as well as democracy. For now, let me focus on the specific assumption that capitalism requires the rich because they have more wealth than they need for their own consumption and so it is their investment of capital that makes the economy spin around and create jobs. That ‘job creator’ thesis is out of date and back to front.

First, while in Adam Smith’s time it might have been true that economic development required capitalists to reinvest their profits, this was because everyone else was too poor. But these days the economies of democratic societies are characterized – for now - by a broad middle-class whose savings are quite sufficient for funding business expansion and technological innovation, such as through the share-ownership of our pension funds or the bank loans backed by our deposits.

Second, the greater the wealth inequality, the worse we may expect the economy to perform. A flourishing economy requires customers as well as investors. If the gains of economic productivity are overwhelmingly transferred to some small group (as profits) it means that they don’t go to ordinary people (as wages) - (for example, since 1979 all the productivity gains of America’s economy have gone to the richest 1%, median wages have been stagnant). The implications are, firstly, that the more unequally distributed economic growth is the less it increases national prosperity, because it does not increase the economic command of ordinary people to satisfy our wants (which was how Smith defined the wealth of nations). And, secondly, economic growth itself will be less than it would have been because high inequality limits the extent of the market (fewer customers) and thus the scope for innovation.

But the biggest problem is the threat the capitalists themselves pose to a free and competitive market economy. As Thomas Piketty notes: “The entrepreneur inevitably tends to become a rentier ... capital reproduces itself faster than output increases. The past devours the future.” (Piketty 2014, 571). This not only involves the production of economic inequalities that undermine democracy and the substitution of inheritance entitlements for meritocracy, but also, as another economist, Joseph Stiglitz (2012) has argued with particular force and clarity, the outright corruption of democratic politics and capitalism itself. The winners of one round of market competition can readily translate their economic wealth into political influence and thereby change the rules to convert their income from a contingent market outcome into a guaranteed entitlement, for example by converting their businesses into quasi-monopolies that effectively levy a redistributive tax on society as a whole. The interest of the plutocratic elite is to widen the market but limit the competition; to do what Bill Gates did to Netscape and Carlos Slim did to Mexico’s telecoms industry. Consider the re-construction of America’s financial services industry over the last 30 years. As the number of firms went down, favourable laws went up, converting the industry into a rentier system in which the costs of financial services to the economy as a whole rose, profits rose, and risks were socialized.

This rentier capitalism doesn’t have the same virtues as the free market kind proposed by Smith and endorsed by most contemporary economists. It undermines the policing required to maintain real – free, fair and rivalrous - competition. It misallocates the country’s wealth and talent, by funnelling it away from productive enterprises and into rent-seeking enterprises that harvest the productivity of others. It politicises the economy in a way that undermines the conditions for liberal democracy rather than providing the shared prosperity that supports it.

What To Do About the rich

I have argued that the rich are a burden and a danger to our democratic society as a whole. But that fact doesn’t tell us what to do about them. Some, such as Piketty, argue that we should tax the rich back into the
middle-class with progressive taxes on both their wealth and income. Such tax policies face great difficulty because imposing and then maintaining them would require an overwhelming and sustained political consensus to overcome the resistance of an extraordinarily powerful political constituency, exacerbated by opportunities for international tax competition and evasion. Piketty admits that his proposal for an international wealth tax of 5-10% on the greatest fortunes to unwind the inequality ratchet is “utopian”. My own proposal is more radical still, and yet may nevertheless be more effective than Piketty’s because it directly challenges the political domination of the class interests of the rich that would thwart his plan.

Recall that I am not concerned here with fairness and social justice, but with the somewhat simpler but more urgent existential threat that the presence of the rich poses to a democratic society. I’m against the rich, but I don’t care about their money. And that allows me to advance a different kind of proposal than one normally sees in this debate: the simple rule that no-one can be both a member of our democratic society and rich.

A good way of thinking about what a democratic society is and should be, and how its members relate to it, is through the idea of the social contract. A social contract is a hypothetical agreement to form a political association for the mutual advantage, security, and justice of all its members. The significance of this idea is that it allows us to scrutinize whether our current social arrangements resemble what we would have deliberately chosen to create if we had had the chance, or whether we would have chosen something better – for instance, John Rawls’ project in A Theory of Justice. In Rawls’ hands the social contract is a device for generating a unique agreement on the basic institutional arrangements of a just society by making explicit our intuitions about what a fair democratic society requires.

But one can also use the social contract device more crudely, to draw our attention to the preconditions for, and legitimate authority of, a democratic society. Though we may not follow Rawls’ controversial argument about what an ideally just democratic society would look like (as even Rawls himself accepted in his later work), we may all readily agree that some arrangements are incompatible with the persistence of any democratic society in which such questions of justice might be debated. Plutocracy seems one of those, since it is incompatible with freedom from domination between citizens and political equality in social choice.

The idea of the social contract also directs us to think of our democratic society as a kind of private club for the mutual benefit of its members. (Indeed, this is how we often explicitly describe it when thinking about immigration). Such a club has the legitimate authority to enforce its constitutional commitment to democracy and to take preventative action against members whose activities undermine it.

Hence my modest proposal. We should first identify with some precision the category of what it seems reasonable to call ‘the rich’, i.e. those people whose capabilities for independence from and command over the rest of us crosses the threshold between enviable affluence and aristocratic privilege. Then, when anyone in our society falls into the category of the problematic rich they would be offered a choice: give it away – hold a potlatch, give it to Oxfam, their favourite art museum foundation, it doesn’t matter what - or else cash out their winnings and depart the country, leaving their citizenship at the door on their way out. Since the rich are, well, rich, they will have all the means they need to make a new life for themselves elsewhere, and perhaps even inveigle their way into citizenship in a country that is less picky than we are. I’m sure they’ll do just fine.

How much wealth makes someone problematically rich? That seems a political question for society to deliberate about, informed by empirical research from social scientists about the character and effects of large wealth inequalities. It is certainly not something for philosophers to decide! But, for the sake of this discussion let me outline one approach, to show how such deliberation could move from broad and abstract principles to concrete proposals.

The general principle is adapted from Rousseau’s proposal in The Social Contract that “in respect of riches, no citizen shall ever be wealthy enough to buy another, and none poor enough to be forced to sell himself” ([1762] 2008, II.11). That suggests that the form of the definition of the rich should
be ‘absolutely relative’ rather than merely relative (i.e. we shouldn’t just target the richest 1%, because there will always be a richest 1%, and this proposal is not founded on envy of the better off). One way to go would be to use some multiple of the wealth of the median citizen (the person who is poorer than 50% of the population and richer than 50%) as a proxy for the distance from, and power over, ordinary citizens that defines problematic wealth. Let me suggest a very generous multiple of 500 to be going on with (surely everyone can agree that someone with more than 500 times the wealth of the middling citizen is in a different class than the merely enviably affluent). What would that mean for a country like America?

According to the Credit Suisse’s Global Wealth Report (2015) the median adult American’s personal wealth is around $50,000, which suggests a cut off of $25 million. For context, America’s mean average wealth is $350,000 (if the gulf between mean and median figures seems surprising, it reflects the fact that wealth inequality is much more pronounced than income inequality). For further context, median wealth in the UK is more than twice as high as America, suggesting a cut-off of $63 million. The UK-US comparison shows that this simple definition has a powerful inbuilt ratchet. The greater the concentration of wealth in a society, the greater, I have argued, the threat to democracy, and the lower the boundary line for the problematic rich that this definition will produce.

There are obviously many technical difficulties remaining in this definition (from settling on appropriate accounting standards, to allowing for market volatility in asset values, to distinguishing individual from household wealth). But if it could be made to work, what would happen? Presumably there would be an outpouring of wealth as assets are liquidated and moved abroad. But the immediate consequences of this should not be exaggerated. The mansions and penthouse apartments would still be here, just owned by someone else. The already globalised financial portfolios (most of the assets of the rich) would merely be registered at a foreign address and denominated in a different currency. A relatively small number of the rich own large stakes in national enterprises such as department-store chains (those Waltons again), or TV stations, that might be difficult to unwind or internationalise.

Aside from some short-term disruption the loss of the wealth of the rich would not make our society poorer. As I noted earlier, developed economies do not lack for capital; what the rich contribute to the economy is not investment but domination. An economy’s wealth - as opposed to an individual’s - relates to its efficiency in allocating its resources between competing projects so as to satisfy as many of the wants of its people as is technically possible. In the long term our economy’s productivity would be higher without the distorting influence of the rich, and, not coincidentally, the gains from that productivity would be more equally shared than they are now.

But I don’t think everyone would leave. After all, while tax avoidance is extremely popular among the rich, true tax exiles are somewhat rare. Democratic societies really are great places to live; plutocracies and autocracies really aren’t. (Even Russia’s oligarchs want to live in New York and London, and send their children to school there). I think that many rich people understand this, and would appreciate the benefits of democratic society even more if they were forced to make an explicit choice between continuing to live there or holding on to their money.

Another possible consequence is a decline in innovation and entrepreneurship—vital to the future growth of the economy. If the rewards for winning ‘the economic game’ became truncated at a few million dollars, would people stop trying so hard? Will there be no future economic revolutionaries like Bill Gates or Peter Thiel?

This argument seems to rest on the assumption that innovators are only motivated by the possibility of vast financial rewards. On the one hand, this seems false because innovation is just what free people do in the face of interesting or important problems, whether that be in literature, computer science, or logistics. On the other hand, it is true that many of those, like Bill Gates, who package up the technological breakthroughs of others into economically significant contributions are motivated by the hope of economic windfalls. And yet, how big does the reward have to be to motivate entrepreneurial innovation? Does it really have to be in the billions? Would no one write books anymore if they saw the wealth of (the British) JK Rowling capped at $63 million? Perhaps. Though I am sympa-
thetis to Adam Smith’s argument that what people are really seeking is the “respect and admiration of mankind” and that a swimming pool full of money is merely one way – a vulgar, inferior way – of achieving that.\textsuperscript{11}

Conclusion

My proposal, though quite serious, is obviously politically unfeasible in the face of the opposition of the rich. It is utopian. But utopian principles can nevertheless perform political service by introducing new normative benchmarks into political debate. (Consider the role that Nozickian libertarianism performs in the politics of taxation). Like the idea of the social contract, the idea of exiling the rich is expected to do its work hypothetically, via persuading people to imagine ‘What if...?’. It politises the issue of personal wealth in a new way - in terms of democratic citizenship - which may appeal to a different and perhaps larger and more ideologically mixed coalition of voters than alternative social-justice accounts such as egalitarianism and libertarianism do. It thereby places a new onus upon the rich to justify their place amongst us, to overcome our suspicions by proving their loyalty to the democratic values of our society, for example by acceding to less radical proposals such as Piketty’s progressive tax on wealth, or at least much greater restrictions on the mechanisms, such as political donations, that translate private wealth into public influence.

In this political perspective the very advantages of the rich are turned against them. The rich have been used to thinking of themselves as more equal than others in our society. Yet that power of command over others is exactly what puts the legitimacy of their place in our politics in question. They have been used to enjoying their independence from the rest of us, hardly mixing with ordinary people and hardly noticing the national borders they cross. Yet this very feature would legitimate and justify our ostracising them in turn. To the extent that the rich believe all their accomplishments came through their own efforts and they don’t need us for anything except property rights, we wouldn’t be doing them any harm by exiling them from our politics, or even literally exiling them to another country. By achieving such independence, the rich have brought upon themselves the burden of justifying why they should be allowed to remain amongst us. If you don’t need us, we can ask, why do we need you?\textsuperscript{12}

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———. 1776. An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations (WN). Edited by Campbell, R. H.,


1 See Peter Campbell (2013) for a discussion of the provenance of this quotation.


3 India has surprised many political theorists by maintaining democratic political institutions and ideals since independence (with one brief interlude in 1975-7). Yet the poverty of the overwhelming majority of India’s population translates into political powerlessness, an inability to make practical use of their theoretical democratic opportunities to address gross injustices. Hence the failure of India’s politics since independence to deal with problems like mass illiteracy and childhood malnourishment despite universal agreement about their importance. (See further, Drèze and Sen 2002 especially chapter 10).

4 According to reporting by Peter Schweizer (2012).

5 Of course not all the rich are concerned with furthering their own material interests through politics, or with furthering an ideology which rationalises those material interests (such as ‘tax libertarians’). Many seem to want to address genuine public interest challenges that regular politics neglects. For example, the Gates Foundation’s support for education reform in general and charter schools in particular. Still, these may be called political whimsies to the extent that it is the rich themselves who take it upon themselves to determine and act upon what the public interest requires by making changes to our public institutions. Whether these experiments turn out well or badly, by deliberately bypassing democratic politics they undermine it.

6 At one point Smith goes so far as to describe “those who live by profit” – i.e. capitalists - as “an order of men, whose interest is never exactly the same with that of the public, who have generally an interest to deceive and even to oppress the public, and who accordingly have, upon many occasions, both deceived and oppressed it.” (Smith 1776, I.11.264).

7 “The central point that emerges from our research is that economic elites and organized groups representing business interests have substantial independent impacts on
U.S. government policy, while mass-based interest groups and average citizens have little or no independent influence." (Gilens and Page 2014, 565). Obviously, this is not an original concern. See, among many others, Rawls' critique of welfare state capitalism in *Justice as Fairness* (Rawls 2001, 137–8).

8 And if they don’t think they would do just fine they are under no compulsion to leave. Their condition may be worse than before under this policy, but it remains greatly superior to their fellow non-rich citizens. The option set that includes a choice between having one hundred million dollars in exile or retaining citizenship and only $25 million remains superior to that of their fellow citizens - many might volunteer to be in their place. It is also superior to the choice offered to the rich by a taxation policy, such as Piketty’s, that attempts to achieve the same goal more gradually: pay a substantial proportion of your fortune to the government every year or go to jail.

9 The reader should put no great faith in the precision of figures produced by a wealth management firm (cf. Piketty 2014, 437). I resort to them because there is still a dearth of rigorous statistics about wealth (rather than income), especially those that attempt to calculate the median individual’s assets rather than that of households.

10 Indeed, many countries with relatively equal income distributions, such as Denmark and The Netherlands, exhibit surprisingly high wealth inequality.

11 See Smith’s other great book, the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), e.g., 1.3.29.
SINA TALACHIAN

BETWEEN UNIVERSALISM AND PARTICULARISM: MARX’S CONCEPTION OF REFORMISM IN HIS LATE THOUGHT

Introduction

There is an ongoing debate among those working in the Marxian tradition between strong universalists on the one side and those overly focused on the particular on the other. For example, in the field of Asian studies the former overemphasize the universal aspects of method and history – cutting across cultural boundaries – while the latter, subaltern, theorists tend to overemphasize the local and regional in their analyses (Chibber 2013: 26). In political philosophy and sociology universalists continue to stress the importance of universal categories like class, while those influenced by post-Marxism eschew them, considering them to be exemplars of a flawed, essentializing logic. Instead they emphasize the contingent in their analyses and point to the multifarious forms oppression and exploitation take which they believe cannot be captured by universal categories (Therborn 2008: 140-145). The debate strikes at the core of Marxist theory and method. By foregoing any sense of universality the Marxist project – with its distinct concepts, analytic tools and analyses – becomes mortally imperilled, while overemphasizing the universal endangers its explanatory power due to the overlooking or explicit discounting of the relevance of the local and variable (Chatterjee 2013: 73-74). In my view there is an alternative, contextualist approach possible, one which strikes a balance between the universal and particular without dismissing the importance of either. It is an approach which can be found in Karl Marx’s (1818-1883) late thought, which I aim to illuminate in this paper by explicating one specific, concrete expression of it: Marx’s late conception of reformism. It is not only an excellent illustration of the contextualist sensibility underlying Marx’s late thought, it also demonstrates that it was well-worked out theoretically rather than being a mere aberration. Moreover, it reveals how Marx sought to incorporate it within his already developed mature political theory, ensuring that it constituted a development from, rather than a break with, his earlier thought.

I will begin by explicating Marx’s various conceptions of reformism, with a focus on his late reformist turn, and then analyze the implications of this turn for his late thought so as to ascertain its place within it. After this analysis I will consider its implications for the two main schools of interpretation of Marx’s conception of reformism, the Leninist and humanist. In so doing I will offer a reading of Marx’s late conception of reformism which, by putting into focus Marx’s reformist turn and exploring its relation to his broader political theory in his later thought, will lead to a novel and better understanding of both, while through its textual accuracy also reveal serious shortcomings in the secondary literature concerning the topic. Moreover, by elucidating the nature of the contextualist approach of Marx’s late thought, whereby he sought to strike the right balance between an overly universalizing and overly particularistic methodological and theoretical outlook, I hope to contribute to the ongoing debate between universalists and particularists by offering an example of an alternative which rejects the overemphasizing of either at the expense of the necessary and balanced unity of both.

Marx’s early conceptions of, and later turn toward, reformism

The varying conceptions of reformism Marx expressed throughout his life can be divided into three general phases. The early, pure reformist phase,
limited in scope to the status quo of capitalist society, lasting until late
1843, early 1844; the second, absolutist revolutionary phase, characterized
by a rejection of reformism; and finally the third phase marked by Marx’s
turn toward reformism from 1870 onwards, characterized by a contextu-
alist approach that saw both reform and revolution as a viable means of
transition to communism, depending on the context (Lovell 2010: 51-60).1
I will examine how exactly Marx perceived the nature of reformism in
each of the three phases in turn, with a specific focus on the third.

Marx’s early conception of reformism

Before being drawn to revolutionary communism Marx wrote articles for
the Rheinische Zeitung, containing penetrating social analyses of society’s ills
such as poverty, and calling for reforms aimed at righting them. In an
1842 article typical of this early reformism he railed against the absurdities
of a law that was to be introduced in the Rhine province concerning the
thefts of wood. The poor, who had for centuries gathered wood unchal-
lenged, would by the introduction of this law be considered criminals.
Rather than punishing the poor who gather wood in order to survive,
argued Marx, the state should ensure that there are no poor, the products
of the ‘mere custom of civil society, a custom which has not found an appro-
priate place in the conscious organisation of the state’ (Marx 1976 [1842]:
235). This was to be done not by calling for a revolutionary transfor-
mation of society, but by appealing to the humanity and sense of justice of
legislators.

In this early phase Marx was still very much under the influence of Hegel,
who had posited a distinction between civil society (bürgische Gesellschaft)
and the state, with the former representing individual needs and self-
interest and the latter representing a force which transcends the egoism of
civil society and in its stead establishes norms which ensure true univer-
sality—the universal ruling over the particular. In this model the bureau-
cracy was considered to be the universal class, hence Marx’s appeals to
them (Avineri 1967: 37). In 1843 he began to move away from this position,
due in part to his increasing disillusionment with Hegelianism and its con-
servatism with respect to politics.

2 By 1844 the appeals to the universal reason of the bureaucracy had
turned into appeals for its dissolution by means of a social revolution,
which Marx deemed capable of so changing the circumstances that social
ills such as the above described would be alleviated.3 Hegel’s distinction
between the egoistic particularity of civil society and the altruistic univer-
sality of the state was denounced as a myth. In reality no such state as He-
gel posits exists, and the identification of the bureaucracy as the universal
class was flawed. Marx did not give up the notion of the universal class,
however; he merely relocated it to the proletariat. In so doing, he also re-
jected the distinction between civil society and the state, instead proposing
a model in which the proletariat, raised to the position of the ruling class,
would, due to its nature as the true universal class, dissolve any kind of
conflict in society at large. This would be the realization of a classless
communist society. This view marked the beginning of the middle phase
of Marx’s conception of reformism (Avineri 1968: 39).

The middle period

During the middle period Marx was advocating revolution as the primary
means of transition toward a post-capitalist society, often doing so by
formulating it as an absolute, universal principle and designating any de-
viation from it as reactionary. In this phase also, though, there are distin-
guishable degrees. From the beginning of the middle phase, that is, 1843-
1844, up until the beginning of the 1848 Revolutions those who believed in
reformism were not always denounced as reactionary, and a peaceful road
to communism was not rejected on principle (Marx 1976 [1847]: 229). In
the Principles of Communism, written in 1847 by Marx’s close co-thinker Fred-
erick Engels (1820-1895) with the approval of Marx for the Communist
League, those who believe in reform measures that are communistic in
nature yet do not believe in the violent transition to a post-capitalist socie-
ty are referred to as democratic socialists, whom ‘the communists will
have to come to an understanding with’, even though they ‘are not yet
sufficiently enlightened regarding the conditions of the emancipation of
their class’ (Engels 1976 [1847]: 356-357). They are considered to be potential allies. In the same text the possibility of a peaceful transition to communism is acknowledged, though Engels hastens to add: ‘(...) the development of the proletariat is in nearly every civilised country forcibly suppressed, and (...) thus the opponents of the Communists are working with all their might towards a revolution. Should the oppressed proletariat in the end be goaded into a revolution, we Communists will then defend the cause of the proletarians by deed just as well as we do now by word’ (Engels 1976 [1847]: 350-351). This came to pass three years later in 1850, when the category of democratic socialists was transformed into ‘petty-bourgeois democrats’, who ‘wish to bring the revolution to a conclusion as quickly as possible’ whereas communists aim to ‘make the revolution permanent, until (...) the proletariat has conquered state power’ (Marx and Engels 1976 [1850]: 282). The idea of a peaceful transition to communism all but disappeared from Marx’s writings.

What precipitated this shift toward revolutionary absolutism? It was due in part to the 1848 Revolutions and its aftermath. How Marx applied his materialist conception of history at this juncture clarifies the relation between the two. According to his materialist method of analysis, there were two kinds of conditions involved in allowing for a transition to communism, the objective and subjective. The objective conditions refer to factors related to the material environment – primarily the economic – which were considered a necessary but not sufficient condition for a communist transition. In order for such a transition to be effected, the subjective condition, which develops out of and is dialectically related to the objective, also had to be present. This subjective condition refers to the state of the class struggle, which at an advanced stage involves the existence of a workers’ movement indicating the presence of a high degree of class consciousness among the proletariat, the universal agent of revolutionary transformation. In Marx’s estimation, in the period after 1850 up to 1870 the nature of these conditions were such that a peaceful transition to communism was impossible, for any movement toward the establishment of universal suffrage – the mechanism by which a peaceful transition would be possible – was effectively blocked in the immediate wake of the 1848 Revolutions. Their crushing defeat and the emergence and entrenchment of autocratic regimes in the 1850’s and 1860’s dashed any hope for reformism (Hobsbawm 1995: 21-23). The only alternative that remained was revolution, and Marx was initially convinced, and later remained hopeful in the years following 1850, that the objective element was sufficiently developed to allow for the subjective element, the proletariat, to be sufficiently organized and class-conscious to take over state power in the major Continental nations via revolutionary means (Hollander 2010: 65).

Marx’s reformist turn

From 1870 onwards Marx began to systematically reassess his revolutionary absolutism and came to see the untenability of such a view in light of the failures and developments of the previous decades. The crux of his error lay not in his materialist method, he came to believe, but rather in his mistaken use of it with respect to his assessment of the existing objective and subjective conditions required for a transition to communism. The lack of organization on the part of the proletariat and its communist representatives, and the lack of development of the material conditions, i.e., the subjective and objective factors respectively, explained why the predicted proletarian revolution had not occurred. Moreover, developments in France, America and Russia made any kind of a priori, universal position regarding the transition period from capitalism to communism increasingly untenable as well. In the case of France and America suffrage and its progressive expansion was now on the immediate agenda, while with regard to Russia Marx began to appreciate the revolutionary potential of the peasant communes, as will be discussed in detail in the next section (Marx and Engels 1976 [1882]: 426-427). What also played a role, though more so for Engels who experienced these successes firsthand in the course of the 1880’s and 1890’s, was the spectacular growth of various socialist parties in Europe adhering to Marx’s vision of communism.

The period after 1870 marks the beginning of Marx’s turn toward reformism. This did not mean a reversion to the first pure reformist phase. Rather, this novel conception of reformism was systematically worked out by Marx based on his mature method and political theory, the relation-
ship between which will be discussed in detail in the next section. What
exactly was the nature of Marx’s conception of reform in this third phase?
While mentioning the possibility of England peacefully transitioning to
communism in an 1871 interview he clarified the underlying reason for it:
‘Combinations among workmen cannot be absolutely identical in detail
in Newcastle and in Barcelona, in London and in Berlin. In England, for
instance, the way to show political power lies open to the working class.
Insurrection would be madness where peaceful agitation would more
swiftly and surely do the work’ (Marx 1976 [1871b]: 603). Similarly he said
in his address to The Hague Congress of the First International a year lat-
er:

We do not assert that the attainment of [political supremacy of the work-
ers] requires identical means. We know that one has to take into consider-
ation the institutions, mores, and traditions of the different countries, and
we do not deny that there are countries, like England and America and if I
am familiar with your institutions, Holland, where labour may attain its
goal by peaceful means. But if this is true we also must recognize that in
most countries of the continent, violence must be the lever of revolution
(Gerth 1958: 236).

The same sentiment was expressed on other occasions. It is evident that
from 1870 onward Marx believed certain objective and subjective condi-
tions made a peaceful transition to communism possible, simply because
the class struggle did not take the same form everywhere. Which condi-
tions had to be fulfilled to allow for such a peaceful transition? The objec-
tive conditions that had to be met were the presence of suffrage, a sizeable
proletarian class and of a democratic tradition and institutions. This re-
quires a certain level of capitalist development, but it is not purely an eco-
nomic matter for other elements, such as the institutional-political, also
had to be present (Avineri 1968: 218). The subjective condition that had to
be met was simply the presence of a workers’ or communist movement,
regardless of size and strength. The most important factor was the mecha-
nism by which power was to be conquered peacefully—universal suf-
frage (Avineri 1976: 36-37). That is why from 1871 onward Marx believed
these conditions definitely existed in England, America, and perhaps also
the Netherlands, because there suffrage was being expanded to an ever
greater extent, allowing workers hitherto excluded from the political pro-
cess to take part in it in such a way as to allow the conquest of power by
means of it (Hollander 2010: 70-71). This is also evident in Marx’s reassess-
ment of the prospects for reformism in France. While in 1870 he contrast-
et it with the situation in England by arguing that in France ‘a hundred
laws of repression and a mortal antagonism between classes seem to ne-
cessitate the violent solution of social war’ (Marx 1976 [1871b]: 603), by 1880
conditions had so changed with respect to suffrage that he now believed it
was possible for the proletariat to transform it ‘from the instrument of
deception which it has been hitherto into an instrument of emancipation’
(Marx 1976 [1880a]: 341). The viability of reformism is therefore inextrica-
bly linked to suffrage, and more generally to the strength of a democratic
tradition, the existence of a sizeable proletarian class and of democratic
institutions, and the positive prospects for their progressive expansion in a
given nation.

A crucial aspect of Marx’s late conception of reformism was, therefore, its
contextualism. As previously noted, for Marx certain objective and subjec-
tive conditions dictated whether reform or revolution was to be pursued.
Only a proper, materialist analysis of the specific context – the objective
and subjective conditions of a specific nation – would determine the question
of reform or revolution. As will be seen in the next section, the contextu-
alist sensibility of Marx’s late conception of reformism was not a diver-
gence from Marx’s otherwise rigidly scientistic, universalist method and
theory, but merely one expression of an overall shift in his approach in his
late thought (Shanin 1983: 31). 2. Implications of the reformist turn for
Marx’s method and political theory, and interpretations thereof

There are several important conclusions to draw from Marx’s reformist
turn for his broader political theory and the method underlying it, as well
as the two main schools of interpretation of Marx’s conception of reform-
ism, the Leninist and humanist. First I will discuss what it indicates with
regard to his method, the materialist conception of history, and how ex-
actly it is related to it so as to better understand both. Then I will go over
the implications for his political theory, specifically his conception of the
state and the transition period, and, finally, I will analyze how it affects the
two main schools of interpretation of Marx’s conception of reformism.
The shift from Mechanism to Contextualism

Beginning with the methodological aspect, Marx’s turn toward reformism in his later life was part of a general shift toward sensitivity to contextuality in his later thought. It is key to understanding this novel approach in Marx’s later philosophy to be able to properly understand his later conception of reformism, for this was only one expression of a shift in his overall approach in his later life. In order to lay bare the exact nature of this shift it is helpful to make use of Hayden White’s work. In his detailed and influential analysis of argumentative strategies among the most important nineteenth-century historians and philosophers, White argues these are distinguishable in general tropes or categories, with the Mechanist and the Contextualist being two of them (White 1973: 16-18). Looking at the development in Marx’s method from his middle to late period through the lens of White’s concepts helps to elucidate its nature, for it displays a move from the Mechanist to the Contextualist, coinciding chronologically with the phases of Marx’s conception of reform in the middle and late period outlined in the previous section. In the writings of his middle period, from about 1843 to 1870, Marx generally displays Mechanist strategies of explanation, which ‘turns upon the search for the causal laws that determine the outcomes of processes discovered in the historical field’, while also searching for ‘the laws of historical process, when the term “laws” is construed in the sense of universal and invariant causal relationships’ (White 1973: 16-17). The methodology underlying this strategy – the kind of materialist conception of history Marx employed during this period – is characterized by a strong sense of universalism and economistic determinism (Shanin 1983: 4-5).

From 1870 onward, a shift takes place from the Mechanist to the Contextualist argumentative strategy. As discussed in the previous chapter, this was partly precipitated by the increasing awareness of the untenability of the strongly universalistic nature of his earlier analyses by anomalies appearing, such as the case of England with regard to the question of reformism and Russia with regard to his more general sketch of historical development, which will be discussed in more detail below (Wada 1981: 139-140). White describes the Contextualist strategy as denoting ‘a theory of truth and explanation represent[ing] a “functional” conception of the meaning or significance of events discerned in the historical field,’ and goes on to say: ‘The informing presupposition of Contextualism is that events can be explained by being set within the “context” of their occurrence. Why they occurred as they did is to be explained by the revelation of the specific relationships they bore to other events occurring in their circumambient historical space’ (White 1973: 17-18). Marx’s method was now characterized by a weak universalism, sensitive to the contingent nature of many aspects of development and local variations—it now possessed a contextualist sensibility hitherto overshadowed by a strong universalism. However, it is important to note that the Mechanist and Contextualist strategies are not mutually exclusive for White, nor do I read them as such. There were earlier writings of Marx, such as *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), which also displayed Contextualist strategies, and it would be wrong to suggest that Mechanist strategies were wholly absent from his later work. However, what is clearly discernable is a pronounced shift in his general method and theory from the Mechanist to the Contextualist in his late thought (Shanin 1981: 8-9).

Marx’s reformist turn was but one expression of this contextualist sensibility, but it can be clearly seen in other aspects of his thought as well. Take his *Capital* for example. In the 1857 preface, the laws of historical development Marx purports to have discovered, which inevitably would lead all societies to undergo the same development as occurred in Western Europe, are presented as natural laws, as universal as the law of gravity (Balibar 2007: 110). This changed in his later thought. Whereas before Marx’s method and theory was universal in scope, explicating a road which every society, regardless of local variations, invariably and by necessity had to follow, he now came to criticize such an approach. In a letter written to a Russian paper in 1877 criticizing a Russian interpreter of *Capital* who ascribed such a strongly universalistic, supra-historical aspect to his method – in line with his own statements to this effect in the 1859 Preface – Marx now insisted one must be sensitive to the particular as well as to the universal, calling for a contextual approach. Etienne Balibar notes the importance of this shift as well, contrasting it with the ‘economistic’ nature of his earlier thought. ‘There is no universal history, only singular histo-
ricities’ in his later thought, he argues (Balibar 2007: 110). This is true, but only up to a point.

As the reformist turn showed, there always remained some level of universalism to his overall method and theory, namely the employment of the materialist conception of history as a means to ascertain the best course for the realization of communism. The aim and the method, imbued with a contextual sensibility, were the main constants to remain in the late Marx’s thought. But what exactly did these consist of? As discussed in the previous chapter with respect to reformism, a certain set of necessary objective and subjective conditions had to be met before it was deemed viable, such as the existence of strong democratic traditions and institutions, developed capitalism and the sizeable proletarian class that comes with it, the presence of a workers’ movement, etc. The method consisted of ascertaining whether these elements exist or not, with a particular focus on the economic factor as the main determining component regulating the other aspects. As for the aim, that always remained the realization of a classless, communist society. However, both of these remaining universal aspects of Marx’s thought were, as said, imbued with a contextual sensibility. Perhaps the best exemplification of how Marx employed this contextualist method can be seen in the Russian case.

There, despotism ruled over a nation that was highly underdeveloped economically. Marx linked the two, considering the political superstructure to be the natural outgrowth of the economic base. In his Mechanist period this not only invalidated the possibility of a peaceful transition to communism, but any transition to communism at all, simply because the universal class, the proletariat – and the economic conditions which lead to its creation and development – was not sufficiently present to allow for such a transition to take place (Avineri 1968: 59-60). Russia had to first undergo capitalist development before communism could even be on the agenda for the foreseeable future. But this mechanistic reading gave way to a contextualist analysis in his later writings. In a series of letters written to the Russian revolutionary Vera Zasulich in the late 1870’s and early 1880’s, Marx discusses the possibility of the peasant communes in Russia – which he considered to be communistic in nature – allowing it to skip the capitalist phase of development and move directly toward communism (Wada 1981: 145-146).

Marx’s turn to reformism in his late thought is therefore not an aberration, nor did it have anything to do with a newly developed moral sensibility as some have argued (Linden 1988: 344). Rather, it was part of a more general methodological and theoretical shift in approach, from Mechanism - marked by a strong sense of universalism where the universal overshadowed the particular - to Contextualism, characterized by a weak sense of universalism, where there was a constant search for striking the right balance between the universal and the particular, giving the latter its due.

Implications for Marx’s political theory

I will now discuss the implications of the reformist turn for Marx’s broader political theory, specifically his view of the state and the transition period to communism. In order to ascertain the implications for his political theory of Marx’s reformist turn in his later life it is necessary to discuss his views of the state, for Marx’s varying conceptions of reformism are intimately bound up with his conception of the state, which in turn shapes his conception of the transition period. Marx considered the state, regardless of its specific form, as being an instrument of class rule – in capitalist society by the bourgeoisie – which had to be taken over by the proletariat in the course of the social revolution (Avineri 1968: 50). In 1871 Marx adjusted his conception of the state due to the experience of the Paris Commune. He now believed ‘the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes’ (Marx 1976 [1871a]: 329), but thought rather that the state has to be destroyed, and in its stead a commune state created, which, as Engels remarked, ‘had ceased to be a state in the true sense of the term’ (Engels 1976 [1875]: 65).

This is an important change of view in relation to his reformist turn, for if the conquest of power was no longer possible by utilizing the already existing institutions of the state but rather required its destruction, then how could Marx possibly posit the possibility of a peaceful takeover of
power and transition to communism? Lenin and his followers seized on this discrepancy to argue the untenability of viewing Marx as advocating any kind of peaceful transition, dismissing his later conception of reformism as the product of a momentary lapse of reason or purely motivated by tactical concerns, ensuring the safety of members of the First International (Lenin 1970 [1917]: 66-69). Both claims simply ignore the textual evidence to the contrary (Singh 1989: 18). It ignores the fact that Marx wrote in support of reformism outside that context as well, for example when referring to England where no persecution of members was taking place and after the First International had already disbanded (Marx 1976 [1880b]: 50-51). More importantly, it ignores Marx’s methodological shift to contextualism in his later writings, of which the reformist turn was but one expression. The opening up of Marx’s political and social philosophy in this respect in his late thought is crucial for understanding his novel conception of reform during this period.

How then does Marx’s late conception of reformism fit with his conception of the state in this late period of his political theory? The answer lies in the manner in which Marx in this period believed the takeover of power by the proletariat would take place in those nations he believed to be suitable for reform, and the subsequent actions it had to take to begin the transition to communism. He took on an integrationist approach to the question, believing that the bourgeois state in such societies could be taken over by the proletariat by democratic means, using the tool of suffrage, who would then institute policies that would cause its gradual disestablishment into a commune state along with other policies that would begin the transition to communism (Avineri 1976: 36-37). How exactly Marx believed this process to occur clearly comes to the fore in the list of demands and policies he formulated as necessary actions to be taken after the takeover of power and during the transition phase to communism.

Marx formulated these demands and policies in various stages throughout his life (Marx and Engels 1976 [1847-48]: 506). Of specific interest are the lists of demands he formulated in his later writings, after the reformist turn. Of these the electoral program he wrote for the French Workers’ Party in 1880 is most significant, as it shows how exactly he perceived his conception of reformism could be integrated into his theory of the commune state in a nation he considered to be ripe for a peaceful transition to communism. After the conquest of power of the proletariat through the use of universal suffrage, the bourgeois aspect of the already existing state machinery was to be disestablished through the gradual taking away of authority from its various institutions, most importantly the army, police and their concomitant ‘material adjuncts, prisons and institutions of coercion of all kinds’ (Engels 1976 [1884]: 271). Instead, the Commune was to have authority over its own police force and administration, while the standing army was to be disbanded and the working class armed (Marx 1976 [1880a]: 639). This last point is crucial because the army was considered to be central in Marx’s theory of the state, for the state’s authority rests on this force (Engels 1976 [1884]: 270-271). With the disestablishment of it and its transformation into a proletarian, Commune army, the bourgeois state would be transformed into a commune state—through gradual, peaceful rather than violent, revolutionary means. It is important to note that this analysis was not added to the program merely for propagandistic purposes, thought to be an unachievable aim that would draw support from workers for eventual revolutionary action. Jules Guesde, the leader of the French Workers’ Party for whom Marx wrote the program, did believe this. This led to a sharp conflict with Marx from which originated the well-known phrase: ‘Ce qu’il y a de certain c’est que moi, je ne suis pas Marxiste’ (If anything is certain, it is that I myself am not a Marxist). Moreover, it was not an isolated analysis, for the transition was thought to occur similarly in places like England (Avineri 1976: 36-37).

Finally, there is the issue of the dictatorship of the proletariat, which Marx believed constituted the transition period from capitalism to communism. Leninist interpreters have argued that the establishment of a dictatorship is incompatible with a peaceful takeover of power, for if such a peaceful road were possible, no dictatorship would be required to obtain and maintain it during the transitional period (Lenin 1970 [1917]: 24-25). The error lies in the semantics of the phrase ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ as used by Marx and as later distorted by Lenin and his followers. As Avineri notes, Marx used the phrase very rarely, and when he did, it was solely to denote ‘the class nature of political rule, not to the way in which any form of government is being carried out’ (1976: 38). For Marx, any form of political rule was dictatorial, making any state, regardless of form,
a class dictatorship by default. The dictatorship of the proletariat does not refer to the form of the state, but merely to its class basis, which has no bearing on the possibility of a peaceful transition to such a state, which he clearly did believe was possible, as shown above. Therefore the aim of communism was not to simply replace the bourgeois state with the proletarian state, but to ensure the withering away of the state altogether. Lenin gave the term a new meaning, denoting dictatorial policies aimed at curbing rights Marx always remained in favor of and a specific, dictatorial form of government (Avineri 1976: 39).

So rather than his late conception of reformism being irreconcilable with the political theory of his late thought, Marx actively sought an integration of it by reformulating how he perceived the process of the conquest of power in those societies ripe for a peaceful transition to communism. The artificial dichotomy posed between the taking over of the state and the smashing of it is – like the dichotomy posed between reform and revolution – a product of Leninist interpretations of Marx, not of Marx’s political theory in his late thought.

Implications for interpretations of Marx’s conception of reformism

There are, broadly speaking, two schools of interpretation in the secondary literature concerning Marx’s conception of reformism which are on opposite sides of the falsely posed dichotomy between reform or revolution. There is the Leninist school of interpretation – of which Althusser was a prominent proponent – which views Marx’s mature political theory as always having been centered on the absolute rejection of a peaceful transition to communism and an embracing of a violent, revolutionary path to this end (Gilbert 1976: 10-11). Concomitantly it rejects the view that Marx’s late thought was characterized by a contextualist sensibility, instead perceiving it as strictly positivistic and mechanistic (Althusser 1969: 10-11). Key to this interpretation is a specific methodology of intellectual history which rejects any kind of eclectic appraisal of Marx’s thought which maintains that it did not consist of a singular essence remaining static throughout most of his life but instead underwent shifts and changes in focus, particularly in his earlier humanist writings and his later thought as explicated above (Kolakowski 1971: 115-116, 124). Instead, Althusser posited that Marx’s thought can be divided into two – the Young and Mature Marx – separated by an epistemological break. The Young Marx was still very much under the influence of Hegelian idealism, while the mature Marx was consistently scientific. Moreover, while the Young Marx was imbued with all kinds of false hopes about the potentials of reformism, the Mature Marx had left these illusions behind, rejecting any possibility for a peaceful transition to communism. Althusser and other Leninist interpreters universalize this version of Marx’s conception of reformism (Althusser 1969: 77). The problem with such an interpretation is that it overlooks the complexity of Marx’s thought, which was clearly not as static and strongly universalistic as the Leninist interpreters claim, as evidenced, for example, by his reformist turn and the broader shift in methodology and theory of which it was a part, that occurred in his late thought as explicated in detail above (Smith 1989: 499).

The humanist school of interpretation, of which Avineri is a prominent proponent, takes the opposite view, considering Marx’s late political theory to be characterized by a strong adherence to reformism and a denial of the viability of a revolutionary transformation of society (Avineri 1976: 35). In terms of method humanist interpreters take a different approach as well. One cannot make a strict division between a Young and Mature Marx, they argue, for the two overlap in crucial respects. However, the Young, humanistic Marx eschewing determinism has to be seen as the core of Marx’s thought for it chronologically preceded his Mature, scientific period and returned to prominence in his later thought (Althusser 1969: 56-57). While the humanists are more sensitive to the variations in Marx’s political theory and conceptions of reformism, they also follow the dichotomous approach of the Leninists by universalizing its humanistic, reformist aspects (Leogrande 1977: 129). Avineri denies that Marx continued to advocate a violent revolution as a means to transition to communism depending on the objective and subjective conditions. Instead, he argues, Marx believed a transition to communism to be impossible in these nations given their underdeveloped nature, for the presence of the requisite objective and social conditions for a proletarian conquest of power would make violent revolution superfluous (Avineri 1968: 217-218).
ignores Marx’s continued belief that a revolutionary transition to communism was not only possible but necessary in nations lacking certain objective and subjective conditions that would allow for a peaceful transition, such as the presence of suffrage and developed democratic traditions and institutions. More importantly, it ignores Marx’s belief in his late thought that even underdeveloped nations could make the transition to communism, as the Russian case clearly shows. By ignoring this crucial aspect of Marx’s late thought and the method that underlies it—its contextualist sensibility—Avineri and other humanists erroneously read a strong sense of economic determinism in him, believing that Marx only considered those nations sufficiently developed to allow for a peaceful transition to communism to be ready for it (Gilbert 1976: 15). The Leninists turn Marx into an ‘alchemist of revolution’ and the humanists turn him into a contemporary reformist social-democrat—while in fact he was neither.

Conclusion

After 1870 Marx became convinced that a peaceful transition to communism was possible as long as certain objective and subjective conditions were present. The required objective conditions were the existence of a strong proletarian class, which assumes a high degree of capitalist development, and the existence of a strong democratic tradition and political institutions, denoted in part by suffrage and its possible expansion by peaceful agitation and organization on the part of the organized proletariat. The subjective condition was the presence of an organized workers’ or communist movement. These conditions being present, any agitation for a revolution would not only be unnecessary, but even counterproductive and foolish. Nevertheless, this conception of reformism did not displace Marx’s conviction that a revolutionary path to communism was not only possible but a necessity in nations lacking these conditions (Singh 1989: 18).

However, Marx’s reformist turn was not an isolated aberration from an otherwise static methodology and political theory. Rather, it was precipitated by a shift in his overall approach in his late thought, characterized by the abandoning of a strong emphasis on the universal with its ignoring of the particular. Instead he sought to strike the right balance between the two by retaining certain universal concepts (e.g., emphasizing the economic factor in analyses and belief in the necessity of communism) while also giving the local and the contingent their due. Moreover, instead of ignoring possible conflicts with his earlier views regarding the nature of the state and the transition period to communism, Marx actively sought to integrate his novel conception of reformism within his broader political theory. The dichotomous approach regarding the question of reform or revolution, read into Marx by both Leninist and humanist interpreters, was by this point alien to Marx’s method and theory (Shanin 1983: 6-8 and Balibar 2007: 110). This reading of Marx’s reformist turn not only accurately reflects the textual evidence but also, more importantly, fits the more general shift that took place in Marx’s thought during his later life.

But what value does Marx’s later conception of reformism have for Marxists today, if any? After all, his predictions about a peaceful transition to communism have been proven wrong by history, and while the revolutionary alternative has also not fared well, does this not point to its obsolescence? The valuable lesson to learn from Marx’s reformist turn lies in its relation to Marx’s more general method and political theory in his late thought of which it was only one manifestation.18 His move away from dogmatism and scientism toward a contextualist approach eschewing strongly universalizing analyses which neglect or discount local variations and contingencies, is a methodological approach that those working in the Marxian tradition today would do well to heed in order to avoid the kind of universalizing logic that still plagues much of the tradition (Chatterjee 2013: 73-74), while preserving universal concepts and categories like class which provide contemporary Marxism with much of its analytic value and explanatory power (Chibber 2013: XI-XII).

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References


1 By communism I refer to Marx’s general usage of the term denoting the first stage of communist society, which the Second International tradition often referred to as socialism. The ‘higher phase’ of communism refers to when the state which still exists in some form in the first phase – also referred to as the dictatorship of the proletariat – has ‘withered away’ (Lenin 1970 [1917]: 109-114).

2 Marx’s *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* (1843) marked the beginning of the break with Hegel’s political philosophy. While already paying attention to these factors in his earlier articles, Marx now focused on private property and capitalism as the main source of contradiction in political relations in modern society and the state, which would soon lead him to embrace communism (Teeple 1984: 96-97).

3 ‘But socialism cannot be realised without revolution. It needs this political act insofar as it needs destruction and dissolution’ (Marx 1976 [1844]: 203, 206).

4 Being dialectically related to in this context means that it is not only acted upon by the objective conditions, but also acts upon these conditions in turn, i.e., there is a reciprocal relationship between the two, although the objective is considered to be fundamental, giving rise to the subjective. After all, without capitalist relations of production there would be no proletariat to engage in class struggle and possess class consciousness to begin with. Shlomo Avineri aptly expresses the relationship between the two in Marx’s method as follows: ‘(...) it tries to focus on the juncture where the objective economic conditions coalesce with the subjective element of will as expressed in class consciousness’ (1976: 41).

5 The only exception to this revolutionary absolutism, which precipitated the substantive contextualism of Marx’s method in his later life, was his view of England. There the situation with respect to the objective and subjective conditions for the transition to communism was different entirely, for there the objective and subjective conditions for reform clearly were present. In terms of material conditions, capitalism was highly developed there, making the proletariat the majority class. With regard to the subjective factor there was the proletarian Chartist movement. Hence Marx wrote in 1852: ‘The carrying of Universal Suffrage in England would, therefore, be a far more socialistic measure than anything which has been honored with that name on the Continent. Its inevitable result, here, is the political supremacy of the working class’ (Marx 1976 [1852]: 336-337).

6 Formed in 1875 through a union between two socialist parties (Hollander 2010: 72-73).

7 For example, in 1880 he wrote in a letter: ‘If you say that you do not share the views of my party for England I can only reply that that party considers an English revolution not necessary, but – according to historic precedents – possible. If the unavoidable evolution turns into a revolution, it would not only be the fault of the ruling classes, but also of the working class. Every pacific concession of the former has been wrung from them by pressure from without’. Their action kept pace with that pressure and if the latter has more and more weakened, it is only because the English working class know not how to wield their power and use their liberties, both of which they possess legally’ (Marx 1976 [1880b]: 50).
In the 1880 letter Marx states that England is ripe for a peaceful transition even though he also notes the weakness of the workers' movement there during the same period (Marx 1976 [1880b]: 50-51).

Engels would expand on this reformist turn of Marx by including Germany in the list of nations ripe for a peaceful transition to communism through election of the Socialist Workers' Party of Germany (Sozialistische Arbeiterpartei Deutschlands, SAPD). This led some interpreters to mistakenly believe Engels broke from Marx's revolutionary stance during this late period, but as has been shown, the same conception of reformism was already present in Marx's later writings. There is therefore continuity rather than a break between the two thinkers in this respect (Hollander 2011: 219).

In his own analysis of Marx in *Metahistory*, White identifies a tension between the two strategies running through his writings – constituting his dialectical method – but fails to take into account this shift, nor does he distinguish between which of the two tended to predominate in a given period (White 1973: 285-286, 310, 328). Rather, Marx's thought is referred to in the singular, which leads one to believe White falls victim to what Quentin Skinner has described as the Mythology of Coherence, the assumption that there is some kind of coherence to be found in the works of a thinker that has to be brought out by interpretation (Skinner 1969: 16). It is therefore not surprising that Marx's late thought is not discussed at all in White's analysis.

But this is too little for my critic. It is absolutely necessary for him to metamorphose my historical sketch of the genesis of capitalism in Western Europe into a historico-philosophical theory of general development, imposed by fate on all peoples, whatever the historical circumstances in which they are placed, in order to eventually attain this economic formation which, with a tremendous leap of the productive forces of social labour, assures the most integral development of every individual producer. But I beg his pardon. This does me too much honour, and yet puts me to shame at the same time. (&) events strikingly analogous, but occurring in different historical milieu [referring to the developments in Ancient Rome and America], led to quite disparate results. By studying each of these evolutions on its own, and then comparing them, one will easily discover the key to the phenomenon, but it will never be arrived at by employing the all-purpose formula of a general historico-philosophical theory whose supreme virtue consists in being supra-historical’ (Marx 1976 [1877]: 201-202).

Balibar goes on to argue that Marx's anti-universalist shift in his later life contradicted much of his earlier philosophy, which he never set out to resolve. It is undoubtedly true that the more contextually attuned and open nature of Marx's later writings contrasts rather sharply with the positivistic certainty imbuing his earlier work, but this should not perturb interpreters, as it did not perturb Marx himself. The search for a balance between the universal and the particular which Marx began in earnest in his later writings (it would be wrong to view it as being solely or even primarily focused on the particular) should rather be seen as being intrinsic to Marx's mature method and theory, indicating a development from, rather than break with, his earlier thought (Shanin 1983: 5-6).

The same sentiment was expressed in the 1883 preface to the second Russian edition of the *Communist Manifesto*: ‘(...) can the Russian obshchina [village community], a form of primeval common ownership of land, even if greatly undermined, pass directly to the higher form of communist common ownership? Or must it, conversely, first pass through the same process of dissolution as constitutes the historical development of the West? The only answer possible today is this: If the Russian Revolution becomes the signal for a proletarian revolution in the West, so that the two complement each other, the present Russian common ownership of land may serve as the starting point for communist development’ (Marx and Engels 1976 [1882]: 427).

Marx also postulated the existence of a Bonapartist type of state, ‘a form of regime in capitalist society in which the executive part of the state, under the rule of one individual, achieves dictatorial power over all other parts of the state, and over society. Bonapartism thus constitutes an extreme manifestation of what, in recent Marxist writing on the state, has been called its “relative autonomy”’. But this has no significance for the present discussion (Bottomore 2001: 55).

It was written after Marx's critique of the Gotha program in 1875, which he criticized for being overly reformist. Moreover, Engels later suggested the program of the French Workers' Party to be considered by the German SAPD in their Erfurt program of 1891 which was meant to replace the Gotha program, referring to it as 'a masterpiece of cogent argumentation rarely encountered' (Engels 1975 [1881]: 312).
16 Guesde hoped the failure of the program would ‘free the proletariat of its last reformist illusions and convince it of the impossibility of avoiding a workers’ 89’ (Moss 1980: 107).

17 According to Engels, Marx said this to his son-in-law Lafargue in reference to his disagreement with Guesde and other leaders of the French Workers’ Party (Engels 1976 [1882]: p. 357).

18 Georg Lukács’ formulated this sentiment best: ‘Orthodox Marxism (...) does not imply the uncritical acceptance of the results of Marx’s investigations. It is not the ‘belief’ in this or that thesis, nor the exegesis of a ‘sacred’ book. On the contrary, orthodoxy refers exclusively to method’ (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 1).
Published five hundred years ago in 1516, Thomas More’s *Utopia* would become the founding text of the utopian tradition. Ever since, a scholarly debate has ensued on whether *Utopia* should be read as satire, or as a detailed blueprint for a new society. The discussion has implications that stretch far beyond the text itself. More’s *Utopia* functions as a platform from which to gauge the merits of utopian thought and intellectual engagement as such. Does utopianism necessarily lead to violence and totalitarianism? Do utopian ideas need to end ‘in a miserable fit of the blues’, as Marx once famously wrote? Is it possible to transform society on the basis of ideas? What role can intellectuals play in politics? Following in the footsteps of anti-utopian thinkers such as Karl Popper, Isaiah Berlin and John Gray, the influential Dutch philosopher Hans Achterhuis has formulated forceful answers to these questions. In his view, More’s *Utopia* has carved a path that subsequent generations of utopian thinkers have been forced to follow, often against their will; a path that has inexorably lead to the modern totalitarian regimes of Stalin, Mao and the Khmer Rouge. The dismissal of societal alternatives, as theorized by Achterhuis, became a defining feature of the post-political culture in the Netherlands after 1989, the year that Wim Kok, leader of the social democrat party (PvdA), renounced its ‘striving towards the Grand Aim’. Though there is no final resolution to be reached on the interpretation of More’s *Utopia* - which remains an enigmatic book - there are convincing arguments to approach it as a semi-serious, semi-satirical text in the genre of serio ludere. In this tradition, utopia should be understood not as a blueprint to be implemented in its detailed totality, but an unstable and unrealizable image of the future that serves to critique the present, while having some fun in the process, too.

‘Utopia is on the horizon. When I walk two steps, it takes two steps back; I walk another ten steps, and it recedes ten steps further. As much as I may walk, I will never reach it. So what is utopia for? The point is this, to keep on walking.’

Eduardo Galeano, *Walking Words*

‘If we are to believe the discourse of the wise, our fin de siècle is the finally conquered age of realism. We have buried Marxism and swept aside all utopias. We have even buried the thing that made them possible: the belief that time carried a meaning and a promise [...] The thinkers who have made it their specialty to remind us without respite of the century’s horrors also explain to us relentlessly that they all stem from one fundamental crime. The crime is to have believed that history had a meaning and that it fell to the world’s peoples to realize it.’

Jacques Rancière, *Chronicles of Consensual Times*

The intellectual debate on utopian thought has long been dominated by a series of scholars – such as Karl Popper, Hannah Arendt, John Gray, Hans Achterhuis - who have described utopianism as a one-way ticket to totalitarianism. The classic case against utopianism has been made by the liberal philosopher Karl Popper. As explained in his famous *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945), and more at length in *The Poverty of Historicism* (1957/1944) and *Utopia and Violence* (1963), Karl Popper sees utopianism as an approach whereby one must first determine the ultimate political aim, or the Ideal State, before taking any practical action. Only when this ultimate aim is determined, in rough outline at least, only when we are in possession of something like a blue-
print of the society at which we aim, only then can we begin to consider the best ways and means for its realization, and to draw up a plan for political action.’ (Popper 1945: 167).

Another defining characteristic of utopianism is its holism: ‘the desire to build a world which is not only a little better and more rational than ours, but which is free from all its ugliness: not a crazy quilt, and old garment badly patched, but an entirely new gown, a really beautiful world.’ (Popper 1945: 174). This approach, called ‘Utopian engineering’ by Popper, necessarily demands a ‘strong centralized rule of the few’ and is therefore ‘likely to lead to dictatorship’ (Popper 1945: 169). Since there is no rational or scientific way to determine what the ideal is that society should move towards, the differences of opinion on these matters take on the character of religious disputes, on which no compromise is possible. ‘Any difference of opinion between Utopian engineers must therefore lead, in the absence of rational methods, to the use of power instead of reason, i.e. to violence.’ (Popper 1945: 171). As an alternative, Popper proposed piecemeal engineering – small scale experiments, trial and error - of politics as a condition for the development of an ‘open society’. Unlike the Utopian engineer, the piecemeal engineer does not strive towards the establishment of a future ideal; his or her concerns lie wholly in the present.

Popper’s critique of utopian thought, and his reduction of politics to scientific rationalism in the here and now, provided the philosophical basis for the turn towards the technocracy of the post-political era, culminating in Fukuyama’s claim of the ‘end of history’. In the Netherlands, the rejection of utopian thought – inspired by Popper - was a key element in the development of the Dutch Third Way and the early shift of Dutch social democracy towards a centrist, technocratic and pragmatic politics. That era was inaugurated in 1989 by Wim Kok, the leader of the social democrat party (PvdA), who distanced himself from the ‘striving towards the Grand Aim’. With remarkable similitude to Margaret Thatcher’s famous dictum – There Is No Alternative (TINA) – Kok stated: ‘We no longer speak of a Vision or The Alternative of the PvdA. […] There is no alternative for the societal constellation we have now and therefore it’s no use to aim for that’ (cited in Marijnissen 2009: 36). This shift was motivated by a critique of utopian thought.

One year before, in 1988, Paul Kalma, the soon-to-be director of the scientific bureau of the Dutch social democrat party, had written a searing indictment of socialist ideology. In the ground-breaking essay Socialisme op Sterk Water (Socialism in Formaldehyde), Kalma pleaded for a definite departure from traditional socialist ideology, understood as the utopian desire for radical transformation of society. Following Popper’s argument, social democracy had to become an enemy of utopia and defend the ‘open society’ against the ‘closed society’ that utopian thought aimed for. (Ironically, for Kalma the ‘closed society’ is based on the idea of an end-stage of history, a harmonious society where all conflict has disappeared; it is eerily similar to the end-of-history thesis as developed by Fukuyama.) A ‘minimal socialism’ should arise without the pretension of being able to develop or realise ‘a general vision of man and society’ (Kalma 1988: 21). In 1995, Wim Kok held his famous Den Uyl lecture, where he spoke of the ‘liberating experience of shedding the ideological feathers’ (Kok 1995). Only to add that in 1995, the severing of ties had been as good as completed.

As is often the case, the most extensive theoretical elaboration of this shift only came after the fact. At the end of the 1990’s Hans Achterhuis developed a still widely acclaimed critique of utopian thought, inspired by the ideas of Popper. The work of Achterhuis thus became the main intellectual expression of the anti-utopian turn in Dutch politics. According to Achterhuis ‘utopian thought has, from the very beginning, tried to prevent the emergence of an open society, in refined ways.’ (Achterhuis 1998: 117).

I believe that statement to be false. In fact, there is much to be said for the opposite argument: that the open society has been inaugurated by utopian thought. The democratic revolutions in the U.S., in France and the Netherlands were inspired by the republican ideals as articulated in the work of More and Rousseau (Rutjes 2012, Venturi 1971).

Internationally, thinkers such as Fredric Jameson, Terry Eagleton and
Russel Jacoby have proposed a reassessment of utopian thought. While utopia as a blueprint is generally seen as problematic by these authors, the reappraisal concerns the iconoclastic form of utopian thought that primarily functions as a critique of the status quo instead of a master plan for the future. In the words of Eagleton: ‘Bad Utopia persuades us to desire the unfeasible, and so, like the neurotic, to fall ill of longing, whereas the only authentic image of the future is, in the end, the failure of the present.’ (Eagleton 2000, p34). Similarly, in the Netherlands, a reassessment of utopian thought is underway. Willem Schinkel writes of ‘a need to hold on to a utopian horizon, without ever making the dangerous claim of realising utopia.’ (Schinkel 2012: 24). Laeyendecker (2013: 423-431) has written an impressive encyclopaedic defence of utopia as a form of societal critique. And the journalist Rutger Bregman (2014: 386) argues for ‘utopian iconoclasm’.

Motivated by a similar spirit as the defenders of iconoclastic utopianism mentioned above, I aim to show that the critique of utopian thought as developed by Hans Achterhuis is based on a deterministic and ultimately untenable interpretation of the utopian tradition, and a flawed and reductive conception of utopia as blueprint. What follows is a critical revision of the critique of utopian thought popularized by Achterhuis, leading us all the way back to the foundational text of the utopian tradition: Thomas More’s *Utopia*, published in 1516. On closer examination, this foundational text turns out be much more in keeping with the idea of utopia as critique, than that of utopia as a complete blueprint.

I. Utopia on Trial

The philosopher Hans Achterhuis, a long-time holder of the Dutch honorary title ‘Thinker of the Fatherland’, is one of the most widely read political thinkers of the Netherlands. In many ways, his biography is that of an entire generation. After receiving a doctoral degree in theology in 1967, Achterhuis worked for the global deaconate, the international department of the Dutch Reformed Church, where he became radicalised and left after a conflict with the leadership. As for many of his generation, leftist politics was not only a break, but also a secular continuation of his previous beliefs. As a young radical, he wrote books on Apartheid in South Africa (*The Revolution Postponed*, 1973) and the ideas of anti-colonial figures such as Frantz Fanon, Che Guevara, Paulo Freire, Ivan Illich and Mao Tse-Toeng (*Philosophers of the Third World*, 1975). Experiencing a crisis of leftist faith, from the late seventies onwards Achterhuis developed into the single most prominent intellectual critic of the social movements of the sixties and seventies. Combining leftist critiques of the state (Foucault) and philosophical conservatism, in 1979 he published his now classic critique of social work as an institution that fosters dependency (*The Market of Welfare and Happiness*, 1979). But the repudiation of his former leftist beliefs is most poignantly expressed in his critique of utopian thought, which has been a central theme in his intellectual career. It led to books such as *De Erfenis van de Utopie* (*The Legacy of Utopia*, 1998), *Utopie* (*Utopia*, 2006) and finally *De Utopie van de Vrije Markt* (*The Utopia of the Free Market*, 2010), which portrays neoliberalism as another utopian belief system that Achterhuis, seduced by its persuasive power, had overlooked in his earlier work.

In *De Erfenis van de Utopie*, his most extensive study of utopian thought, Achterhuis defines utopian thought by way of three family traits:

1. Social engineering, the idea that human nature and the natural world can be rationally given (a new) shape and controlled.
2. The idea of community, implying the subservience of the individual to society.
3. Holism or totality of the societal experiment. There is a blueprint or master-plan with a detailed image of a future society: the whole of society needs to be configured and controlled, implying a total break with the past.

On the basis of this holism – taken from Karl Popper - Achterhuis objects to interpretations of utopian thought that seek to ‘take away useful elements’ or ‘inspiring ideas’. One either has to reject utopian thought in its entirety, or accept it as a whole, in its uttermost detail, with all of its trou-
bling ingredients. According to Achterhuis, ‘the utopians explicitly oppose, starting with More, the reformism that seeks to improve certain elements or apply loose ideas. Partial improvements are for the right-minded utopian out of the question.’ (1998: 19).

Next to these three characteristics, More’s *Utopia* itself is the central foundation stone on which the critique of utopia rests, which Achterhuis seeks to develop in *De Erfenis van de Utopie*. The analysis departs from the ‘simple fact that both the concept as the phenomenon ‘utopia’ saw light of day in 1516’ (14), when More’s *Utopia* was published. ‘Almost all later developments and problems of utopian thought are present here, in condensed form’ (16). ‘Who is unfamiliar with these sources,’ Achterhuis goes on to state, ‘whoever ignores or denies their existence, does not speak of utopia, but merely their own fantasies and projections.’ (16). More’s *Utopia* is ‘decisive’ (19) for his perspective on utopianism. ‘In this book More has thought through utopian discourse to its logical conclusions.’ (32).

Here it becomes necessary to present some basic information on the content of More’s *Utopia*. It consists of two parts. In Book I, More introduces himself and his (really existing) friend Peter Giles and recounts his first acquaintance with the (fictitious) traveller Raphael Hythloday. What follows is a description of the discussions they have on how society could best be governed and whether intellectuals (in this case: humanist scholars) can fruitfully engage with politics, as advisors to rulers. At the end of the discussions in Book I, Raphael proposes to tell More and his companion Giles of his experiences on the island Utopia. The second book is the detailed exposition of the nature and customs of Utopian society, as told by Raphael to More and Giles. Naturally, the narrator Raphael Hythloday is a literary device, a fictitious figure employed by More to present certain ideas - which were deemed quite radical at the time - without having to take responsibility for them.

The island of Utopia that Hythloday describes in Book II is in some aspects a very desirable place, certainly when compared to sixteenth-century Europe. In Utopia, socio-economic equality is the norm, since there is no private property. Nobody goes hungry and there is no homelessness. Utopians have a six-hour working day and everybody gets to do the job they like most. There are limited forms of democracy: if a tyrant takes control of political power, the Utopians can dispose of him. There is universal education and healthcare. And there is a policy of religious tolerance. On the other hand, Utopian society is highly restrictive of personal freedom. Children can be transferred from one family to another, or one location to another, to maintain optimum population levels. Leisure is strictly regulated, and people are not allowed to amuse themselves in wine bars, alehouses or brothels. Utopia also features slaves, who take care of the dirty jobs no one is willing to do. Free citizens of Utopia can be condemned to slavery if they disobey the rules. What’s more, each family is led and controlled by an elderly patriarch, and women are supposed to serve their men. Also, Utopians feel entitled to colonize foreign lands that are not cultivated and to violently subdue its indigenous population if necessary.

In some aspects – slavery, patriarchy, and colonial violence – Utopia is not unlike sixteenth-century Europe. In other aspects, Utopia anticipates some of the accomplishments of modern welfare states. And again in further aspects, the highly organized and omnipresent nature of the state in Utopia reminds us of twentieth-century totalitarian regimes. Here the much-debated question arises as to whether More himself saw Utopia as an ideal society. All in all, More’s Utopia is a complex text whose meaning is not immediately transparent to the reader.

The discussions in Book I are generally perceived as key to understanding what More sought to achieve with Book II, Raphael’s description of the nature and customs of Utopia. Likewise, Achterhuis bases his interpretation of *Utopia* on an analysis of a dialogue in Book I, where More argues for a politics of the lesser evil. The good life as such is unachievable, the character More says to Hythloday. It will never be ideal, as long as humanity isn’t ideal. Raphael Hythloday then responds by saying that humanity can be improved, as is shown by the island Utopia, which exists in reality. For Achterhuis, this is the single most important proof that in the utopian tradition, utopia is not some unattainable idea, ‘it is more than a Platonic idea for the philosopher to consider’ (50). *Utopia* needs to be taken literally, as a blueprint for a new society, intended to be implemented in its detailed entirety: ‘More’s Utopia shows that utopia is feasible in reality, and Raph-
ael’s answer to More has been so convincing to its readers that they im-
mediately set out to realize it in uttermost detail.’ (68)².

As Achterhuis reluctantly acknowledges, his interpretation is somewhat
complicated by the fact that More distances himself at various points in
the text from Raphael’s description of Utopia. First of all by using the
word utopia itself: the term is an invention of Thomas More, a combina-
tion of the Greek οὐ (‘not’) and τόπος (‘place’) meaning ‘no place’. It’s a
play of words, a pun on the word eutopia, derived from the Greek εὖ
(‘good’ or ‘well’) and τόπος (‘place’), which means ‘good place’. The pro-
nunciation of the two words is similar, leading to confusion, which was
undoubtedly More’s intention. Secondly, the name More has chosen for
his narrator is Raphael Hythloday. The surname is derived from the
Greek word Huthlos, used frequently by Plato, and the name translates as
peddler of nonsense or idle talk. His Christian name, Raphael, stems from
the Archangel Raphael who gives sight to the blind and guides the lost.

What then, is More trying to tell us? In the introduction, More suggests to
the reader how to approach the stories told by Raphael Hythloday: ‘While
he told us many ill-considered usages in these newfound nations, he also
described quite a few other customs from which our own cities, nations,
races and kingdoms might take lessons in order to correct their errors.’
(Logan & Adams 1989: 12). In the concluding passage of Book II, More
gives another final clue to his readers. Describing the laws and customs of
Utopians as ‘really absurd’, More concludes: ‘while I can hardly agree with
everything he [Hythloday] said (though he is a man of unquestionable
learning and enormous experience of human affairs), yet I freely confess
that in the Utopian commonwealth there are very many features that in
our own society I would wish rather than expect to see.’ (Logan & Adams

Here Thomas More suggests an approach to Utopia that Hans Achterhuis
has explicitly rejected (by referring to More) namely ‘the reformism that
seeks to improve certain elements or apply loose ideas’. The way Achter-
huis seeks to circumvent this problem is by separating the text from its
author, and by attributing the text with an agency of its own:

‘For me the greatness and genius of More, lie in the unrelenting logic with
which he systematically explores the reality of Utopia. That he, in reality
continuously distances himself from it, by means of irony or the posing of
critical questions to Hythloday, the narrator of the story, is of great im-
portance for judging his personality. The rigorous logic of the utopian
system that would come to captivate many after More, is not affected by

The text, in other words, escapes the control of its author. Achterhuis
defends this peculiar perspective on the analysis of texts by taking re-
course to a rather eccentric interpretation of Foucault’s discourse theory.
According to Achterhuis, discourse theory implies that ‘individual mo-
tives and intentions are not the deciding factor, when looking at the ma-
terial effects of a text’ (35). While that is a commonly accepted insight of
the history of ideas, Achterhuis gives it a particular deterministic twist.
When people are born, he states, they enter into an existing discursive or-
der, which is already present before their birth, and will continue to exist
after their death. Similarly, philosophers have no choice but to attach
themselves to - and immerse themselves in - existing discourses, they are
always preceded by a nameless voice, in whose narrative they enmesh
themselves, in order to continue its path. This passage by Achterhuis is a
reference to Foucault’s famous opening in The Discourse on Language:

‘I would have preferred to be enveloped in words, borne away beyond all
possible beginnings. At the moment of speaking, I would like to have per-
ceived a nameless voice, long preceding me, leaving me merely to enmesh
myself in it, taking up its cadence, and to lodge myself, when no one was
looking, in its interstices as if it had paused an instant, in suspense, to
beckon me. There would have been no beginnings: instead, speech would
proceed from me, while I stood in its path - a slender gap - the point of its
In these elegant first lines, Foucault expresses the scholar’s desire to give himself up to discourse. For the people who read beyond the first page, it becomes quite clear that Foucault refers to a personal desire and not a premise that follows from his discourse theory. In fact, the very opposite is the case: Foucault presents his discourse theory as an attempt to break away from the seduction of passive immersion, leading to an active awareness of how institutions shape and regulate discourse:

‘Inclination speaks out: “I don’t want to have to enter this risky world of discourse; I want nothing to do with it insofar as it is decisive and final; I would like to feel it all around me, calm and transparent, profound, infinitely open, with others responding to my expectations and truth emerging, one by one. All I want is to allow myself to be borne along, within it, and by it, a happy wreck.” Institutions reply: “But you have nothing to fear from launching out; we’re here to show you discourse is within the established order of things, that we’ve waited a long time for its arrival, that a place has been set aside for it - a place which both honours and disarms it; and if it should happen to have a certain power, then it is we, and we alone, who give it that power.’” (Foucault 1972: 215-216).

Achterhuis, however, assumes the dominance of the text over its authors as the epistemological implication of Foucault’s philosophy. It means that once a certain discourse has been given form by a ground-breaking author, subsequent generations can only enmesh themselves in it and continue its course. Likewise, the authors in the utopian tradition ‘cannot escape from certain conclusions that More already made’ (1998: 35) in his foundational text. Using Wittgenstein’s idea of family resemblances, Achterhuis adds to this determinism by stating that in the utopian tradition discourses that have some of the family traits discussed above, tend towards having them all in the end: ‘one aspect of utopian discourse almost inevitably calls into being the other’ (35). In other words: the all-embracing totalitarian logic that Achterhuis identifies in More is an inescapable aspect of all utopian discourse that follows. Even if subsequent authors have assumed it possible ‘to refrain from some of these implications’, they will nonetheless manifest themselves ‘uncontrolled and undesired behind their backs’ (35).

In so doing, Achterhuis manages to invent a remarkable brand of discursive determinism, with which he (unwittingly) approaches Hegel’s idealism. In Hegel’s philosophy everything revolves around the idea, human minds are its vehicle and history is the development of the idea, working out its own rational purposes in human consciousness. Similarly, for Achterhuis, there is the utopian logic, human minds are its often unknowing or unwilling vehicle, and history is the unfolding of the utopian logic. In both cases, providence is at work.

Starting with More, all subsequent utopian thinkers are considered to be tragic wrecks in the utopian stream, whose current inescapably leads them towards totalitarianism, even if some of the passengers of said wrecks are – desperately - paddling in the opposite direction:

‘Maybe the utopian logic is so powerful that one cannot independently give it the desired direction. Maybe it goes its own direction, behind the backs of those that think they can meddle in it unpunished, a direction that is opposed to their own desires and ideals. Many disappointments and failures of benevolent people inspired by utopia, in both really existing socialism and capitalist societies, could in this way better be explained and understood.’ (14).

Like the speech that is to emanate from the vessel that is Foucault, it is the ‘immanent logic of utopia’ that speaks through authors such as Sartre, Marx, Marcuse, Horkheimer, Habermas, Bloch and Brecht, despite their good intentions and highest ideals. Or one could say, because of these high ideals: in the utopian tradition, ‘the all-important end justifies the means, resulting in violence, and the hardening of economic and gender relations’ (21). Any appeal for a radically different society – such as the Paris 1968 slogan ‘be realistic demand the impossible’ - is interpreted by Achterhuis (25) as a call to violence. The immanent (totalitarian) logic of utopia, according to Achterhuis, is the result of the hidden will-to-power of utopian thinkers, a desire they themselves are not even aware of. What follows is an indictment of an entire ‘generation of western intellectuals of the second half of the twentieth century’ who were not aware of their own hidden will-to-power. After which Achterhuis proceeds to decry ‘the mass foolishness’ (150) of the Dutch sixties and seventies. The spirit of that
time, Achterhuis claims, came to display the utopian logic: ‘The domi-
nant intellectual climate of the seventies can without doubt be considered
utopian’ (151). In other words, tending to totalitarianism. To argue his
case, Achterhuis refers to a book by a German theologian who compares
Mao and Marx with Christ, an English publication that glorifies Mao’s
China and the writings of Marcuse. None of which seems to validate his
claim of a dominant utopian Dutch intellectual climate. The most
important intellectual figure on the Left was without doubt Den Uyl, who
was opposed to utopian blueprints. And what is often seen as the most
remarkable aspect of the New Left current within the Dutch social demo-
crat party (PvdA) was its reformism and anti-intellectualism (Blokland

This deterministic reading of texts is compounded by a second eccentric
inference that Achterhuis makes from discourse theory, namely the col-
lapse of the distinction between theory and practice. ‘Because reality is
constructed in language, texts can have an inescapable and even deadly
effect.’ (1998: 33). He cites Heinrich Heine to the effect that Kant’s Critique
of Pure Reason was ‘the sword with which European deism was decapitat-
ed’ and the work of Rousseau is ‘the bloodstained weapon that in the
hands of Robespierre had destroyed the old regime’ (33). Achterhuis
writes of ‘acts that are irresistibly invoked by certain discourses’, and
consequently in utopian discourse ‘words and acts are hard to separate’ (36).
It leads Achterhuis (132) to blame a sentence in Rousseau’s Emile for the
wholesale destruction of the capital of Cambodia under the Khmer
Rouge. In fact, Achterhuis quotes Rousseau spectacularly out of context.5
And it leads Achterhuis to portray Ayn Rand’s Atlas Shrugged as the sup-
posed cause of the rise of neoliberalism, ending in the global financial cri-
sis. A hyperbolic claim rightly debunked by Zuidhof (2012: 86) as ‘histori-
cally highly implausible’.

Of course, no intellectual would want to dispute that ideas have an effect
on practice. If not, what would be the point of formulating and spreading
one’s ideas? But an ‘inescapable’ and ‘irresistible’ effect? That seems to be
overdoing it a bit. Why is Achterhuis making these rather grandiose
claims for the efficacy of theory? The most convincing answer is that it
appears to further his argument. Whether intended or not, the conflation
of theory and practice serves to tie the entire tradition of utopian thought
irrevocably to modern totalitarian practice.

It may come as no surprise that in reality these historical phenomena are
more complex than the approach of Achterhuis allows for. A case in point
is the example of the French Revolution, considered by Achterhuis to be
the first eruption of the modern totalitarian logic. It is questionable
whether the utopian ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his later adher-
ent Abbé Sieyès led to the Terror, as Achterhuis claims through a rather
disgraceful misreading of Rousseau, whose formulation of the general will
supposedly contains a ‘cleansing logic’ (130-131). In reality, the political
theory of both Rousseau and Sieyès maintained that sovereign power
needed to be bound by important preconditions, such as the rule of law.
The violence of the French Revolution is often seen as a much more
pragmatic affair, stemming from a context of immanent war and the
threat of counterrevolution.6 Achterhuis however, follows Hannah Ar-
rendt’s controversial account of Rousseau and the French Revolution,
which presents Rousseau’s theory of the general will as the inspiration
and cause for the Terror of the Jacobin regime. Arrendt’s description
of French revolutionary history has come under heavy criticism from both
political theorists and historians7. As Scheuermann argues in a particular-
ly enlightening critique: ‘Arendt believes that we can ignore Rousseau’s
own adamant insistence in his crucial discussion of The Limits of Sover-
eign Power, that political power is only legitimate when exercised in ac-
cordance with the ideal of the rule of law. Nor, it seems, do we need to
take Rousseau’s detailed description of the proper presuppositions of legiti-
mate republican government - modest size, and a substantial degree of
social and economic equality, for example - very seriously. For Rousseau,
such preconditions represent pivotal limitations on the absoluteness of
the general will.’ (Scheuermann 1997: 152-153, italics in original). Scheu-
ermann concludes: ‘We need to distinguish between the theory and prac-
tice of the French Revolution. Simply to assume an underlying affinity
between these events and the core of the theoretical legacy of the French
Revolution represents sloppy intellectual and political history.’ (Scheu-
ermann 1997: 141).

Yet this is exactly what Achterhuis does, he simply assumes an underlying
affinity: the inescapable flow of utopian discourse bearing down on us from the sixteenth century serves to bind it all together - even if Achterhuis admits that Rousseau’s writing cannot be strictly defined as utopian, ‘according to my definition’ (1998: 125). Seeing no need to change his definition, Achterhuis goes on to qualify Rousseau’s work as utopian just the same. Moreover, if there is no such thing as a distinction between theory and practice, if texts have a direct effect on reality, then Rousseau must be accountable for providing the ‘bloodstained weapon’ to Robespierre - his theory of the general will. One could demur and interject that Rousseau saw only smaller communities as appropriate for the application of his ideas as formulated in *The Social Contract*. But then Achterhuis would reply that the individual motives and intentions of the author are not the deciding factor when looking at the material effects of a text, since that would be ‘idealism’. Relying on his remarkable interpretation of discourse theory, Achterhuis claims that it ‘makes no sense to hold Rousseau responsible for the posterior effects’ of the ideas he has let loose on the world (131). Even though this is precisely what Achterhuis seems to do, by mentioning a few sentences later that Rousseau’s influence on the French Revolution was ‘immense’, and that ‘the first laboratory for the ideas of Rousseau was the Jacobin regime of Robespierre’ (131), and by erroneously stating - in the footsteps of Hannah Arendt - that Rousseau rejected negative freedoms and the division of powers in the name of the unitary and all-powerful general will (129). Even if Achterhuis’ interpretation of Rousseau’s general will as a ‘utopian cleansing logic’ (128, 130-131) is dramatically incorrect, still one wonders, why should Rousseau not be held responsible for being an intellectual arms-dealer of sorts and for formulating an alleged ‘cleansing logic’?

A similarly confounded reading is offered of the work of Marx and Engels. Of course the problem here is that Marx famously criticized utopian thought and expressed his refusal to ‘write recipes for the cook-shops of the future’. (Achterhuis mistranslates this to Dutch as ‘looking in the cooking pots of the future’, which poses an interesting image of Marx to entertain.) A remarkable solution to this problem is presented:

‘Paradoxically, the neglect of the demand for a concrete description of a new society would, behind their backs, come to plague Marx and Engels. The insistence on details, an inescapable aspect of the utopian logic, only came to the fore after the socialist revolution had taken place. It does not appear in the texts, but in the reality in which the new rulers in their all-embracing plans, tried to arrange the smallest details. Again it shows how brilliant and exhaustive the exploration of the realm of utopia is, that More performs in Utopia. Who thinks they can easily withdraw themselves from certain aspects of the utopian logic revealed by him, is generally deceiving themselves.’ (69).

So in the end, it doesn’t really matter if an author presents a detailed utopian blueprint or not. You’re damned if you do, damned if you don’t. The totalitarian nightmare will always catch up with those that dare to dream of a different society. Achterhuis has developed a critique of utopia that takes the form of a slippery-slope argument: any form of utopian thought that has some of the family traits of utopian thought, will – inescapably - come to have them all and will - irresistibly - lead to totalitarian outcomes.

In summary, the critique of utopia that Achterhuis has developed is based on a curious discursive determinism that consists of three core assumptions, all supposedly derived from Thomas More’s *Utopia*. Firstly, an all-or-nothing approach to utopian thought. Achterhuis rejects the idea that utopia could serve as an unattainable ideal, an inspiration to guide action. On the contrary, he maintains there is a single, unitary utopian tradition that departs from the idea that utopia is realizable. Utopia is a detailed blueprint that must be implemented in its entirety: the utopian tradition rejects the reformism that improves elements of society or applies loose ideas. Secondly, starting from More, all utopian texts, even those that stipulate clear limitations on sovereign power, even those that do not provide a detailed blueprint of a future society, inescapably lead to totalitarianism, due to ‘the immanent utopian logic’ that is stronger than the good intentions and high ideals of the utopian authors. An added benefit here is that one doesn’t need to properly analyse the writings of utopian thinkers, since their intentions do not really matter. Thirdly, texts can have a direct – inescapable and irresistible - effect on social reality. The advantage of this last assumption is that there is no need to get deep down into the messy realm of historical reality and political practice, or to ad-
dress the even more difficult question of ascertaining causality and attributing blame. One merely assumes an underlying affinity and pardons all participants in the process as naïve, well-meaning victims of an ephemeral utopian logic. As a scholarly discipline, the history of ideas seems to have never had it so easy. Here, analytical rigour seems to have been sacrificed for the purpose of political propaganda.10

Thus far we have looked at the attempt of Achterhuis to develop the construct of a unitary utopian tradition, inherently directed towards violence and totalitarianism; a notion that he subsequently employs to indict utopian thinkers and the Dutch progressive movements of the sixties and seventies. We have already seen that the structure of the argument itself is rather shaky. Instead of a solid set of analyses of primary texts, it consists of a series of references to controversial interpretations of More, Rousseau and Marx11. These are then joined together by the superglue of discursive determinism, which relies on an eccentric understanding of Foucault’s discourse theory. This already unstable construct rests on one, all-important building block: the interpretation of Thomas More’s *Utopia*. If we were to extract this particular element, the entire edifice of his already rickety argument would come crashing down.

II. An open reading of Utopia

Let’s return to the discussions in Book I of More’s *Utopia* for a moment. As mentioned earlier, in this section More introduces himself and his friend Peter Giles, and describes his encounter with an unknown figure, Raphael Hythloday, whom we know to be both a guide to the blind and a non-sense peddler, and who is introduced as follows: ‘a stranger, a man of quite advanced years; with a sunburned face, a long beard, and a cloak hanging loosely from his shoulders; from his face and dress, I took him to be a ship’s captain.’ (Logan & Adams 1989: 9).

As Giles introduces Raphael he explains to More that his first impression is incorrect, Raphael is not a ship’s captain: ‘you’re far off the mark’, Giles tells More, ‘for his sailing has not been like that of Palinerus, but more that of Ulysses, or rather of Plato.’12 Giles proceeds to describe Raphael as a humanist scholar, proficient in Latin and Greek, whose main interest is philosophy, and who has joined Amerigo Vespucci in his explorations of the New World to return with a wealth of knowledge concerning distant lands. Thus, from the very beginning it is made clear to the reader that we are embarking on philosophical travels, instead of merely material ones. Raphael Hythloday then engages in thoughtful discussion with Giles and More, concerning ‘the faulty arrangements both in that hemisphere and in this’ and the ‘wiser provisions’ that can be derived from his experience (12). Impressed with his intelligence, Giles and More encourage Raphael ‘to enter some king’s service’, to make sure his knowledge is put to good use. Raphael responds by saying that involvement with politics would bring nothing, since nobody is prepared to listen to new ideas. An extensive discussion on intellectual engagement with politics ensues.

Involvement in politics is of no use, Raphael concludes. Europeans are resistant to new ideas. Princes are deaf to philosophy and more concerned with making war than hearing ideals for peace. And courts are filled with men who admire only their own ideas and who are envious of others. More concurs: ‘When your listeners are already prepossessed against you and firmly convinced of opposite opinions, how can you win over their minds with such out-of-the-way speeches?’ (34). Since there is no room for ‘academic philosophy’ in the councils of kings, More proposes Raphael an alternative approach:

‘[T]here is another philosophy, better suited for the role of a citizen, that takes its cue, adapts itself to the drama in hand and acts its part neatly and appropriately. This is the philosophy for you to use. Otherwise, when a comedy of Plautus is being played, and the household slaves are cracking trivial jokes together, you come onstage in the garb of a philosopher and repeat Seneca’s speech to Nero from the *Octavia*. Wouldn’t it be better to take a silent role than to say something inappropriate and thus turn the play into a tragicomedy? You pervert a play and ruin it when you add irrelevant speeches, even if they are better than the play itself. So go through with the drama as best you can, and don’t spoil it all just because you happen to think of a play by someone else that might be more elegant.’ (35).
As Logan and Adams explain, the comedies of the Roman playwright Plautus involve ‘low intrigue’. The tragedy Octavia, in contrast, is ‘full of high seriousness’ and in the speech that More alludes to, the Roman philosopher ‘Seneca lectures Nero on the abuses of power’ (35n80). In other words, if the play of politics is performed as a light comedy, why ruin it by playing one’s part as if it were a serious tragedy?

This enigmatic paragraph is the key passage of Book I. More continues by describing his alternative as an ‘indirect approach’, oriented towards diminishing harm: ‘what you cannot turn to good, you may at least make as little bad as possible. For it is impossible to make everything good unless all men are good, and that I don’t expect to see for quite a few years yet.’ (35). Raphael responds by saying that he doesn’t understand what More means. For the reader it is equally unclear what is intended here.

Raphael then explains why private property is at the base of society’s troubles, and that he does not understand how to convince people of that through an ‘indirect approach’. Maybe he should just follow the advice of Plato, when he described the reaction of wise men faced with crowds of people out in the streets, being rained upon. Since the wise men cannot persuade the people to go inside and get dry, because the wise men know they will only get themselves wet as well if they go out and try, they stay indoors, content to keep at least themselves dry. More objects to Raphael’s ideas concerning the abolition of private property. Raphael replies by proposing to explain the customs of Utopia, to prove his point. That is the end of Book I, and of course, the prelude to Raphael’s detailed exposition of the mores of Utopia in Book II.

Scholars have long been divided over the question how to explain the metaphor of the play employed by More in his advice to Raphael. A first reading is that More’s advice to Raphael is a justification for appeasing rather than confronting power and for working within the system. This is also the interpretation of Achterhuis: he applauds More’s appeal for ‘patience and gradualism’, and criticizes the ‘hot-headed activism’ of Raphael, ‘who wants to eradicate evil down to its very roots’ (1998: 50). In the eyes of Achterhuis, More stands for sober reformism, and Raphael embodies the revolutionary spirit.13 Achterhuis presents Raphael’s answer to

More as proof that utopia is realizable, thus providing the basis for his thesis that the utopian tradition is defined by realizable blueprints. For Achterhuis, Raphael is the literary variant of a monster of Frankenstein: a construct that, once given life, rebels against its creator (More) and takes control over utopian discourse. Raphael is the embodiment of the ephemeral utopian logic that will seduce utopian thinkers in the ages to come. An alternate reading, which has been gaining in popularity in the last decades, interprets the advice of More as a plea for enveloping critique in literary or artistic form. Drama creates a space and place which looks and feels like reality, where marginal ideas can suddenly become the norm.

Duncombe describes the indirect approach as an artistic strategy, which involves the creation of an imaginary ‘lifeworld that operates according to different axioms’, leading the spectator to experience reality in a radically different way. The critic is no longer an outsider, trying to convince people that what they hold to be true – the dominant narrative - is actually wrong. The critic-turned-artist invents a radically new world where the coordinates of right and wrong are rearranged, a world that can be experienced by the audience as a convincing, and therefore detailed and holistic reality. Of course, such an approach also implies a limitation: as the work is fictional, it loses part of its authoritative power, it is not to be taken literally. Instead it opens itself up to the interpretation and imagination of the audience.

Significant here is what Logan and Adams identify as the ‘seriocomic mode of Utopia’ (Logan and Adams 1989: XXI). More, and his close friend Erasmus, with whom he discussed and conceived Utopia, were both admirers of the Greek/Syrian ironist known as Lucian of Samosata. Lucian’s writings took the form of dialogues and short pieces of prose, in which he would make serious political points, cloaked in satire. In 1506, a decade before the publication of Utopia, More published a translation of four works of Lucian, together with some additional translations by Erasmus. As part of this tradition, Logan and Adams mention also The Golden Ass of Apuleius, The Praise of Folly by Erasmus (written while residing in More’s house in 1509 and published in 1511, five years before Utopia14) and the later works of Rabelais and Swift. Logan and Adams refer to this tradition as
serio ludere, ‘to play seriously’. As More wrote in the preface to his translations of Lucian, the quality of this tradition is that it obeys the classical requirement of literature, to combine delight with instruction. Not coincidentally, the (ironical) subtitle of More’s *Utopia* reads as follows: ‘A Truly Golden Handbook, No less Beneficial than Entertaining.’ According to Logan and Adams ‘More was also attracted to the tradition of *serio ludere* for a deeper reason. The divided, complex mind, capable of seeing more than one side of a question and reluctant to make a definite commitment to any single position, has a proclivity for ironic discourse; and *serio ludere* - in which the play can serve to qualify or undercut any statement - is one of the great vehicles of irony.’ (XXI).

The enigmatic quality of More’s *Utopia* stems from this double character: serious and satirical at the same time. As the book’s title - *On the Best State of a Commonwealth and on the New Island of Utopia* - makes clear, it is inspired by the classical tradition of political writing on the ideal state of the commonwealth, such as Plato’s *Republic* and *Laws*, and Aristotle’s *Politics*. Here the conjunction ‘and’ in the title is telling, instilling doubt as to whether the island of Utopia can be considered an ideal commonwealth: it is, after all, a fiction. In the second letter to Giles, More comments obliquely on his choice for this literary format:

‘I do not deny that if I had decided to write of a commonwealth, and a tale of this sort had come to my mind, I might not have shrunk from a fiction through which the truth, like medicine smeared with honey, might enter the mind a little more pleasantly. But I would certainly have softened the fiction a little, so that, while imposing on vulgar ignorance, I gave hints to the more learned which would enable them to see what I was about. Thus, if I had merely given such names to the governor, the river, the city, and the island as would indicate to the knowing reader that the island was nowhere, the city a phantom, the river waterless, and the governor without a people, it wouldn’t have been hard to do, and would have been far more clever than what I actually did. If the veracity of a historian had not actually required me to do so, I am not so stupid as to have preferred those barbarous and meaningless names of Utopia, Anyder, Amaurot and Ademus.’ (109).

This is of course exactly what More has done: Utopia means non-place, Anyder waterless river, Amaurot is a play on the Greek word *amauroton*, meaning dim or obscure and Ademus translates as ‘without a people’. A lot of the fun for the humanist scholars in the circle around More and Erasmus consisted of the fact that some contemporaries were actually tricked into believing that Hythloday and Utopia really existed. In a letter published in the 1518 edition, the humanist scholar and printer Beatus Rhenanus describes a discussion of *Utopia* with ‘various important men’. He writes about a ‘foolish fellow’ who argued that More deserved no more credit than a paid scribe, since all that More did was write down what Hythloday said. Rhenanus then switches to Greek and comments: ‘Now, don’t you admire the sly wit of More, who can bamboozle men like these, not just ordinary dolts but men of standing and trained theologians at that?’ (126). We can conclude that almost 500 years later, More continues to bamboozle trained theologians.

So, what are we to make of Achterhuis’ claim that the irony of More does not affect ‘the rigorous logic’ of his utopian system? Or the idea that the detailed exposition of a blueprint in Book II of Utopia has served as the model for utopian thinking ever since? As we’ve seen, it is the fictional character of More’s Utopia that distinguishes it from previous political philosophy on the ideal commonwealth. Precisely that fictional quality would make it into the foundational text of the utopian genre. More invented a world instead of merely arguing for one. The descriptive details and the holism that Achterhuis sees as utopian family traits leading to totalitarianism, are in fact preconditions for a successful work of fiction. And it is this same fictional character that results in the ambiguity undermining the rigorous logic that Achterhuis is so eager to project on the work. After all, how can the island of Utopia be the ideal commonwealth? It openly contradicts the ideas of Raphael Hythloday, who states in Book I that ‘it’s an incompetent monarch who knows no other way to reform his people than by depriving them of all life’s benefits’ (33). In Utopia, crime is punished with slavery. Utopian society even contradicts the ideas of Utopians themselves, who believe ‘no kind of pleasure is forbidden, provided harm does not come of it’ (58), while in fact all sorts of harmless pleasures are forbidden, such as an unsanctioned walk in the country. The tale of Utopia is filled with absurdities and inconsistencies. The Utopians have
golden chamber pots.

More himself, in the second letter to Giles, responds to the criticism of a ‘very sharp fellow’ who has ‘noted some absurdities in the institutions of the Utopians, or caught me putting forth some not sufficiently practical ideas about the constitution of a republic.’ More’s answer is telling: ‘Aren’t there any absurdities elsewhere in the world? And did any of all of the philosophers who have offered a pattern for society, a ruler, or a private household set down everything so well that nothing ought to be changed?’ (108-109). It is clear: Utopia is not a closed blueprint, it is meant as an open space for imagination and reflection upon possible changes to society. This much is confirmed by a poem attached to the early editions, printed in the Utopian language and in the voice of the island itself: ‘I alone of all nations, without philosophy, have portrayed for mortals the philosophical city. Freely I impart my benefits; not unwillingly I accept whatever is better.’ (119). As Duncombe rightly concludes,

‘Utopia does not have, nor provide to the reader, a wholly satisfactory philosophy; its systems of logic, aesthetics, ethics, metaphysics, and epistemology are constantly undercut by More. But it is because the reader cannot satisfy themselves within the confines of Utopia that it can become a ‘philosophical city,’ a place to ponder and space within which to think.’ (Duncombe 2012: 40).

Seen in this light, utopian thought becomes a force that promotes many of the qualities that Karl Popper attributed to his ‘open society’: a spirit of criticism, reason and reform. Popper argued that the dream of perfection, what he calls aesthetic enthusiasm, ‘becomes valuable only if it is briddled by reason, by a feeling of responsibility, and by a humanitarian urge to help.’ (Popper 2006: 174). But what if it’s briddled by irony, by metaphor, by the explicit recognition that we are dealing with fiction? Then it becomes impossible to maintain that ‘utopian thought has, from the very beginning, tried to prevent the emergence of an open society, in refined ways’.

Conclusion

Here we should return to the three core assumptions on which Achterhuis bases his approach to utopian thought. Let’s begin by rejecting his first assumption: the all-or-nothing approach to utopia - the idea that ‘the utopians explicitly oppose, starting with More, the reformism that seeks to improve certain elements or apply loose ideas. Partial improvements are for the right-minded utopian out of the question.’ (1998: 19). We have seen that at several points in the article above that More explicitly embraces reformism, writing of features he would like to see implemented, lessons one could take away from utopia, and that any pattern for a new society contains absurdities and impracticalities needing change and improvement. Of course, this does not mean that the subsequent utopian tradition necessarily contains an awareness of the inevitable imperfection of the utopian ideal. It just means that the unitary tradition of utopian thought as blueprint, the idea that Achterhuis has tried to develop, is a fiction.

The open-endedness of More’s Utopia - or the fictional character of the utopian genre as such - also implies that there is no posterior effect condemning all subsequent utopian authors to follow the ‘immanent utopian logic’ on a course to totalitarianism, even against their will. Here it becomes necessary to make a distinction between different tendencies of utopian thought. For Duncombe, ‘the problem with many social imaginations is that they present themselves as a realizable possibility. Their authors imagine a future or an alternative and present it as THE future or THE alternative.’ (Duncombe 2012: 40). More’s Utopia manages to circumvent that problem, by undermining and thus opening up his utopian ideal. Utopianism and ‘the reformism that seeks to improve certain elements or apply loose ideas’ can thus be made to coincide, in democratic ways. This particular vision of utopia – as an unattainable ideal – has been present from the very beginning. It is articulated by Rousseau when he describes his much desired natural state of man, as a state that no longer exists, maybe never has existed, and probably never will exist (Rousseau, 1979 [1762]). The present defenders of utopian iconoclasm, such as Fredric Jameson and Terry Eagleton, are in line with More’s original spirit, when stating that ‘the only authentic image of the future is, in the end, the failure of the present.’ (Eagleton 2000: 34).
The third assumption of Achterhuis, the collapse of the distinction between theory and practice, has allowed liberal Cold War critics to apply rigid schemes of interpretation to a rich and complex intellectual heritage. Authors such as Plato, More, Rousseau and Marx, have all been soiled with the stain of modern totalitarianism, while their work has contributed significantly to the foundation of modern democracy: Plato’s republican ideals inspired several democratic revolutions; More’s humanistic ideas contributed to the Renaissance; Rousseau equally inspired the modern education system, democratic revolutionaries, and the thought of Kant and Schiller; Marx provided a worldview to the workers movement that went on to campaign for universal suffrage, and gave rise to the modern welfare state. Of course their work is not without its shortcomings and should not be read uncritically – no text should be. But the idea that these texts have had a direct – inescapable and irresistible – effect in establishing totalitarianism leads to the conclusion that we ‘cannot meddle in it unpunished’. That would imply a severe restriction of our intellectual room for manoeuvre, and our democratic capacity of imagining alternative realities.

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1 The critique of utopia developed by Achterhuis continues to be an influential and dominant way of thinking in the Netherlands. In 2007, around 50.000 (HAVO) high-school students were given as their exam-literature a book on utopia edited by Achterhuis. Also, the most recent Dutch translation of Thomas More’s Utopia (2014) is accompanied by a post-face written by Marja Brouwer decrying the inherently violent nature of utopian thought. And in his more recent and well-received critique of neoliberalism De Utopie van de Vrije Markt (The Utopia of the Free Market, 2010), Achterhuis retraces the problems of neoliberal thought to its utopian character, again warning for ‘the dangers of utopian activism’, that can ‘literally make people blind for the hard facts of life.’ (Achterhuis 2010: 57).
2 The word ‘immediately’ is a reference to the bishop Don Vasco de Quiroga and his reform efforts oriented at the indigenous population of the Mexican state of Michoacan from 1535 to 1565, inspired by More’s Utopia. Contrary to what Achterhuis states however, Quiroga did not follow More to the letter. Rather, he took elements and applied loose ideas. Quiroga was an opponent of slavery, and opted for large-scale Christian evangelization efforts instead of Utopia’s religious pluralism. Quiroga also took ideas from the Christian myth of Eden and Plato’s Republic. The degree to which he was inspired by More’s Utopia is disputed (Verastique 2000).

3 An amusing observation, considering that his great example Karl Popper sees Hegel’s philosophy as a principal pathway to the ‘closed society’. Adding to the confusion, Achterhuis explicitly distances himself from philosophical idealism, more specifically from the ‘idealist flight far away from the tough material reality’ (33) and he embraces materialism. But he does not seem to have a clear understanding of what the basic philosophical opposition between idealism and materialism entails. Philosophical idealism, a concept Achterhuis misunderstands as ‘emphasising (good) intentions’ (33), is the view that social reality and history is primarily shaped by ideas. Achterhuis is definitely an idealist. Materialism, in the opposing (Marxist) sense of the word, is not the view that ideas or texts have ‘material effects’ (33). It means that material forces, and corresponding social relations are primary in shaping history, and ideas serve to reach an awareness of these relations. For a political philosopher like Achterhuis, not knowing these terms is rather like not knowing up from down.

4 By attributing agency to discourse, Achterhuis exonerates the authors: ‘In the following text analysis, I’m not concerned with apportioning blame to individual authors. On the contrary, if texts have material effects, and transcend personal, individual, good or bad intentions, it is not proper to declare an individual guilty, in this case More; but it could also be - for example in the fourth chapter - Marx.’ (33).

5 The sentence from Rousseau’s Émile reads as follows: ‘It is inconceivable that in this age of calculators there is none who can perceive that France would be much more powerful if Paris were annihilated.’ (Rousseau, 1979 [1762]: 469) Achterhuis provides no analysis as to the context and interpretation of this sarcastic and provocative sentence, part of a passage on the relation between morals and government. Rousseau begins with the advice to study Montesquieu’s De l’esprit des lois, as the best exposition thereof. And he continues by explicitly rejecting violence and unconstitutional measures: ‘One should not examine what is done by force; for the law which combats the constitution is evaded and becomes vain. Instead, one should examine what is accomplished by the influence of morals and by the natural bent of the government, for these means alone have a constant effect.’ (Rousseau, 1979 [1762]: 468). This is the paragraph directly above the sentence Achterhuis quotes out of context as the instigator of the violence of the Khmer Rouge. In fact, when it comes to Western influences, historians point to the illegal bombardments of Cambodia by Kissinger as a defining influence on the rise and extreme violence of the Khmer Rouge (Gandin 2015). Of course, Kissinger’s philosophy is described as ‘realist’ and the notion that realism and pragmatism have a similar potential for violence as utopianism would undermine the entire argument of Achterhuis.

6 For example, the historian Roger Brubaker argues that we need to distinguish between the ‘conspicuously cosmopolitan’ character of French revolutionary ideology and the xenophobia apparent in the revolution’s waning days, ‘a product of war and factional struggle, which engendered a climate of extreme suspicion of the internal enemies that might knowingly or unknowingly be in the service of external enemies.’ (Roger Brubaker, 1992: 45-46).


8 Here again Scheuermann: ‘Arendt conflates the Enlightenment defense of a unified, indivisible popular “sovereign” with an argument against a separation of powers within the decision making apparatus and, thus, a differentiation or division of authority among institutional instances, which both Locke and Rousseau clearly endorse. For both Locke and Rousseau, “[p]opular sovereignty is the actual or potential force that unifies the state which, for convenience, divides its functions.” Arendt’s claim that Rousseau sought the awesome centralization of institutional power evident in the worst moments of the French Revolution rests on a failure to make an elementary conceptual distinction: one can insist on the unity and indivisibility of the democratic “people” without demanding the centralization of political authority into the hands of a tiny group of decision makers.’ (Scheuermann 1997: 153-154, italics in original).
For example, Achterhuis claims that Marx and Engels would ‘incorporate much of the content of Rousseau’s utopianism’ (133). But this is not based on a proper analysis of their - radically different - political philosophies. In short, Marx lacks a theory of the state, as provided by Rousseau in The Social Contract. Here, it would be more logical to speak of a discontinuity or lack of incorporation.

Achterhuis makes a remarkable about-turn at the end of his book The Legacy of Utopia, when discussing those authors that see existing society as a realised utopia, such as Foucault and Adorno. Achterhuis criticizes the philosopher’s “simplistic belief in the text” and its ability to “automatically produce their realities”. He compares that approach to Don Quixote and his literal interpretation of medieval tales of chivalry (Achterhuis 1998: 309). He even criticizes Foucault’s writing on the panopticon in Discipline and Punish for abandoning “careful historical research into the changes in our material and institutional surroundings”, in favour of a “critical textual analysis of a utopian idea” (Achterhuis 1998: 309). Of course, all these things apply to Achterhuis himself and his approach to utopia. Philosophically it is not very consistent, but politically it is. Achterhuis defends the status quo: when it is attacked by utopian thought, he emphasises the dangers of utopian texts and their ability to shape reality. When the status quo is attacked for being utopian itself, he downplays the dangers of utopian texts and ridicules those who think they can shape reality.

I’ve mentioned Hannah Arendt’s account of the French Revolution. Another of these sources presented by Achterhuis with no dissenting voice or discussion, is the late French historian François Furet, whose work on the French Revolution has incited widespread controversy. To analyse Marx, Achterhuis relies on the work of the Polish theorist Leszek Kolakowski, who claimed Stalinism is not a distortion of Marx’ writings, but a logical consequence of its premises. These sources all offer strictly partisan views – a result of the intellectual climate of the Cold War – of a complex intellectual heritage that requires a less heavy-handed treatment to be properly analysed.

Palinerus is a (comic) reference to the pilot of the Trojan hero Aeneas. Palinerus dozed at the helm and fell overboard. The reference to Ulysses could mean two things: a well-travelled, intelligent man, as described in the Odyssey; or a notable liar as described in the ‘True Story’ of the satirist Lucian. It is known that Plato travelled widely. But here, it is rather travels of the mind that seem to be implied.

A similar dualistic interpretation exists from the other end of the political spectrum, for example in Fredric Jameson’s Archaeologies of the Future, where he defends Hythloday’s ‘enthusiasm’ from More’s satire: ‘Even from the outset, however, we have a decision to make which will confront us with two distinct interpretations, inasmuch as Book Two, the properly Utopian part of the text, is known to have been written first. Are we then to reincorporate this philological knowledge, and to treat Book One as a kind of afterthought or cautious and politically prudent (but also daring) recontextualization of the account of the island itself, one which carefully distances Hythloday’s enthusiasms and hedges all the bets? Or should we let the present order continue to dictate a processual dynamism in which the Utopian vision emerges dialectically from the very contradictions of both Part One and the historical present? This second alternative reading, and the interpretive decision it calls for (to take More’s vision seriously), is reduced and caricatured by the revisionist and anti-Utopian position (which always seems to reemerge in periods of political stagnation) according to which ‘Utopia’ is really a jeu d’esprit after all, and the idiotic names (Hythloday = Nonsenso, etc.) are meant to be taken satirically.’ (Jameson 2005: 22).

In Praise of Folly has in some cases been translated as In Praise of More, as the Greek word Menos means fool, a wordplay that More also uses in Utopia.

In the original preface of Utopia, More writes ironically about his doubts to publish the book, fearing misunderstanding from his audience, unable to appreciate satire: ‘But, to tell the truth, I’m still of two minds as to whether I should publish the book at all. For men’s tastes are so various, the temperaments of some are so severe, their minds so ungrateful, their judgments so foolish, that there seems no point in publishing a book that others will receive only with contempt and ingratitude. [...] Here’s a man so solemn he won’t allow a shadow of levity, and there’s one so insipid of taste that he can’t endure the salt of a little wit. Some are so flat-nosed that they dread satire as a man bitten by a rabid dog dreads water; some are so changeable that they like one thing when they’re seated and another when they’re standing.’ (Logan & Adams, 1989: 6). (Here a small explanation of the word ‘flat-nosed’ is in order: the nose was considered the organ of derision, a person with a flat nose is without wit and incapable of appreciating satire).

For example, in More’s first letter to Giles, originally published as the preface of Utopia, he subtly informs his readers that none of the information provided can be relied upon.
More writes to Giles that he is uncertain whether he rightly remembers the length of the bridge over the river Anyder at Amaurot. He also forgot to ask Raphael about the coordinates of the island itself, the whereabouts of Utopia. Not an unimportant piece of information. He implores Giles: 'Therefore I beg you, my dear Peter, to get in touch with Hythloday - in person if you can, or by letters if he's gone - and make sure that my work contains nothing false and omits nothing true.' (Logan & Adams 1989: 5). Of course, Raphael will never contradict anything that More says, let alone correct his errors, since he is a fictional character. In a second published letter to Giles, More suggests that those that doubt the existence of Utopia, should go and speak with Raphael themselves, for he is supposed to be alive somewhere in Portugal. More ends by saying: 'I only want them to understand I answer only for my own work, not for anyone else's credibility.' (Logan & Adams: 110).

17 Much like his adherent Achterhuis, Popper has been criticized for interpreting Plato’s utopian Republic – which takes the form of a complex metaphor of mind and society - far too literally (Veatch 1979). In a powerful rebuttal of Popper’s argument, Michael Freeman has argued that utopian experiments are in fact in accordance with Popper’s ideas concerning the open society: ‘Since Popper declares again and again that the true scientific spirit is earnestly and vigorously to seek out falsification of our tentative laws, it would seem that Popper’s theory of the growth of knowledge encourages rather than discourages utopian experiment.’ (Freeman 1975:32).
In 1997 namen Mark Koster en Dennis Schulting een interview af met Richard Rorty, dat tot op deze dag ongepubliceerd is gebleven. Onderstaande tekst is een excerpt uit het volledige gesprek. Het interview wordt voorafgegaan door een korte inleiding op Rorty's denken door Jappe Groenendijk.

Inleiding

In zijn meest autobiografische essay, ‘Trotsky and the wild orchids’, beschrijft Richard Rorty (1931-2007) hoe hij als ambitieuze vijftienjarige het plan opvat om een theorie te ontwikkelen die zijn wroeging kan wegnemen over het feit dat zijn liefde voor wilde orchideeën geen enkel universeel moreel nut dient. Orchideeën zijn voor hem persoonlijk weliswaar van groot belang, maar het knaagt aan hem dat hij zijn kostbare tijd niet besteedt om ideeën te ontwikkelen die helpen de zwakken te bevrijden van het juk van de sterken – bijvoorbeeld door het bestuderen van de geschriften van Leon Trotski, de marxistische revolutionair en held van zijn ouders. Rorty stelt dat zijn hele filosofische loopbaan terug te brengen is tot dit eerste probleem, hoe Trotski met de orchideeën te verzoenen, of in de woorden van Yeats, ‘[to] hold reality and justice in a single vision’ (Rorty 1989: 7).


Met Rorty's wending naar het pragmatisme komt er ook een einde aan zijn zoektocht naar een alomvattende theorie die persoonlijke fascinaties met universele principes kon verbinden. Hij ziet onder ogen dat ieder individu idiosynkratische contingenties kent die voor hem of haar van onschattbare waarde zijn – zoals de ervaring van een bepaald kunstwerk, het belijden van een geloofsopvatting of het vinden van wilde orchideeën –, maar die met geen mogelijkheid aanspraak op universele geldigheid kunnen maken. In Contingency, irony, and solidarity (1989) staat de spanning centraal tussen een particulier besef van de contingentie van het bestaan – het inzicht dat het ook anders had kunnen zijn – en onze publieke verplichtingen ten opzichte van de samenleving. Rorty’s oplossing is een radicale scheiding tussen het private en het publieke.

Rorty’s utopische toekomstideaal is een samenleving van liberale ironici. De ironicus is iemand die onder ogen ziet dat zijn eindvocable, zijn centrale overtuigingen en passies, contingent zijn. Dit neemt niet weg dat hij of zij een overtuigd liberaal kan zijn. Ondanks zijn afwijzing van universaliteitclaims blijft voor Rorty één belangrijk universeel principe overeind: het terugdringen van wreedheid in de wereld door een toename van solidariteit.


Dat is ook de Rorty die aan het woord is in dit niet eerder gepubliceerde interview, dat hij gaf in het voorjaar van 1997 tijdens zijn Spinozaleerstoel aan de Universiteit van Amsterdam. Dennis Schulting, een van de twee interviewers, herinnert zich het gesprek als volgt:

‘In een fax voorafgaand aan het interview liet Rorty weten liever niet te veel te willen uitwiden over postmodernisme (eind jaren negentig nog volop actueel in de filosofie), maar te willen debatteren over *good old social democratic politics*, want dat werd veel te weinig gedaan, althans onder Amerikaanse intellectuelen. We ontmoetten hem in Hotel De l’Europe in de week voordat hij begon met zijn colleges aan de UvA over de grondslagen van het pragmatische denken. We spraken met hem onder andere over een paper dat hij onlangs had geschreven, getiteld ‘The intellectuals and the poor’, waarin hij de Amerikaanse linkse intellectuelen ervan beschuldigde veel te veel in zichzelf gekeerd te zijn. Zijn aanklacht was dat in plaats van zich te concentreren op de sociaaleconomische noden in de Verenigde Staten de intellectuelen niet ter zake doende academische debatten over de positie van culturele minderheden op de Amerikaanse universiteiten voerden. In het interview benadrukt hij zijn opvattingen over de politieke rol van de intellectueel. Opvallend is ook dat hij enigszins lijkt terug te komen op zijn gebruik van de term ‘ironie’, zoals gebruikt in *Contingency, irony, and solidarity.*’

Zo’n twintig jaar nadat dit interview werd afgenomen dringt de vraag zich op hoe we Rorty’s filosofische erfenis moeten bezien. Om te beginnen heeft zijn denken geen onbelangrijke rol gespeeld in de geschiedenis van dit tijdschrift. Voor de UvA-studenten die in 1980 *Krisis* oprichten uit ontevredenheid over het heersende filosofische klimaat in Nederland en een uitweg zochten uit de crisis van het marxisme, was Rorty een richtinggevende stem. In artikelen uit de jaren tachtig en negentig duikt zijn naam steeds op, zo wordt in het derde nummer van 1989 zijn filosofie aan een breed publiek geïntroduceerd en drie jaar later verschijnt een publicatie over zijn denken als *Krisis-Onderzoek* (*Krisis* 1989, 3; Boomkens 1992).

Rorty’s ooit zo aanstootgevende kennisethiek is inmiddels allang niet meer opzienbarend – voor de meeste filosofiestudenten is het tegenwoordig common sense dat hun opvattingen geen ultieme grond hebben en dat er geen absolute waarheid bestaat. Daarentegen oogt Rorty’s politieke
filosofie in retrospectief een tikkeltje naïef en zijn scheiding tussen het private en het publieke tamelijk problematisch. Zo heeft zijn pleidooi om wreedheid te voorkomen weinig oog voor systeemkritiek en lijkt zijn scheiding tussen het private en het publieke geen recht te doen aan het belang van onze (contingente) overtuigingen in de publieke ruimte. In *Achieving our country* uit Rorty felle kritiek op postmoderne romanciers als Thomas Pynchon, die volgens hem niet in staat zijn de *social hope* te bieden die het werk van John Steinbeck nog bood (1998a: 6-10). Hieruit blijkt hoezeer de twee Rorty's op gespannen voet met elkaar staan; de eerste zou Pynchons postmoderne vocabulaire immers juist moeten kunnen waardeer, de tweede verwijt hem een gebrek aan inspirerende verhalen waaronder we nationale trots kunnen ontleenen. Hier staan Rorty's opvattingen opeens weer dichter bij de poëtica van jeugdheld Trotski dan gedacht.

Als we terugblikken, moeten we constateren dat Rorty's grootste verdienste misschien wel is gelegen in zijn onvermoeibare rol als bruggenbouwer en vertaler van filosofische ideeën en tradities. In zijn kenmerkende frivole omgang met uiterst complexe kwesties pleegde hij interventies in vrijwel alle belangrijke debatten van zowel de analytische als de continentale filosofie. In zijn sympathieke lezingen van sleutelposities uit de geschiedenis van het denken lijkt hij altijd op zoek naar dat wat nog steeds bruikbaar is. Daarbij goochelt hij met posities die voorheen onverenigbaar leken en verzoent hij zelfs het kantiaans moreel universalisme met Nietzsches *bridging of the gulf between “Christ” and “Anti-Christ”* (Wellmer 2008: 1). Het zijn precies deze herbeschrijvingen waarmee Rorty de spelregels van het hedendaagse filosofische discours voorgoed heeft veranderd.

**INTERVIEW MET RICHARD RORTY**

De zelfgenoegzaamheid van de linkse academici ergert u. In uw essay ‘The intellectuals and the poor’ schrijft u over het ‘moeras van de multiculturele studies’ en de ‘romantisering van het verschil’. Je zou toch ook kunnen zeggen dat het multiculturalisme een uit de hand gelopen emancipatiebeweging is?

Wat ik in dat essay bedoelde was dat de huidige multiculturele rage contraproducent is, in zoverre dat het een gevoel van een gezamenlijk Amerikaans burgerschap ontbeert. Mijn punt was dat in de nasleep van de burgerrechtenbeweging een tendens is ontstaan om af te geven op de Verenigde Staten. Onder invloed van bijvoorbeeld Malcolm X werd het gemeengoed om te denken: Amerika is een slecht land, we moeten ons isoleren van de rest, we moeten een separate cultuur creëren. Hierdoor is het multiculturele denken tot een soort fetisj van links geworden. Het gaat samen met een zekere neerbuigende houding ten opzichte van de Amerikaanse democratische instituties. Iedereen denkt zijn eigen vlag te moeten laten wapperen met als gevolg dat intellectuelen niet meer een gezamenlijk platform vormen. Ze spenderen te veel tijd aan het verdedigen van hun eigen territorium. Het is een soort yuppiefenomeen geworden. Elke academische groep – homo's, vrouwen, Hispanics – wil zijn eigen stempel op het huidige academische denken drukken. Ik geloof niet dat er iets verkeerd is met het multiculturalisme, behalve als het linkse politiek voor de voeten loopt.

Het lijkt erop dat u, net als de zogenaamde liberal consensus-denkers van vlak na de Tweede Wereldoorlog, een herwaardering wil van de Amerikaanse democratie. Intellectuelen als de politicoloog Louis Hartz, de historicus Daniel Boorstin en de socioloog Daniel Bell meenden dat de Amerikaanse democratie uniek was, omdat zij alle ideologische en maatschappelijke tegenstellingen in zich had verzwolgen. Ziet u zich in deze traditie?

We moeten de robuuster toone van het liberalisme inderdaad trachten te bewaren. We moeten het geloof in de instituties van onze westerse samenleving blijven behouden. In plaats van steeds te wijzen op het verkeerde, moeten we de hoop behouden dat we met concrete, specifieke voorstellen invloed kunnen uitoefenen. Hierover bestond een consensus bij links tot aan het einde van de jaren zestiende. De stelling was toen: Amerika is okay, mits het zijn beloftes waarmaken. Toen kwam Vietnam. Het werd gemeengoed om te zeggen: Amerika is niet okay en de gemaakte beloftes waren ook niet goed. De aandacht van de intellectueel verschoof. Niet langer concentreerden ze zich op de economische en politieke noden van het land, maar ze gingen over tot antimaatschappelijke acties. De aan-
Krisis
Tijdschrift voor actuele filosofie

Mark Koster & Dennis Schulting – Interview Richard Rorty

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De linkse intelligentsia moet een nieuwe ideologische coalitie gaan vormen, vindt u. Hoe?

Links moet met voorstellen komen om sociaaleconomische problemen aan te pakken. We zouden ons meer moeten mengen in de debatten die worden gevoerd over de bijstandswet, voorstellen moeten doen voor nieuwe arbeidswetten en ons druk moeten maken over de aftakeling van het onderwijssysteem. Het lijkt erop dat de intellectuelen hebben beslo- ten: echte politiek heeft nooit gewerkt, dus hoeven wij ons er ook niet mee te bemoeien. Dat is een misvatting. Vóór de jaren zestig was het makkelijker om je daden te legitimeren. Als een intellectueel geen marxist was, wist hij waarom hij geen marxist was. Je had een mening over het communisme, over Trotski en over marxistische politiek. Als je niet lid werd van de communistische partij, moest je daar een reden voor hebben. Na de jaren zestig begon dit uit de mode te raken. Er trad een schisma op in het linkse kamp. Je kreeg de radicalen en de liberals. Liberals werkten mee aan veranderingen binnen het systeem, de radicalen niet. Na de ne- derlaag van de linkse apostel McGovern in november 1972 hebben vooral de radicalen zich afgekeerd van het systeem en werden zo politiek on- bruikbaar.

Van rechts verwacht u ook geen heil. U meent zelfs dat de term ‘rechtse intellectueel’ een oxymoron is.

Ik kan niet één intellectueel van rechts in Amerika bedenken die een bij- drage levert aan de publieke discussie.

Maar mensen als Allan Bloom in The closing of the American mind of Dinesh

D’Souza in zijn Illiberal education hebben net als u veel kritiek op het multiculturalisme, maar zij noemen zich conservatief.

Goed, mensen als Bloom, Will en ook Bennett zijn intelligente mensen. Zij lezen boeken, maar het lijkt erop dat ze zich niet mengen in de politie- ke arena. Ze preken met een eindeloos moralisme, maar ze onderbouwen hun standingen niet met economische statistieken. Hun boeken zijn niet bruikbaar in de politiek. Bloom heeft de pretentie dat als je Rousseau niet hebt gelezen je je geen mening mag aanmeten over het verval van de west- terse cultuur. Bullshit, lijkt me. Zo’n boek kanaliseert hoogstens een ge- voel van onbehagen. Cultuurpessimistische kritiek wordt aangegrepen voor politieke doeleinden. Dat gebeurde ook in 1968. Toen zwaaide stu- denten met De dialektiek van de Verlichting van Adorno en Horkheimer alsof het Mao’s kleine rode boekje was. Pathetisch, want de studenten wisten absoluut niet wat er in het boek stond. Het enige wat ze hadden onthou- den was dat er een zwartgallig beeld in werd geschetst van de Amerikaanse maatschappij, dus dat het daarom wel een goed boek moest zijn. Uit het boek van Bloom kun je niet afleiden hoe het verder moet. Hij komt niet met een oplossing voor de kinderen in de getto’s, hij vertelt niet hoeveel belasting je moet betalen. Het enige wat hij doet, is de liberals er- van beschuldigen oppervlakkig en light-minded te zijn. Het is slechts academische politiek.

Maar er zijn toch ook rechte intellectuelen die zich wél mengen in politieke discussies en hun stellingen onderbouwen met statistieken. De socioloog Charles Murray heeft het bijna tot levenswerk gemaakt om de afschaffing van de bijstand te onderbouwen met cijfers.

Hij is een uitzondering, omdat hij inderdaad probeert de feitelijke situatie in kaart te brengen. Murray spreekt me niet aan, maar ik denk dat hij be- ter is dan Will, Bennett of Bloom, want zij blijven praten als filosofen. Murray komt aan met de sociologische feiten, al interpreteert hij ze niet goed, naar mijn idee.

U verwijt zowel de radicalen als de reactionairen zich niet te bekommernen om de dagelijkse politieke gebeurtenissen, maar ook in uw boeken staan geen politieke blauwdrukken. U noemt uzelf een ‘ironist liberal’. Is dat geen contradictio in terminis?
Ik heb bij nader inzien de verkeerde uitdrukking gebruikt, omdat niemand met het woord ironie uit de voeten kan. Ik bedoelde ermee te zeggen dat men een besef heeft van de contingentie of relativiteit van zijn opvattingen, maar dat is natuurlijk niet precies wat ironie impliceert. Als ik was aangekomen met het begrip ‘probabilism’ was niemand erover gelopen, maar dat leek me niet een bevredigende term. Ik wilde het scherper stellen, daarom noemde ik het ‘ironie’. Ik wilde duidelijk maken dat ik geen liberal ben in dogmatische zin.

U hebt uw liberalisme nooit, zoals bijvoorbeeld Jürgen Habermas, filosofisch willen onderbouwen. U vindt het niet noodzakelijk om onze voorkeur voor de ideeën die ten grondslag liggen aan de Verlichting en in onze westerse instituties zijn verankerd, epistemologisch te funderen. Waarom niet?

Habermas denkt dat het belangrijk is om een universalistisch principe te hebben. Dat is het grote verschil tussen hem en mij. We zijn het in bijna alles met elkaar eens op politiek gebied, er is echter één verschil: in de laatste analyse wil hij een kantiaan zijn en ik niet. Hij ziet in de communicatie van mensen een vorm van de hoogste Rede, terwijl ik niet geloof in dergelijke transcendentale vooronderstellingen. Ik zie niet in hoe je de communicatie tussen mensen, duizenden jaren geleden, toen ze nog tegen varkens praatten, kunt beschouwen als een transcendentaal verankerd discours.

Sommige mensen willen toch een verklaring. Het is alsof mensen van filosofen verwachten dat ze ook een soort laatste stap nemen naar iets onbereikbaars, iets buiten henzelf. Vergeet het maar: dat is er dus niet. Ik denk niet dat het een goed idee is dat filosofen die laatste metafysische stap maken. Je vraagt om een buitenmenselijk kader voor onze menselijke gemeenschap. Het is alsof wij, net als vroeger, denken dat we God aan onze kant hebben. Een verkeerde gedachte. Onze humanistische waarden komen niet voort uit iets dieps in de menselijke natuur of de universele menselijke ratio.

U hebt daar zelf persoonlijk ook nooit naar gezocht?

Nee.

Nooit?

Nooit.

Er is niets out there, behalve ongedwongen conversatie in de cultuur, meent u. Denkt u niet dat u het risico loopt het verwijt te krijgen van ‘linguïstisch behaviorisme’, als u zich beken tot een strikt linguïstisch kijk op de sociale werkelijkheid? Verliest u daarmee niet een kritisch begrip van zelfreflexiviteit?

In plaats van de Rede is er binnen een gemeenschap een gewoonte van kritische bezinning in het publieke debat. In dat opzicht ben ik inderdaad een linguïstisch behaviorist, maar ook een romanticus, omdat de talige handelingen steeds rijkere vormen van talig gedrag met zich meebrengen. Dat geschiedt op een volstrekt naturalistische wijze.

Al predikt u een antimetafysisch relativisme, ook u gaat uit van een aantal morele premissen. Uw humanisme is erop gebaseerd om pijn, sadisme en wreedheid te voorkomen. Waarom?

Als je een serieuze discussie wilt voeren over de noodzaak van het liberalisme kom dan met iets concreets. Je moet een levende vijand hebben om tegen te vechten. Pijn is zo’n concrete levende vijand. Pijn is tastbaar. Pijn voelt iedereen.

U zet zich af tegen elke vorm van epistemologische legitimatie, maar denkt u niet dat er iets van een legitimatie nodig is? Hoe weten we bijvoorbeeld dat we op de goede weg zijn?

Het is zoals Dewey zei: ‘Als we de democratische politiek verder perfectie- neren dan komt de Geest en de cultuur vanzelf.’ Die moet je niet probe- ren uit te spellen. Het enige wat je nodig hebt, is de vrijheid. Hoe meer vrijheid, hoe meer diversiteit. Je hebt geen filosofie nodig die aangeeft hoe de mens zou moeten handelen. Als je de vrijheid op cultureel, politiek en sociaal terrein stimuleert dan volgt vanzelf de dialectische vooruitgang van de Geest, zoals Hegel die voor ogen had. Die filosofische twijfel aan het liberalisme is voorgewende twijfel. Dat kun je niet rationeel verklaren.
In dit verband is het interessant dat de politicoloog Ernesto Laclau in een discussie met u wijst op de ‘structurele onbeslisbaarheid’ van de democratische politiek. Een politiek die daar rekening mee houdt, biedt de enige garantie voor een zo open mogelijke democratie.

Ik ben het niet oneens met Laclau, maar ik denk dat hij er te veel herrie om maakt. Ik vind dat er niet zoveel nieuws mee is gezegd. Die analyse is veel te sophisticated.

Men zou ook kunnen zeggen: u draait de zaak om. U zegt dat u uw voorkeur voor het liberalisme nergens op wilt baseren, zelfs niet op pragmatische premissen. Maar uitgaande van wat Laclau zegt over de ‘structurele onbeslisbaarheid’ kun je toch überhaupt geen politieke voorkeur hebben? Het is pas echt pragmatisme, als je telkens je keuzes aanpast aan de politieke situatie. Waarom heeft u dan toch een parti pris voor het ‘bourgeois liberalism’?

Ik zie niet in hoe we daar omheen kunnen.

* * *

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Dennis Schulting is gepromoveerd filosoof (Warwick, 2004) en voormalig universitair docent wijsbegeerte aan de UvA. Hij publiceert met name op het gebied van Kant en het Duitse idealisme.

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Literatuur


In the paper ‘From Fordism to Post-Fordism’, Emmanuel Renault argues that it is not clear that ‘the categories of democracy, social justice and the good life are capable of bringing about the political effects that may be expected today from the concept of alienation.’ (2007: 206). In line with this view, Axel Honneth states in the foreword of Alienation that we ‘inevitably find ourselves falling back on the concept of alienation’ in cases where we want to criticize social conditions that do not primarily violate principles of justice (viii).

At the same time, ever since post-structural critiques and the recognition of the ‘fact of pluralism’, the reintroduction of a concept like alienation requires at least some critical side-notes. For just as inevitably we may need to seek salvation in the concept of alienation in cases where we want to criticize social conditions that do not primarily violate principles of justice (viii).

Moreover, alienation critique suggests that we can objectively identify the good life as the authentic, non-alienated life. Rahel Jaeggi, professor in philosophy at the Humboldt University in Berlin, does not give us ‘some’ critical side-notes. Instead, she intertwines an extensive discussion of these issues within her conceptualisation and elaboration of the phenomenon of alienation today. It is for Jaeggi’s original and thorough discussion of these fundamental questions about the self and human freedom that we should value her project the most. However, her reconstruction of the concept of alienation also seems to be at the expense of the potential of the concept for social critique.

Jaeggi embraces the existentialist and Marxist insights of her theoretical predecessors in accepting that our acting and thinking is entangled with, and affected by, the social and material world around us, further suggesting that there can be something wrong with this relatedness to ourselves and to the world. That there is nevertheless a need to reconstruct the concept of alienation, she argues by showing how former ideas of alienation always presuppose that there is something that is essentially “one’s own” from which we can be estranged. This is particularly evident in Marx’ notion of a species-being with ‘essential human powers’ that are (ideally) externalized and objectified through labour-activity. In this respect, Jaeggi paraphrases Althusser that ‘the critique of essentialism has become part of philosophical “common sense”’ (28). Moreover, Jaeggi argues that a reconstruction of the concept of alienation is demanded in order to address the question that arises from the perspective of liberal theory, namely ‘whether there can be objective evidence of pathology that contradicts individuals’ subjective assessments or preferences’ (29). Exemplary here is Marcuse’s analysis of the subject who is ‘swallowed up by his alienated existence.’ If the alienated subjects do not themselves experience their situation as problematic, so Jaeggi argues, the ‘theory of alienation appears to have made itself immune to critique’ (29).

Jaeggi thus takes up the project of rethinking alienation without thick
notions of the self or the good life. A crucial theoretical starting point for this she finds in the notion of psychological health as formulated by the contemporary German philosopher Ernst Tugendhat. One of Tugendhat’s aims is to find a modern conception of the good life on the basis of which we could tell whether a person’s life is going well or badly, independently of that person’s actual desires and preferences. He finds this in a ‘formal conception of psychological health’ specified as the functional capacity of willing. To have the functional capacity of willing implies that ‘one has oneself at one’s command’. What is important for Tugendhat (and Jaeggi), is that simply willing something is not enough to count as having the functional capacity of willing: one also needs to identify oneself with this will and thereby hold a positive, endorsing relation to that volition. If this positive relation is absent, the functional capacity of willing is impaired. It is this impairment – not having oneself at one’s command – that Jaeggi takes to be at the heart of the phenomenon of alienation.

By understanding alienation as a deficiency in willing one’s will, the problem of alienation becomes essentially a problem of freedom. Although this focus on willing may appear as a problem of exercising Kantian autonomy, Jaeggi repeatedly emphasises that we should not confuse alienation with heteronomy. For the lack of freedom in cases of alienation is not due to an external force or obstacle that frustrates the exercise of our will, it is rather due to a more ‘internal’ affair, namely, that – somehow – a person cannot appropriate one’s actions, desires or thoughts. It is through this idea of appropriation that Jaeggi shows herself to be a truly Hegelian thinker, taking positive freedom as her central object of concern. According to this view, being free requires that a person appropriates one’s will and actions, identifies with them and incorporates them into one’s life, thereby constituting and realizing oneself through what one wants and does. We thus see that speaking of an ‘internal affair’ is at the same time misleading: willing and acting take place within, and are affected by, a material and social environment. Due to this strong relation between the self and the world, Jaeggi takes a deficient appropriative relation to oneself as both a matter of self-alienation and of alienation of the world.

Tugendhat’s conception of willing one’s will offers Jaeggi a way to overcome the liberal challenge with which the concept of alienation is confronted. The idea of appropriating one’s will enables us to conceptualize alienation without invoking substantive claims about true, natural or good preferences (what Tugendhat calls ‘the What of willing’), but allows only formal claims about the (relational) process of willing. Alienation critique can as such do without an objective conception of the good life: it criticizes forms of life to the extent that they are not appropriated by the persons living them, not to the extent that they lack particular goals or values. Understanding alienation as impeded appropriation of one’s will also helps to avoid appealing to an essentialist view of the self. Jaeggi only assumes that people have this capacity to appropriate the life they lead as their own, not that there is something inside us that can or should be ‘re-appropriated’. So, besides from rejecting the idea of a human essence as a basis of the good life, Jaeggi gives a thorough critique of the ‘container model’ of the self, according to which the self is conceived as a ‘closed-off inner-space’. Instead, leading a life implies that we act in a world, change that world, and thereby make this world our own. At the same time, our acting in the world does not leave ourselves unaffected: we appropriate our acting and willing and through this, we are ‘selves in the making’ (166). Moreover, Jaeggi does not think the self as having a pre-given substantive content that determines the outcome of our actions. Although she assumes the self as having the functional capacity of willing and appropriating these volitions, this appropriation is not, in a way that Harry Frankfurt suggests, determined by a ‘volitional unity’. The problem with such a volitional unity, according to Jaeggi, is that it presupposes an underlying coherent will that determines the hierarchy among different volitions. She points out that this cannot account for the fact that volitions can be incoherent and ambivalent. At the same time, Jaeggi rejects the post-modern idea of multiple identities, since this would ignore the intuitive idea that there is a bearer of experiences and processes of appropriation. Jaeggi thus conceives the self as ‘Doing’ rather than a ‘Being’: a fluid process that relates both to itself and to the world, and that can form meaningful, integrating narratives about all the ambivalences and changes in values and preferences that constitute this very ‘self’.
Immanent critique

Jaeggi thus convincingly strips off the concept of alienation from outdated associations with human nature or universal conceptions of the good life. As she herself points out, the implication of this is that the scope of alienation critique is limited. Since alienation is understood as a failure to appropriate one’s life as one’s own, a person’s condition of relating to herself and the world can only be judged by its form, not by its content. There are no objective criteria to which an analysis of alienation could appeal. Alienation critique, so Jaeggi argues, should thus be understood as immanent critique: a critique that cannot rely on standards or ideals that transcend those that are already endorsed by the alienated agents. Such transcending ideals would lack authority within a liberal paradigm: immanent critique is therefore limited to a specific shared form of life.

Jaeggi then identifies two forms that an immanent critique of alienation can take. On the one hand, alienation to the world can be diagnosed by pointing out tensions between prevailing ideals of freedom and their actual realization; e.g. a gap may exist between the modern ideal of living a sovereign life, and the degree in which agents ‘actually’ have their life at their command by making their social and material world their own. On the other hand, self-alienation can be analysed by indicating the discrepancies between features and qualities we attribute to subjects by regarding them as responsible agents, and the fact that subjects do not identify with their own actions and are for that reason obstructed in their capacity to act responsibly. Jaeggi suggests that although alienation critique is limited to a shared form of life, the scope of that shared form of life may extend as far as the value of autonomy is endorsed: ‘Alienation critique would then be an element of the critical, evaluative self-interpretation of a modern culture that has made freedom and self-determination its core-values’ (41).

Alienation as social critique

But there is another sense in which Jaeggi’s reconstruction of the concept of alienation seems to be limited, in so far as alienation critique is understood as a promise for critical theory, the Frankfurter Schule tradition in which Jaeggi can be situated. As mentioned above, understanding alienation as a crucial concept for critical theory is hinted at by Axel Honneth and Emanuel Renault. But also Jaeggi herself states that the concept of alienation ‘makes it possible to arrive at standards for diagnosing social pathologies’ (xxiii). However, it is questionable to what extent Jaeggi’s alienation critique can indeed point out pathologies that are ‘social’ in the sense of having both a social source and solution. As Raymond Geuss argues in The Idea of Critical Theory, what makes theories ‘critical’ is that they offer on the one hand a form of knowledge, and have, on the other, a ‘special standing as guides for human action’ (Geuss, 1). This holds for both psychoanalytic theories and for social-critical theories. Both aim to enlighten the agent to whom the theory or analysis is directed. Providing the agent insight into the ‘falseness’ of his or her beliefs would have an emancipating effect on the agent, in the sense that it could help to free the agent. But as Geuss also points out, there is an important difference between psychoanalytic and critical theory of society: in the case of psychological deficits, such as a neurosis, the repression of the agent (its ‘false consciousness’) is often self-imposed. To free yourself from it is indeed possible in most cases by means of self-reflection and going into therapy. As Geuss puts it: ‘the struggle to overcome it, is a struggle with oneself, not with an external — physical or social — reality, and success consists not so much in accomplishing changes in the world as in finding a satisfactory reorganisation of attitudes, habits, feelings and desires.’ (Geuss, 74).

To talk about false beliefs of a social class or social group generally leans on the notion of ‘ideological coercion’: ‘Ideological coercion is self-imposed — by acting in the way they do, agents constitute it — but the “objective power” it has over them is not just a power which will be automatically dissolved by critical reflection. In acting in their deluded way, the agents have produced a complex of social institutions which cannot now be abolished merely by changes in the agents’ beliefs (…) To abolish an established social institution (…) will in general require more than a change in the form of consciousness of the oppressed; it will require a long course of political action.’ (Geuss 74-75).

It seems to me that Jaeggi’s understanding of alienation cannot be thought of as a question of ideological coercion. The phenomenological discussion in the middle of the book of the individual cases of alienation...
reinforce this: even though these persons are conceptualised as deeply intertwined with their social and physical environment, it seems that in the end their alienated condition can only be overcome by a change of the subject’s thoughts and dispositions. In order to show how little there can be done about alienation in terms of institutional reforms, I'll discuss each of these cases briefly.

**Powerlessness**

The first case – a young scientist – represents alienation as the experience of powerlessness towards one’s own actions. This mathematician used to live a city life based on fast food, in devotion to his work. But then for tax-reasons he and his girlfriend decide to marry. She becomes pregnant and they move to a suburban house, starting a happy family life. Although the turn of his life-course is consciously chosen, the scientist experiences it as if an alien power is at work in his life. This story shows us that even if we act in accordance with our will, we can still fail to experience the choices that we have made as our own. Referring to Tugendhat, Jaeggi explains this alienation by pointing to the degree in which one considers one’s life as a matter of ‘practical questions’, such as ‘What is to be done?’, but also more fundamental questions such as ‘What kind of person do I want to be?’ Such practical questions are masked if a person’s life-course presents itself as taking a dynamic of its own. According to Jaeggi, to prevent or overcome this form of alienation there should be an awareness of the possibility of alternatives. Now, the question is: is it a responsibility of our scientist to unmask the practical questions, or could it be that the situation was constituted in such a way that it could not appear as a choice? Jaeggi answers that it can be both. On the one hand, the young father is not sensitive enough to his own living situation and therefore fails to takes alternatives into consideration. At the same time, to understand things as practical questions is also a matter of the opening up ‘of the horizon of possibility that is given within a particular life situation or in a particular form of life.’ (67). So, the external factor Jaeggi identifies as a source of alienation is the existence of a particular form of life. Conventions can indeed narrow the scope of possibilities for agents and determine the thinkable alternatives. But whether the particular form of life common in a society actually does result in alienation depends on the extent to which the subject is conscious of his own thoughts and feelings, and can as such enable himself to perceive his position as open for change.

**Loss of authenticity**

The second case of alienation is that of alienation as loss of authenticity in social role-playing. The ambitious junior editor is taken as exemplary: being a bit overdressed, imitating the gestures of his boss, and having an articulated opinion about everything, we tend to regard him as inauthentic or insincere. Jaeggi does not consider social roles as such as alienating, for we cannot do without them, and they often, or so she argues, enable our self-realization. Jaeggi nevertheless identifies several ways in which alienation in role behaviour can take place. The central point for her is that such alienation occurs because the subject does not appropriate his role as something that is constitutive for his personal identity. To prevent alienation remains a matter of what she calls “manoeuvring” between the pre-existing role and the task for the individual to realize it in its own way. Also here it is social convention, namely concerning social roles, that might indeed partially cause the alienation by imposing demands and rules of behaviour upon the agent. Yet as Jaeggi herself states, social roles are not impossible to appropriate per se. Alienation through social role implies a ‘mismatch’ between the agent and the role, but it seems to be up to the former to appropriate the latter.

**Internal division**

The interesting character that is discussed as a third case – alienation by internal division – is H. ‘the giggling feminist’. To her own frustration, this feminist woman often falls back into kinds of behaviour she rejects as ‘unemancipated’, such as giggling. H. is not just superficially holding emancipatory opinions, but has deeply internalized feminist convictions. She therefore experiences a real discrepancy between her impulses to behave ‘sweet and harmless’ and her emancipated beliefs. According to Jaeggi, the problem in the case of inner division is not that one fails to behave according to one’s true will, for this would presume that we can discern our true will from desires that are manipulated by our social environment. Rather, inner division is what happens when one does not
'participate' in what one does. Although will-formation always happens under the influence of a social environment, alienation as internal division implies that a person experiences tensions between her multiple desires and beliefs. Resolving this kind of alienation thus requires the individual's capacity to recognize and respond to such inner inconsistencies.

Indifference

A last form of alienation — self-alienation as indifference — is represented by the protagonist from the novel Perlmanns Schweigen. Perlmann is a professor in linguistics who has lost the belief in the importance of academic work. Lecturing and visiting conferences, once conceived by him as meaningful activities, appear now to him 'as if through a wall of glass'. Jaeggi explains this as a loss of identification: Perlmann is unable to take up his academic activities as constitutive for his identity or self-understanding. According to Jaeggi, alienation as indifference results from a distorted relation between the self and the external world. In this last form of alienation it becomes perhaps most obvious why there is reason to question the role of institutions in overcoming alienation: a subject needs the world to realize herself, yet the external world cannot prevent the subject from becoming indifferent.

The phenomenological richness of Jaeggi’s discussion of these individual examples is of great value for understanding the subjectivities of alienation today. But if this is the best we can make of the phenomenon of alienation it seems unlikely that specific social institutions can be identified as having 'objective power' by alienating agents. The only objective alienating force at stake in these modern manifestations of alienation are the particular forms of life in which agents attempt to realize themselves, and institutions such as marriage and social roles. Especially within today’s liberal and pluralist societies, these forms of life and social institutions do not present themselves as objective or external obstructions per se. Whether forms of life are alienating thus differs from person to person.

To come back to the hopes expressed by Emanuel Renault and Axel Honneth for the promising potential of the revival of alienation critique: it remains questionable to what extent this reconstructed concept of alienation could sort out any political effects, or address structural social conditions. It is not said that this is impossible, but Jaeggi’s project as presented in Alienation does not yet make clear how to conceive of alienation as also a diagnosis of social pathologies, rather than as an indicator of a lack of individual psychological health. Fortunately, there is something to look out for, for the ‘corresponding analysis and evaluation — of how institutions are constituted — remains to be carried out’ (220). And according to the translator Frederick Neuhouser, Jaeggi’s new book Kritik von Lebensformen is promising in this respect. For those who cannot read German, it is waiting for its translation; meanwhile keep on trying to have oneself at one’s command. And in case of failure: visit a shrink.

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EVA MEIJER

ANIMAL DELIBERATION: FROM FARM PHILOSOPHY TO PLAYING WITH PIGS


Introduction

The field of animal ethics has in the past forty years been dominated by a focus on nonhuman animal suffering. The main theoretical debate in this field takes place between proponents of utilitarianism and deontology, or welfare and rights. The aim of this debate is to formulate universal human duties towards nonhuman animals. Factory farming is seen by many animal philosophers as one of the largest problems for animals, at least in quantitative terms, and many animal ethicists argue for either a substantial reform, or abolition, of this practice. In Animal deliberation: The co-evolution of technology and ethics on the farm, Clemens Driessen develops a new approach to animal ethics, in which he focuses on technologies used on farms. By connecting different theoretical approaches, ranging from science and technology studies, to pragmatic philosophy and to case studies, Driessen aims to contribute to real, situated debates. He does so not only by theorizing, but also by engaging with farmers and farmed animals, focusing specifically on farming practices with dairy cows and pigs in The Netherlands. Additionally, he aims to bridge the distance between farming practices and the general public, as is perhaps most visible in the interspecies video game Pig Chase, which he invented as part of the project.

Animal ethics and technology on the farm

The thesis is divided into four parts, which are all devoted to different sets of concerns. Each chapter introduces a new theoretical approach, used as a tool that is tied to the practice described, thereby creating not only depth in the subject matter discussed, but also in the ways we can view, discuss and understand farming practices. In the introduction Driessen argues for a situated and contextual pragmatist form of ethics that focuses on material and discursive practices, recognizing the importance of experience, instead of trying to formulate universal abstract moral standpoints. He does so for several reasons, ranging from the fact that intensive farming will continue to exist in the years to come, to the theoretical impossibility of taking a view from nowhere. Relatedly, Driessen aims to rethink the meaning of debating, and to reconsider what counts as an appropriate argument by focusing on the influence of technology on our thinking.

The first part of the thesis explores the role of ethics on and beyond the farm. In chapter two Driessen writes an ethnography of farmers’ deliberation – a group that is usually not consulted in animal ethics – combining insights from sociology with the author’s own experiences with farmers: he took a course in milking cows, visited farms with students, and helped out animal scientists. The following chapter considers ethical debates surrounding technological inventions that propose to do away with farmers, namely in vitro meat and pig towers, and uses the work of Dewey and Heidegger in combination with insights from science and technology studies, as well as bio-art, to map the forms of reasoning generated by these experiments.
Part two investigates how the co-evolution of moral and technological change takes place in everyday material practices. It focuses on the example of the milking robot, and draws on Actor Network Theory in conversation with rural sociology and geography, to show how cow-robot-farmer assemblages are constructed around this invention. With the introduction of the milking-robot the roles of farmer and cows change. Driessen introduces the term ‘animal deliberation’ to describe this process, connecting views developed in animal geography to recent work that argues for viewing animals as political actors, and to situated critiques of theories of deliberation. In this material multispecies deliberation, cows adapt to the robot and show their preferences, which the farmers interpret and to which they respond by making changes, to which the cows respond, and so on. The outcome regarding the position and use of the robot is the result of both the cows’ and the farmers’ agencies. The milking-robot enables the cows to formulate their standpoint in a new way and the farmers to read them differently, and vice versa.

In part three, Driessen combines the theoretical insights gained in the first two parts to develop an interspecies video game, Pig Chase. In this game, viewers communicate with farmed pigs. This relieves the pigs’ boredom – one of the most pressing problems for pigs in intensive farming – and connects consumers to the animals they eat. The video made to promote the game (the actual game has not yet been realised) was picked up by different media, and stirred discussion. Driessen presents the game as a philosophical intervention that raises questions about the treatment of pigs in intensive farming, eating animals more generally, and the distance between consumers and farmed animals, as well as ontological questions about moral subjectivity. The game explores new forms of thinking with other animals, and of doing ethics. Its aim is to bring to life a form of multispecies philosophy, in which pigs, and different groups of humans, such as scientists, consumers, animal activists, game enthusiasts, can play and think together.

The final part of the thesis ties the different threads together and questions its own emphasis on the written word. Instead of offering a conclusive argument on animal farming in The Netherlands, the thesis aims to bring about a sense of fascination and ambivalence towards the practices described. Instead of regarding technological interventions solely as sites for debate and reflection, it proposes to view them as ways of practicing philosophy and ethics. In this context the Pig Chase project is presented as a new site for experience, reflection and moral debate, in which humans and other animals can take part.

Philosopher Chase

The thesis is an original contribution to the field of animal ethics, and as such an interesting read for philosophers and others interested in interconnections between ethics, technology, and farm practices. The method developed in this thesis sheds new light on the issues discussed and shows the potential of thinking about animal ethics outside the dominant paradigms of utilitarianism, deontology and virtue ethics. Connecting different fields of theory to the case studies not only illuminates aspects of human-animal relations, but also shows the relevance of these, mostly rather new, approaches in thinking about farm animals and technology in the Netherlands. Driessen’s argument for locating ethics and interspecies thinking at least partly in material practices is convincing, and using philosophical interspecies experiments to interact with nonhuman animals, and those who work with them, is a promising new research strategy. The thesis reads well and succeeds in providing an engaging narrative. The topics discussed – bored farm animals, environmental issues, new technologies – are serious, but Driessen knows how to approach them lightly; at the end of his thesis he discusses his engagement with absurdity and the ridiculous, and the role of jokes and humour in making others think.

The thesis however also raises several theoretical and practical questions. The first set of questions concerns power relations. While Driessen’s arguments for providing a narrative, rather than arguing from a view from nowhere, are convincing, his starting point is not morally neutral. Exercising power and agency is not a matter of all or nothing, something Driessen convincingly shows, and the philosopher is always situated, for example by being human. But being situated does not mean we cannot question power relations. The risk of staying too close to practices is that
one legitimates them. Conceptualizing animal agency in relation to milk-
ing-robots is for example quite problematic from an animal rights per-
spective, because the cows in question are held captive and have no (or
very little) opportunity to end their exploitation. While suffering is not
the only lens through which we should view nonhuman animals, not
taking their suffering seriously keeps intact the worldview that allows for
exploitation, and runs the risk of legitimating the practices attached to
that.

This leads to the second set of questions, which deals with the political
implications of this thesis. Driessen does not discuss political implications
of the project and it is unclear how the views developed in this thesis can
be translated to democratic institutions, laws and regulations. This is
problematic from the perspective of animal subjectivity, and from the
perspective of democracy. In current political constellations, nonhuman
animals have no voice. Their interests are affected by human laws and
regulations, yet they cannot participate in official forms of politics. Dries-
sen shows that farm animals can and do exercise agency in matters that
concern their lives. He also shows that material interventions can support
human-animal deliberations. Using a political concept such as deliber-
ation to conceptualize human-animal relations is very promising, but in its
current form the political and democratic potential is not fully realized. It
is unclear why, and if, farmers should aim to further develop processes of
deliberation with other animals, and how existing forms of deliberation
can inform political decision-making. Animal agency is only conceptual-
ized on the micro-level, while humans determine the macro-framework
in which it is acted, which reinforces the human-animal hierarchy that is
challenged. Viewing nonhuman animals as subjects with their own per-
spective on life asks not only for rethinking nonhuman animal agency but
also for rethinking the structures and relations in which it is shaped, on
different levels.

The last question concerns the relation between form and content. The
final chapters of the thesis refuse to offer an overarching argument, as
would be expected from a PhD thesis. While this works well in terms of
narrative, it also leaves the story with somewhat of an open ending. Or,
more precisely: it raises the question of why the result of this research is a

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THE SOMATECHNICS OF WILLFULNESS


‘How do you solve a problem like Maria?’ The Sound of Music is a bit far from the cultural intertexts that comprise Sara Ahmed’s willfulness archive, such as numerous novels by George Eliot, two instructive Grimm fairytales, Audre Lorde, and the master and slave of Hegel. Yet, Julie Andrews’ joyfully troubled character flew to my mind as a cheesy embodiment of a figure who says no, and is still the lovable problem of the cultural text. ‘To be identified as willful is to become a problem,’ declares Willful Subjects (3). Ahmed’s latest contribution to feminist ‘not philosophy’ is an assemblage of heterodox readings of continental philosophy and literature that incorporates insights from cultural theory, queer and black feminist studies. She explains that the book contributes to ‘not’ philosophy not only through a non-philosopher engaging the novelist George Eliot as a philosopher (though she is “not”), but also by attending to “the not” in order to make it an object of thought (15). ‘Willfulness might be what we do when we are judged as being not, as not meeting the criteria for being human,’ writes Ahmed, succinctly parsing the main thrust of her explorations in the archive of ‘not being white, not being male, not being straight, not being able-bodied’ (Ibid.) As such, Willful Subjects greatly expands on the figure of the feminist killjoy introduced in Ahmed’s The Promise of Happiness (Duke, 2010); it even claims to be readable as a prequel by returning to characters, texts and the question of conditional sociality (see p. 219 n42). By figuring the stray, and doing philosophy astray, Ahmed’s writing stridently affirms the negative “not” within philosophy’s discipline. Likewise, though with eyes open to the masculinist and militaristic captures of the will, Ahmed affirms the utility of working with willfulness ‘to deepen the critiques of voluntarism by reflecting on the intimacy between freedom and force’ (16). The various willful subjects that populate this very wide-ranging study form, like Maria, to some people, a problem. They too are decidedly undecided; in other words described as flighty, childish, and won’t listen or understand. For her willfulness Maria is both adored by some and called a headache by others. Drawing often on her own life story, Ahmed reminds us that this attribution of willfulness is not personal, though it may feel so.

Willful Subjects does not need to announce any bold deconstructionist moves, the overflowing archives on the will offer slippage aplenty that Ahmed follows, methodologically, as far as she can. The book is structured according to different inflections and sites of will and its articulation, which means one can read it in any direction or piecemeal. So, allow me to introduce it back to front: Taming a finicky will is central to all structures of inequity, leading to willfulness becoming required to come up against whatever has been defined as the generalized will (chapter 4). Ahmed argues that will and its force is at the core of establishing hierarchies of command/obedience within nationalism (chapter 3), education (chapter 2), and amongst human subjects (chapter 1). Ahmed convincingly shows that rife within contemporary society are a proliferation of ‘straightening’ techniques that bend wills to the correct path, like iron rods, guiding hands, and, I might add, ingestible drugs for impulse control like Ritalin. These will ‘orthopedics’ could also be central to any scholar’s analysis of today’s debates on police force, university management, and a range of activist movements that call for self-determination such as migration, transgender, disability and intersex. Problematizing willfulness also floats through social consciousness in unassuming phrases like “will-
power” that haunt all kinds of feminist body issues like working, eating, and exercising.

Foucault returns regularly as a thinking partner of Ahmed, such as noting the oft-quoted sentence, “If there was not resistance, there would be no power relations,” and reminding us of the less cited: “Because it would be just a matter of obedience” (137-8). The take-away being: There is power because there is disobedience. What Ahmed alludes to in her account of the anti-sociality of the will are the range of dissident practices that comprise the ‘somato-political’ (Foucault 1978) mattering of the body that exercises techniques of control and resistance. Paul B. Preciado’s Testo-Junkie: Sex, Drugs and Biopolitics in a Pharmacopornographic Era (2013), a book she Ahmed?? does not mention, would make for fascinating companion reading because the author similarly argues that the will has been ingestible and interiorized. In the pharmacopornographic era, according to Preciado, the body swallows power predominately in pill form but also through all kinds of consumables and incorporation of images (207). Considering the two authors together would push forward the question of how the somato-politics crisscrosses interiority and exteriority; for example, Ahmed discusses disobedient ears that (don’t) hear, or thumbs that feel sore, or voices that croak “no.” In light of this special issue, I will briefly consider how the somato-politics of swallowing, much like the killjoy’s willful gagging that “ruins an atmosphere” that Ahmed discusses in chapter 4 (152), might be placed within the project of the new university.

In a recent keynote “The Somatechnics of Swallowing: Affective Life in the Neoliberal University,” given at the Somatechnics International Conference (Tucson April 18, 2015), Nikki Sullivan reflected on the affective and bodily technologies in place to shape and bend the will of people in the academy. Academics who start their day swallowing selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors might be suffering from gagging on the “bullshit” Sullivan defines as the “neoliberalalese” language spoken in the “Kingdom of Bull” (6). Swallowing (or not), she writes, “is a disciplinary practice, a somatechnology” that institutionalizes, normalizes, and also wreaks havoc on dissident forms of visceral corporeality (10). The conceptual portmanteau of somatechnics tracks the emergence of gendered, racialized, or sexualized bodily being within various histories of hard and soft techniques. The analytic of somatechnics, or its kin in the somato-political, clarifies how the operation of willfulness animates and enfleshes different forms of subjectivity and as such is also an illuminating lens to use for reading Willful Subjects. Sullivan describes how her experience of gagging led her to realize that, ‘I am twenty-three feet of feminist intestines cocked, alert, ready to shoot from my mouth’ (9). Aligned with Ahmed’s body part that does not submit its will to the whole, that becomes the willful part (10), Sullivan becomes to the administration an embodiment of her willful epiglottis that should close to make swallowing neoliberalalese possible, but doesn’t, can’t.

The somatechnics of willfulness is clearly trans-disciplinary. Ahmed shows us the myriad ways that will discourses cross-pollinate from biology, to anatomy, philosophy, psychology, political economy and so on. This might explain the genesis of what one reviewer, Marcie Bianco, described as a ‘methodologically messy’ text that traverses discourses without apparent connection (2014: n/p). The textuality of Willful Subjects seems to me to be incarnating not-philosophy in refusing to perform according to the general will of correct disciplinary ways. In my reading, Ahmed (willfully!) refuses one through line resulting in often jarring, or ‘swerving’ (10), skips amidst histories of willfulness. At various points, and often in footnotes, she suggests “a history” of the will could be seen through following the deviations of hysteria, or who selfishness gets attached to, or investigating the entangled emergence of will and desire, or straying along with other “will words” like vandals and vagabonds who are racialized willful wanderers. Though teeming with stray ends, this book never tries to be a complete social history, nor a history of ideas. The wanderings reveal an incredible breadth and depth of knowledge that amasses popular culture like Downton Abbey together with ancient philosophers like Empedocles in a similar way to Sianne Ngai and Lauren Berlant’s dexterous writings.

As stated in the introduction, the idiosyncratic methodology reads sideways and across an archive of documents ‘that are passed down in which willfulness comes up … as a character trait’ in order to ask not what willfulness is, but what willfulness is doing. While calling someone willful is a technique of social dismissal that is explored in the first three chapters, in
chapter 4 and the conclusion Ahmed refuses to ignore the potentially positive side of this charge of ‘too much will’ that might be necessary to forge ahead against the flow of another (general) will. Ahmed’s attraction to the concept seems to be that “the will” offers nearly every sense of agency and of domination. Hence, the book examines what the invocation of the will and its problematic fullness accomplishes, and for whom. Examples of the somatechnics of willfulness at work are often figures in novels that happily carry water pots or accidently drop jugs that seem to have a will to fly-away; but also we find embodied action in arms that rise up, feet that hesitantly shuffle, hands that grasp or clinch into fists, mouths that can’t speak or like Sullivan’s, can’t swallow, ears that can’t or won’t hear, and so on.

Perhaps unsurprisingly then, one of the book’s stated departure points is from Foucault’s genealogy of the subject that inquires after the power relations that give rise to the apparent unity of the subject. Cautiously Foucault maneuvers around the will to ask not who wills, but how the human will is a somatechnics to produce a who. Ahmed’s chapter “Will-ing Subjects” opens with a quote from Augustine’s *Confessions*, also favored by Foucault, to examine how a will becomes a property of a subject. The next chapter on “The Good Will” begins with a moral quandary about a murderous will quoted from Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda* before considering obedience as pedagogical training. Then, Rousseau’s *The Social Contract* is brought in to highlight “The General Will” that paradoxically forces one to be free by wrangling the particular will into alignment with the general. The final chapter on “Willfulness as a Style of Politics” does not open with literature, but advances by arranging quotes from various political actors, who claim to be willful, in feminist, queer and antiracist histories, including a reading of *Antigone*. The effect is a detour around endless discussions of (free) will versus (self) determination that bring little insight into our current political climate. Instead we learn how willful parts, not people, are the acting organs, instruments, and affections that illuminate the mechanics of culture.

Though dealing very often with texts from antiquity and early modern periods, the book pulses towards providing a history of the present. This long arc can be found in how throughout the book Ahmed references the origin and history of words. Etymology is recruited to unpack senses and tease out politically efficacious associations through a word’s derivatives. Nearly every few pages we encounter this “derives from” phrasing, which is often followed by (concluding or transitioning) passages that burst with the fun of wordplay. Just one example: Ahmed’s discussion of Mary Poovey’s book *Making a Social Body* shows how the classical metaphor of the body politic holds out the image of the whole as a promise of membership to parts that should function sympathetically to each other. ‘Sympathy,’ she writes, ‘can be understood as accordance: the verb “accord” derives from heart. A sympathetic part is an agreement with heart’ (101). Bordering on puns, the rhetorical strategy of feeling out different senses of words often furthers another convincing, poetic twist to the argumentation. However, as a regularly used device it stands out and could irritate some readers looking for an encapsulated argument and less embroidery.

With fifty pages of notes at the end, they comprise another chapter at least of thoughts. Many notes are much more than short asides and suggest whole abandoned projects (much more on Foucault and Fanon’s will) and versions of the chapter (like expanding on Freud’s counter-will). Particularly for readers less familiar with her work, Ahmed usefully explains here how a certain paragraph builds on earlier texts such as *Strange Encounters* (2000) or *On Being Included* (2012). The view from the back of the book suggests retrospectively how Ahmed’s research has all along placed the will at the core of her trajectory.

In fact already on page 3, the author explains that *Willful Subjects* was sparked by a footnote in *The Promise of Happiness* in which she reflects on the sociality of the will, ‘the ways in which someone becomes described as willful insofar as they will too much, or too little, or in “the wrong way”’, a statement from an earlier work that effectively summarizes the research question regarding the somatechnics of willfulness at the heart of this present book’s investigation. For use in the classroom or just personal interest, Ahmed also shares a great deal of work-in-progress on her blog, feministkilljoys.com. For instance, the most recent entry is on becoming unsympathetic, which is a direct expansion from writing in chapter three on the general will and coercive sympathy. Recurrence and reshuffling of ideas seems to be her *modus operandi*; the writing affords a fascinating kalei-
dosscopic view into the mind of one of the most prolific and respected feminist (not) philosophers active today. For now I can only guess which footnote gave rise to the already announced next book, Living a Feminist Life. Given the solid basis this one offers for institutional critique, I imagine the next one will also help us all bring into being a new university, or at least one that doesn’t make us retch.

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Op de website van Omroep West wordt op 21 januari 2015 het volgende bericht geplaatst over een verkrachtingszaak waarin een dertigjarige man tbs met dwangverpleging opgelegd krijgt: ‘[Hij] bekende de daad pas in hoger beroep. Hij werd toen tot 4 jaar cel en tbs veroordeeld. Met de bekentenis hoopt hij onder tbs met dwangverpleging uit te komen.’

Wat betekent de bekentenis van deze man? Omroep West zegt dat hij zijn straf wil ontwijken. De rechter besluit dat de man moet worden verpleegd. De samenleving moet worden beschermd tegen het criminele subject, om wat hij heeft gedaan en wie hij is en het risico dat zijn zijn vormt.


Waar Foucault eerder, in *Discipline and punish*, de nadruk legt op de zichtbaarheid van de gevangene, verschuift die aandacht zich in Leuven naar de hoorbaarheid van wat de verdachte zegt. Dit heeft implicaties voor de situatie waarin subjectiviteit tot stand komt. Een bekentenis kan alleen worden begrepen in een situatie die om een bekentenis vraagt. De dramaturgie van het bekennen vraagt om een podium en toehoorders (Foucault 2014: 210). In die zin volgt de bekentenis op de onderwerping – subjectivering – van de beschuldigde.

Behalve als een echo van eerdere werk zijn de colleges ook te lezen als een opmars naar Foucaults latere preoccupatie met het waarheid-spreken in de vorm van _parrhēsia_. _Parrhēsia_ omhelst een ethische vorm van waarheid-spreken ten overstaan van een autoriteit die zich vervolgens gebonden ziet aan die waarheid en daardoor een verandering ondergaat (Foucault 2012: 13). In de colleges in Leuven gaat Foucault in op de bekentenis als vormend voor het criminele subject, waarbij eerder sprake is van overheersing dan van ethiek (Foucault 1996: 434). Het handelend subject versterkt hier de overheersing waardoor het wordt onderworpen. Waar _parrhēsia_ de mogelijkheid tot verandering opent, bemoeilijkt de bekentenis deze juist.

In zijn laatste college komt Foucault uit bij het criminele subject als risico voor de samenleving. Hier is de bekentenis niet meer nodig om de beschuldigde te veroordelen, maar om haar subjectiviteit als dader vast te stellen. Deze situatie volgt op een geschiedenis van de verbinding tussen het bekennen en jurisdictie vanaf de klassieke oudheid tot aan de twintigste eeuw.

Die geschiedenis begint met een interpretatie van Homerus. Foucault be-
steedt aandacht aan een eed die moet worden afgelegd als resultaat van een geschil dat optreedt na een paardenrenwedstrijd. Een van de renners, Antilochus, moet voor de goden zweren dat hij niet vals speelde (Foucault 2014: 37). Antilochus weigert de eed af te leggen omdat hij zich niet tot de goden wil verhouden. Nu moet het geschil binnen het menselijke domein worden beslecht. De oplossing neemt een juridische vorm aan. Er is echter nog geen sprake van een bekentenis: hij weigert de eed af te leggen. Toch laat de eed de waarheid naar voren komen. Juist door te weigeren wordt duidelijk dat de renner niet had mogen winnen omdat zijn tegenstander de gerechtigde, ware winnaar was (Foucault 2014: 41-42).


We gaan van Homerus naar Sophocles. Foucault geeft zijn lezing van Oedipus Rex. In de tragedie wordt de waarheid duidelijk – dat het Oedipus zelf was die zijn vader doodde en met zijn moeder trouwde – wanneer Oedipus zichzelf herkent als de dader. Het belangrijkste is dat het hier niet enkel gaat om een waarheid die in rechte komt vast te staan, maar dat het gaat om een bekentenis waarbij Oedipus zichzelf herkent als degene die gebonden is aan die waarheid. Deze verbinding tussen een in rechte vaststaande waarheid en het bekennende subject leest Foucault als ‘the very blueprint – and the introduction onto the stage – of this procedure of avowal’ (Foucault 2014: 79).

Hij vervolgt zijn geschiedenis met een bespreking van twee vormen van boetedoening in de vroeg-christelijke periode. Enerzijds gaat het om de boetedoening van leken. Deze is publiekelijk en neemt de vorm van waarheid-spreken over het zelf aan waarbij het zondige zelf dood wordt verklaard. Hierdoor komt de waarheid van dit zondige zelf naar voren: ‘With mortification of oneself, that is, with the sacrifice of oneself. One produces the truth of the self only insofar as one is capable of sacrificing oneself’ (Foucault 2014: 112). De tweede vorm is de levenslange boetedoening van de monnik waarbij het leren kennen van de geheimen van het zelf van belang is. Deze geheimen moeten worden geopenbaard door waarheid-spreken waarbij het idee is dat de goede gevoelens en ideeën geopenbaard willen worden en dat de ideeën van de duivel in het duister willen blijven (Foucault 2014: 151). Door gevoelens te openbaren, kan onderscheid worden gemaakt tussen het ware en het slechte: voor de slechte gevoelens treedt schaamte op en voor de ware niet.

In de zevende eeuw treedt een verandering op in de manier van boetedoening. De twee bovengenoemde vormen beginnen met elkaar te vermenigen, waarbij de boetedoening gespecificeerd wordt naar het individu enerzijds en naar de zonde anderzijds (Foucault 2014: 177). Hiermee wordt het subject individueel aangesproken op de daad die hij pleegde. Een tweede verandering in dezelfde periode is dat de verhalingsarië van de bekentenis voor afzonderlijke feiten wordt benadrukt (Foucault 2014: 178). Een proces van juridificering treedt op: zonden worden gecodificeerd en men is eraan gehouden de code te kennen om verbaal boete te kunnen doen (Foucault 2014: 183).

Een volgend moment in de colleges ligt tussen de elfde en dertiende eeuw. Het gaat om de sacramentalisering van boetedoening. Onderdeel hiervan is dat de priester voor het eerst de macht krijgt om door middel van een performatieve taalhandeling de zonde van de bekennende persoon te vergaren (Foucault 2014: 190). Een van de effecten van de nieuw verkregen macht van de priester was dat: ‘the act of penance (…) became in effect an act of juridical nature’ (Foucault 2014: 186). De boetedoening neemt hier de vorm aan van een schuldbekentenis in juridische vorm: de boete wordt verbaal gedaan ten overstaan van een priester die kan vergeven en veroordelen.

In zijn laatste college besteedt Foucault aandacht aan de achttiende eeuw tot het heden. Hij stelt dat de bekentenis van blijvend belang is bij de rechtspraak omdat de wet wordt gezien als de wil van het volk inclusief het bekennende subject, de rechter een bekentenis nodig heeft om de waarheid vast te stellen en de bekentenis de verdachte koppelt aan de sanctie die wordt opgelegd (Foucault 2014: 207-209).
Tussen 1800 en 1835 doet zich een bijzonder fenomeen voor. Er wordt een aantal moorden gepleegd waarbij de dader duidelijk aan te wijzen is. De daders hebben echter geen duidelijke motivatie voor de moorden en een betekenisvolle bekentenis geven ze niet (Foucault 2014: 212). De bekentenis van de beschuldigde is intussen zo belangrijk voor het gerecht dat deze niet zomaar kan ontbreken. Er moet een verklaring komen.

Pyschiatrie biedt de oplossing. Een nieuwe aandoening wordt ‘ontdekt’ waarvan het enige symptoom is dat iemand een misdaad pleegde zonder motivatie (Foucault 2014: 216). Hiermee ontstaat een verbinding tussen de psychiatrie enerzijds en het juridische anderzijds. ‘The importance of psychiatry at the beginning of the nineteenth century was that it functioned as a sort of public hygiene’ (Foucault 2014: 217). Psychiatrie werd toen niet beoefend gericht op het individu, maar op de samenleving als geheel. Met de psychiatrie ontstaat een nieuw probleem. De interpretatie van het waarheid-spreken van de beschuldigde als een vorm van verantwoordelijkheid nemen voor een daad, was niet langer houdbaar. Wanneer een beschuldigd subject niet als vanzelfsprekend in staat wordt geacht een waarheid te bekennen, raakt de bekentenis in diskrediet (Foucault 2014: 222).

In een laatste verschuiving komt de antropologie aan zet. Deze nieuwe discipline zorgt voor twee verschuivingen in de betekenis van het juridische bekennen: ‘(…) from the act committed to the danger that is potentially inherent in the individual, and from a modulated punishment of the guilty party to the absolute protection of others. We entered at that precise moment, I believe, an entirely different regime: that of security’ (Foucault 2014: 223). De verschuiving naar dit nieuwe regime van veiligheid en zekerheid brengt een nieuwe waarheid van het subject mee. Het criminele subject wordt een afgebakende entiteit die aan de hand van risico’s is gedefinieerd. Het is niet langer de misdadig, die onder controle moet worden gehouden maar de misdadiger. De beschuldigde is verantwoordelijk. Niet alleen om de daad die hij pleegd, maar door zijn bestaan als crimineel (Foucault 2014: 227). Het bekennen is niet langer nodig voor het vaststellen van de daad, maar voor het fixeren van de dader.

As de bovenstaande samenvatting van de colleges geslaagd is, leest deze als een probleemstelling rondom de ontstaansgeschiedenis van het bekennende subject. Het waarheid-spreken van de beschuldigde leidt enkel tot een versterking van het regime waaraan het subject wordt onderworpen. Dat wat bekend wordt, is reeds voorbereid door de beschuldiging; de misdadiger wordt reeds als zodanig voorondersteld om een bekentenis hoorbaar te maken. Niet alleen is het subject dat in het leven is geroepen als bekennend subject te begrijpen als een gevolg van de (juridische) machtsstructuren waarbinnen het zijn plaatsvindt, het bekennen als zodanig draagt bij aan het in stand houden van deze structuren waardoor het subject in zijn bekentenis overheerst wordt door zijn bekentenis, die door de rechters, psychologen en antropologen wordt verwacht en gehoord.

Foucault schrijft elders dat het verband tussen het eigen werk aan het zelf en de macht die van buitenaf over dit zelf wordt uitgeoefend, is wat hij governmentality of government noemt (Foucault 1997: 225 & Foucault 2007: 154). De colleges in Leuven laten zich lezen als een problematische relatie tussen zelf-technieken en overheersing van buitenaf; een problematiek van government. De stelling dat Foucault een probleem heeft met macht op zich schiet dan ook tekort. Waar het uiteindelijk om gaat, is het probleem van een bepaalde machts situatie waarin verandering bemoeilijkt wordt:

‘When an individual or social group succeeds in blocking a field of power relations, immobilizing them and preventing any reversibility of movement (…), one is faced with what may be called a state of domination. In such a state, it is certain that practices of freedom do not exist or exist only unilaterally or are extremely constrained and limited’ (Foucault 1996: 434).

Terugdenkend aan de man die werd veroordeeld voor verkrachting en die bekende in de hoop niet in een kliniek te worden opgenomen, zien we dat hij zich vergiste. De beschuldigde verbeeldde zich in een andere tijd te leven, een tijd waarin zijn bekentenis slechts betrekking had op zijn daad en niet op zijn persoon. De man verbeeldde zich dat hij de mogelijkheid had om invloed uit te oefenen door te bekennen. Hij trof zich aan in een situatie van overheersing waarin jurisdictie zodanig met de bekentenis is ver-
weven dat ieder bekennend woord de rechter sterkt in het horen van de waarheid die is voorbereid: dit figuur verkrachtte niet alleen, als verkrachter vormt hij een risico, een risico voor een samenleving die moet worden beschermd. Literatuur

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Momenteel doet Ilios onderzoek naar besmetting van zelfdoding. Belangrijke concepten in dit onderzoek zijn: suïcide, rouw, besmetting, agentschap, verantwoordelijkheid en macht. Hij is te bereiken via i.willemars@uva.nl of ilios.willemars@student.uva.nl.

Literatuur


1 Zie: Imad B. uit Leiden krijgt 2 jaar cel en tbs voor brute verkrachting studente. Te raadplegen op: www.omroepwest.nl.

2 De originele titel zoals gegeven door Foucault is: Mal faire, dire vrai. Fonction de l’aveu en justice.

3 Waar Foucault spreekt van domination heb ik die term hier vertaald met overheersing.

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