The Crisis of the Present Moment and the Crisis of Contemporary Theory

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**Abstract**

Contemporary theory is experiencing a crisis in grasping the present moment. Various orientations of theory remain divided between positing a fundamental rift or moment of negativity in the past and positing the need to invent or imagine a utopian future. In both cases these gestures are aimed at addressing a present that is regarded as destitute or otherwise lacking. The matrix for this division between past rift and inventive future leaving a destitute present is traced through the influence of Heidegger and, especially, Nietzsche. As a result, contemporary theory inherits a reactionary model of crisis that disables its understanding of the present. Instead, the current moment of crisis and stagnation needs to be critically understood as a result of historical trends and with pathways beyond crisis to an equitable future. This current crisis is characterized by drawing, critically, on the work of Mario Tronti, which suggests the scattered nature of struggles in the present disperses critical knowledge. The result is not only capitalist crisis, but also a crisis of temporality and historical sense that is reflected in the impasses of contemporary theory.

*Keywords* crisis, future, theory, Nietzsche, Tronti

**Contributor’s Note**

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The problem of crisis is not only about the effects of crisis, but also how we understand crisis and through that understanding respond to crisis. If the contemporary forms of crisis create a crisis in our sense of time, not least as crisis no longer seems punctual but rather drawn-out and extended (Nixon 2011), then grasping crisis becomes a problem of grasping the complex temporality of crisis. To grasp this time, we can borrow a term from Williams and Toscano (2019: 274), itself borrowed from Lefebvre and others (Williams and Toscano 2019: 286 n. 2), and think in terms of a rhythm of crisis. This captures something of the syncopation of crisis, and also the overlapping and interrelated forms of crisis we have experienced, including the global capitalist crisis of 2008–9, with its resulting regimes of austerity, intensifying climate crisis, the global pandemic of Covid-19, and inter-imperial rivalries, which do not exhaust the current conjuncture. The rhythm of crisis is one in which we pass from crisis as punctual and decisive event to this new, more complex understanding, in which we also find relations of time to space and space to time that take on antagonistic and disruptive forms (Williams and Toscano 1999: 275).

This understanding of the rhythm of crisis can help us also grasp the problems of contemporary theory as it tries to provide ways to see and understand crisis. In particular, what we find in contemporary theoretical articulations is a tendency that neglects grasping our present moment except as one that is destitute and abandoned. The crisis of the present renders the present as a homogenous and transparent bearer of crisis, evacuating it of antagonism and complexity. The result is that the ongoing time of crisis creates a crisis for contemporary theory that then seeks alternative forms of time and space that are claimed to escape this homogenous and empty present. The time of crisis is also a time of crisis for contemporary theory. This crisis for theory is reflected in the fact that is has abandoned the present by turning to the negativity of a fundamental rift or wound in the past, as a source of rupture, or to the task of producing a utopian or mythic image of the future, of “inventing the future” (Williams and Srnicek 2015), to galvanize political action.

This is not to say that contemporary theory is not driven by the demands of the present and, precisely, the demand to address the crisis of the present moment through these shifts to different temporal moments. If anything, contemporary theoretical production has intensified in its desire to negotiate the forms and outlines of the rhythm of crisis that we confront. A tone of urgency has become apparent and understandable as this rhythm of crisis accelerates and intensifies, in particular and uneven fashion. The difficulty is that such theoretical responses might engage with the present as crisis, but they often only articulate the rhythm of crisis is negative terms. There are exceptions, which aim to periodize and articulate the present and the contemporary as theoretical and temporal categories.[[1]](#endnote-1) The difficulty remains, however, of a matrix, which we will unpack, in which the present is confronted only to be negated and abandoned by the turn to the past or to the future, or to both as we make a leap back into the past to find resources to develop a new future (Žižek 2017; Fisher 2014).

The distinction between the return to a past negativity to rupture the serene façade of positivity that contemporary societies present us and the demand we invent a new future to overcome the inertia of the present is not just one between being backward-looking and forward-looking. This is too simple a modelling of the temporal arrangements of contemporary theory. The simplicity of this picture is first evident in the fact that we can combine both these orientations together. An exemplary figure of this combination would be the work of Giorgio Agamben. While Agamben (1999) is best-known for an emphasis on ontological damage or wounding, in the figure of “bare life” or life as absolute exposure, what is less-remarked is his theorization of the overcoming of this division of life, between the human and the animal, in a future messianic moment (Agamben 2002).[[2]](#endnote-2) Agamben then is a useful figure in the division of his thinking, as Jessica Whyte (2013) puts it, between catastrophe and redemption. Agamben (2000: 110) is also symptomatic for a characterization of the present as a monotonous time of desolation: “Contemporary politics is this devastating experiment that disarticulates and empties institutions and beliefs, ideologies and religions, identities and communities all throughout the planet, so as then to rehash and reinstate their definitively nullified form.” Certainly Agamben (2000: 112) promises a “*nonstatal and nonjuridical* politics and human life” will emerge from this destitute present, but the articulation of this emergence is left hanging. Agamben’s thinking defines a common matrix in which we find the negativity of a rift in the past, the desolation of the present, and the utopian overcoming of this rift in the future. In this way crisis is posed, but at a level of abstraction that escapes historical analysis and instead becomes a matter of the crisis of civilization.

If Agamben offers a synthesis of these positions usually, however, there is a split between those thinkers who focus on a past rift and those who focus on a utopian future. This cuts across a range of theoretical orientations. In Queer theory, we have Lee Edelman’s (2004) resolute destruction of the future in the name of a queer death drive, in which that death drive is always present as the moment of rift and which defies any transcendence to a future. In contrast, we have José Estaban Munoz’s (2009) invocation of a future queer utopia, which is prefigured in multiple moments of the recent past.[[3]](#endnote-3) This fracture between negativity and utopia repeats, in a different way, earlier tensions in Queer theory between Leo Bersani’s (2009, 1996) emphasis on fundamental fantasies of passivity and John Rechy’s (1994 [1963]) Queer revolutionary romanticism. In the Black tradition of radical thought, we have the contemporary focus of Afropessimism on ontological anti-Blackness (Wilderson 2020), which locates the negative rift in the historical violence of chattel slavery. While this recognizes a particular historical violence and its ongoing effects into the present, the difficulty is when that violence is ontologized and so left detached from historical determination. In a different mode, also responding to the shattering historical violence of slavery, we have the utopian articulations of Afrofuturism (Eshun 1998, Eshun 2003), both theoretical and cultural, which construct new technological Black futures while also drawing on a mythic past.[[4]](#endnote-4) There is also the contrast between certain Marxist currents of communization, which stress negativity and the failure of any prefigurative politics (Noys 2011), and the recent theoretical movement of accelerationism, and cognate discourses, which have stressed their capacity for the imagination or invention of the future (Srnicek and Williams 2014).

In all cases, there are complex articulations of past, present, and future that could be discovered in these texts and in these contrasting lines of thought. They are also, obviously, turning to the future and the past to address the present. This complexity does not, I argue, invalidate the point that the orientation to past and future risks abandoning the present by treating it as destitute. The splitting between a past primal wounding that provides a negative rupture and a utopian future that sends a “tendril of tomorrow … burrowing back” into the present (Land 2012: 415), risks leaving us in the worst of all possible worlds – the present treated as desolate. Certainly, a negative characterization of the present is shared amongst contemporary thinkers, beyond this matrix. Alain Badiou (2006: 420) argues that we live “atonal worlds,” which “are simply worlds which are so ramified and nuanced – or so quiescent and homogeneous – that no instance of the Two, and consequently no figure of decision, is capable of evaluating them.” The atonal world allows no point of purchase for decision, representing itself as so complex or so fundamentally flat, as to allow no decisive action. Living the present as an experience of crisis is translated into living the present as an experience of destitution in which, it is supposed, no decisive intervention can be made. In this way the relation to crisis to criticism and crisis to decision is muted or left as only available through an alternative temporality detached from the present.

In response to these theoretical orientations we can refer to a much-cited comment by Marx (1973a: 162) from the *Grundrisse*:

It is as ridiculous to yearn for a return to an original fullness as it is to believe that with this present emptiness history has come to a standstill. The bourgeois viewpoint has never advanced beyond this antithesis between itself and the romantic viewpoint and therefore the latter will accompany it as its legitimate antithesis up to its blessed end.

The yearning for the past moment before the rift and the conception of the present as empty obviously characterize these currents. While they claim to transcend the antinomies of bourgeois thought (Lukács 1971), we may also be suspicious of such self-characterizations. Certainly, the antinomy between original fullness and present standstill does seem to remain resonant, even if these terms are reworked by the currents I have sketched.

This crisis of the thinking of the present in contemporary theory also reflects a certain of crisis for the future of theory. Leaps to the ontological past and jumps to the utopian future are evasions of the critical and Marxist traditions. In particular, they are ways to avoid Hegel’s (1991: 21) “*Hic Rhodus, hic saltus!*” (here is Rhodes, jump here), and his adaptation “*Hier* *ist die Rose, hier tanze*” (here is the rose, dance here) (22) from *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. Hegel (1991: 21–22) states that “It is just as foolish to imagine that any philosophy can transcend its contemporary world as that an individual can overleap his own time or leap over Rhodes”. If we try to construct a world as it ought to be, if we try to invent the future, then we create a world formed in the image of our opinions, “a pliant medium in which the imagination can construct anything it pleases” (Hegel 1991: 22). This is the risk of the turn to myth, whether in the past or in the future. Marx (1973b: 150) similarly insists on the need to start from the present, synthesizing Hegel’s suggestions in his *Hic Rhodus, hic salta!* (Here is Rhodes, dance here) from *The Eighteenth Brumaire*.[[5]](#endnote-5) In this case, the revolution is only possible when the conditions make this cry and they can be met by a self-critical proletarian movement.

These statements do not say all we have is the present, but rather we must account for this present through historical reconstruction, hence the *Phenomenology of Spirit* or *Capital*, while tracing the possibilities of the present as potentials to realize a future of self-determination and freedom. As Hegel (1991: 22) puts it, we must “recognize reason as the rose in the cross of the present” to achieve the reconciliation of reason and actuality. In each of these iterations of the phrase it is implied that we have to grasp the present conditions as the site of overcoming and transformation. Marx states (1973a: pp), in the *Grundrisse*, “within bourgeois society, the society that rests on exchange value, there arise relations of circulation as well as of production which are so many mines to explode it”. My point, therefore, is a simple one: contemporary radical theoretical forms have embraced the future or the deep ontological past in a flight from the present. They risk a romanticism of the past as fullness, in the moment before the rift of negativity, and a flight into a speculative future as the site of galvanizing myth. In doing so, they also flee the rose in the cross of the present by characterizing the present as simply stagnation and inertia. Such a diagnosis risks translating the thinking of historical crisis as moment of struggle and possibility into the apocalyptic image of crisis as collapse and redemption.

To explicate this situation, we need to turn to the origin of this fracture in theoretical conceptualization. The origin of this division between a rift in the deep past and a radical future lies in the work of Heidegger, and behind Heidegger lies the work of Nietzsche. This makes sense of the presence of Agamben as a contemporary figure who combines both the orientations to the past and to the future. Agamben’s work is heavily indebted to Heidegger and, although this is less-remarked, also to Nietzsche.[[6]](#endnote-6) Agamben is an exemplary figure for the tension and contradictions of this imaginary of historical temporality. Heidegger’s orientation to a rift in the deep past is well-known. For Heidegger Western metaphysics is founding on the forgetting of Being, the question or meaning of ontology, which has been progressively occluded by the focus on the ontic. This loss of Being begins with Socrates and Plato, who rupture with the thinking of Being that can still be seen in the pre-Socratic philosophers (Heidegger 1987: 125). The history of Western metaphysics is a history of this forgetting of Being, in which ontology is replaced by various principles that reduce ontology to the ontic, from Aristotle’s *energeia* to Nietzsche’s will-to-power and, finally, the technological and its principle of en-framing or *Gestell* (Heidegger 1977).

Heidegger (1977) might well appear to be the most anti-future of philosophical thinkers, seemingly condemning the global domination of technology as the realization of Western metaphysics and the most terminal en-framing of Being as “standing reserve”. The turn to the rustic, to the pastoral of forest paths, to the bucolic wisdom of the farmer, to the ancient bridges rather than modern hydroelectric dams, would be evidence of an unequivocal rejection of modernity and embrace of the rooted past (Badiou 1999: 53). While this tone is dominant, and certainly remains present in certain ecological appreciations of Heidegger, we should note that it lies alongside or sometimes conceals the desire to embrace and traverse technology as the destiny of the West. Of course, part of the reason this element of Heidegger is not commented on much is that it lies at the heart of his continued belief that the “inner truth and greatness” of Nazism lay in “the encounter between global technology and modern man” (Heidegger 1987: 199). Although pre-dating the writings of the so-called turn, already in the 1930s and 1940s Heidegger’s vigorous defense of Nazism is one directed towards its capacity, in his eyes, to traverse the nihilism of technology. This is the special destiny he sees as given to the people of the middle, the Germans, caught in the metaphysical pincers of the United States, representing capitalist modernity, and the Soviet Union, representing levelling communism (1987: 38).

Even in the late Heidegger of the poetic, the four-fold, and reflections on technology, there is still an emphasis on traversal through technology. This is why, provocatively perhaps, we can treat Heidegger as a mutant form of accelerationism – that contemporary theoretical movement that suggests the possibilities of re-purposing technology to radical ends. While the accelerationists lambast Heidegger as a reactionary who refuses to embrace technology (Mackay and Avanessian 2014: 6, Plant and Land 2014: 306, Brassier 2016: 471), what we see in Heidegger, certainly not always clearly, is the desire for a new sort of making, a new relation of gods, mortals, earth and skies. I leave to one side how much this project would lie in continuity, politically, with Nazism or its variants, but certainly the late Heidegger remains convinced that the imagination of the future lies through the devastation, in his eyes, technology has caused. Even the apocalyptic pronouncement “only a god can save us” of the 1966 interview (Heidegger 2017a), is still predicated on the rebirth or re-emergence of a god or gods out of and even through technology. Heidegger’s (1977: 42) “saving,” which emerges out of maximum danger, suggests a vision of the future as a new kind of poetic making, a new dispensation of the earth, although one certainly marked by all the national and anti-Semitic fetishisms that are the persistent core of his thinking (Heidegger 2017b).

Nietzsche, however, stands as the origin figure for many of the current theoretical terms and arrangements that lie between the suggestion of past catastrophe and future utopia, even if that future relies on traversing the catastrophe lived out to its extreme moment. Heidegger (1991) makes evident his debt to Nietzsche’s thought, even as he positions Nietzsche as the last thinker of metaphysics. Certainly, Nietzsche’s analysis of nihilism, discussed in the fragments collected as *The Will to Power* (Nietzsche 1968), implies a necessary working out or through of crisis. Nihilism, the collapse of meaning, is the result of the sort of inquiry embarked on by Socrates, and the popularized moral questioning encouraged by Christianity. These reactive currents, for Nietzsche (2008b), ironically so successful over the active powers of the elite and aristocrats, eventually exhaust themselves by undermining their own basis. We can see how evidently similar this is to Heidegger’s analysis of technology, which borrows so heavily from Ernst Jünger’s (2017) use of Nietzsche to frame the dynamic of technology as mass disenchantment. If the history of Western thought is, for Nietzsche (2008c: 20), the history of an error, of “how the real world became a fable,” this is the positive condition for the moment of transvaluation in which this absolute disaster can be reversed into a new rebirth.

This is why Nietzsche (2003) offers a philosophy for the future, as he announces in *Beyond Good and Evil*. The catastrophic domination of reactive forces, as told in *The Genealogy of Morals* (Nietzsche 2008b), must be read alongside the passage to a reborn future in the world-shaping powers of Nietzsche’s (2009: 48) new “party of life,” which “takes in hand the greatest of all tasks, the breeding of a higher humanity, including the ruthless destruction of everything degenerating and parasitic”. The “*excess of life*” is revealed at the limit of the negative and life-denying crisis of Christian value and Western nihilism (Nietzsche 2009: 48). Nietzsche’s thinking provides the model for the combination of catastrophe and redemption, in which the moment of “a crisis as yet unprecedented on earth” (Nietzsche 2009: 88) is interpreted as the possibility of radical rebirth in which “he breaks the history of humanity in two” (Nietzsche 2009: 94). Crisis is read as a crisis of civilization, in terms of crisis being the result of global nihilism, and the solution to crisis as a kind of messianic overcoming, associated with the overman and with the disruption to historical temporality caused by the eternal recurrence. That overcoming or disruption is at the service of an aristocratic radicalism in which the “degenerating and parasitic” must be destroyed, with for Nietzsche includes the forces of socialism, anarchism, feminism, and the movements for Black liberation (Losurdo 2019). Contemporary currents do not embrace the toxic reactionary elements of Nietzsche’s thought, although that has been present on the alt right (Baker 2019). They do, however, remain within the matrix of Nietzsche’s thought, in which the past is rendered as a deep fracture, the present as site of destitution, and the future as a site of rebirth through myth (Nietzsche 2008a: 130).

There is no doubt that some of the accents of past rift and future invention could also be claimed for or seen as present in the critical or Marxist tradition. The Marxist or critical tradition shows signs of the influence of Nietzsche and Heidegger, and must also be carefully read to distinguish it from this model. It is not surprising, for example, that the central Marxist influences on Giorgio Agamben are Guy Debord and Walter Benjamin. If Agamben is the synthetic model of this linking of crisis and redemption then his Marxist influences permit a reading of this model into the Marxist and critical tradition. Debord’s thought probes history as a history of separation that characterizes not only contemporary capitalist societies but all past forms of power (Debord 1983: #25). This supposes a model of an original fracture, which is also reinforced by the nostalgic elements of Debord’s project that seek moment or times untainted or less tainted by capitalist forms of power. In Debord’s (1992) text *Panegyric* we find his reflections on the decline of the taste of alcoholic drinks (38) or the destruction of Paris by urbanism (45), which embody this nostalgic element. This obviously carried a critical and even a metaphysical charge for Debord, in the sense of an emphasis on the transience of time as the condition of revolt and the sense that capitalism is merely a passing historical phenomenon. It does, however, also carry a sense of loss and even a fall that risks repeating the matrix of the deep rift.

Similarly, Agamben subjects the work of Walter Benjamin to a particular reading that tends to flatten some of its complexities. Agamben is not fascinated by the Benjamin who embraces the possibilities of technology for liberation, what we could call the Brechtian Benjamin (Noys 2014: 83–92), but the late Benjamin of the messianic and possibility of a healing of the rupture between humans and nature.[[7]](#endnote-7) Agamben is concerned with the Benjamin who, again, posits human history as the history of barbarism and promises a redemption that, this time, is given a proletarian cast. Certainly, disruptive to Nietzsche’s aristocratic radicalism and some of the problematic suppositions of the Social Democracy of the 1920s and 1930s, Benjamin’s vision can still be shorn of its Marxist or critical elements and read in a more epochal and Heideggerian fashion. This is what Agamben tends to do, and it accounts for the ambiguity of Agamben’s own work. If the Marxist or critical tradition insists on a rift then that rift must be historicized and analyzed, especially in relation to capitalist production. Also, no present is destitute or hopeless, but only the potential site for developing possibilities of liberation. The rift is not ontological or primary and the redemptive future is not messianic or mystical, but to be traced from the tendencies of the past and present; Lenin (2002: 16) remarked that “there are no miracles in nature or history”.

The risk we are identifying here is that of a fusion between Nietzschean themes, notably civilizational crisis, present stagnation, and elitist rebirth, with those themes belonging to the Marxist and critical tradition, of capitalist crisis and the necessity to overcome the degenerating tendencies of capitalism. This risk is evident in the twentieth-century rehabilitation of Nietzsche, which has often taken the form of identifying Nietzsche as a radical figure while minimizing the aristocratic nature of that radicalism (Losurdo 2019). Certainly, in the case of various left-Nietzscheanisms, the explicit aim has been to claim Nietzsche against this lineage. One sign of the success of Nietzsche’s own thought, which he always regarded as finding its true destiny in the future, has been its capacity to infiltrate modes of thinking that would violently reject Nietzsche’s politics and the political consequences of his philosophical thinking (Waite 1996).[[8]](#endnote-8) That is to say, a whole range of currents have come to accept elements of a Nietzschean vision of some kind of deep rift or failure in Western thought and, alongside that or as an alternative, the creative need for the invention or production of the future. This is often done in the name of radical pluralism and creative investment in the powers of life, but without understanding the provenance and forms these take within Nietzsche and their implications. While this Nietzschean critique is often given a radical accent, or presented as a radical gesture, or even “the most radical gesture” (Plant 1992), it comes at the cost of fundamentally losing the basis of a critical radicalism.

How then do we approach the present? If we are not to claim the present is simply destitute, atonal, mythless, or disenchanted, then we do also have to attend to the present as a problematic site. Certainly, the exhaustion of the capitalist model by crisis and climate change, intensified in peculiar ways by the Covid-19 pandemic (Armitage and Featherstone 2021), which includes a moral exhaustion of capital, has not led to any major global resurgence of left or “anti-systemic movements” (Arrighi et al. 1999).. This is not to discount existing resurgences, particularly in anti-racist struggles (Purnell 2021), but it is to suggest a weakness and disorientation in the present. This is what a lot of the Nietzschean-style diagnostics play on – overlaying a particular historical moment and form of exhaustion with a more global or civilizational model of crisis and collapse. That is not to say that capitalism as a civilization, in terms of a totality of social organization that is now global, is not in crisis. In fact, the composition of capitalism as a totality, its global reach and intrusion into the depths of existence, is what gives the crisis of capitalism the sense of a crisis of civilization. The totalizing effect of contemporary capitalism creates the situation in which the crisis of capitalism appears as the very crisis of civilization or life itself. This is what must be resisted, particularly by notoverlaying capitalist crisis with a kind of crisis of nihilism of the type modelled by Nietzsche. This mystifies crisis into a crisis of value or civilization as such, and it also mystifies capitalism as a totality, which is not monolithic but riven by contradiction and crisis.

To address the crisis of the present I turn to the work of Mario Tronti (2019), especially his *Workers and Capital* (originally published in Italian in 1966). This is not an easy book to read in the present moment: dense, difficult, closely engaged with the text of Marx, and written in that high style of “chiseled, lucid, [and] confrontational” prose that Tronti sees as the signature of Italian *operaismo* (2019: 328). The book is also saturated with a language of class, particularly of the working-class, which might appear anachronistic. Tronti argued that capitalist development was driven by working-class struggles. As the working class struggled against labor discipline and the violence of capitalist production it forced capitalism to respond by developing new technological forms to replace workers or to minimize or mitigate their struggles (Tronti 2019: 243). Hence factories arose as tools of discipline and organization that aimed to subsume the worker to value production as a mere hand on the line. This discipline also has an ecological dimension, as the regime of the factory shifted from sites of energy based on water to new concentrated centers reliant on carbon, in the form of steam power. Thanks to the research of Andreas Malm (2013), we know that the disciplining of nature was driven by the disciplining of labor, as capitalism’s need for dependent labor required relocating to the sites of that labor – cities. The technological inventiveness attributed to capitalism is a result of its constantly having to displace and disperse working class struggle. In turn, however, working class struggles against the factory were also generated by the factory – which created a compact form of struggle that could explode at the point of production. As these struggles intensified, in the 1960s and 1970s, capitalism would be forced to new social and technological fixes, such as dispersing labor, relocating the factory form, further replacing workers by machinery in the digital revolution, and new forms of precarity.

In a twist on this argument, Tronti also argued that working class passivity and lack of struggle could have effects on capitalism. Discussing America in the 1920s, a decade of relative quiescence in terms of workers’ struggles, Tronti (2019: 297) wrote: “Working-class struggles are an irreplaceable instrument of capital’s own self-consciousness: without them, it does not recognize its own adversary and thus does not know itself”. Tronti suggests that the crash of 1929 was in part a result of this lack of struggles, which robbed capitalists and capital of the ability and knowledge it gained from the struggle by workers. Tronti’s argument implies that the ruling class gains its intelligence or capacity in response to working-class struggle. The implication is also that the intensity of working-class struggles drives not only capitalist development but also bourgeois thought. Hence, the great inventiveness of bourgeois forms, during the 1920s and 1960s, is not unrelated to the great intensity of struggles in those periods. *Operaismo* as a movement would constantly refer to the bourgeois thinkers of the early twentieth century, especially German-language thinkers (Cacciari 1996). The implication was the insight of these thinkers was driven by the intensity of emergent struggles and, in parallel, so were the insights of *operaismo* dependent on the struggles in Italy in the 1960s and 1970s.

This is not to say that Tronti’s arguments are unproblematic. In one sense they partake of a subjectivism and certain Nietzschean notes that we have already indicated are problematic in grasping the present moment. Tronti, according to Berardi (2019), shares with Foucault “the primacy of subjectivity (or better, of subjectivation) in the historical process”. Berardi (2019) insists that the value of *Workers and Capital* is as “a philosophical meditation on the primacy of subjectivity and the precession of social movements”. While Berardi treats this as a laudatory breakthrough, the turn to subjectivity can be treated critically. Matteo Mandarini also makes clear the Nietzschean dimension of this meditation on the primacy of subjectivity: “Thus in *Operai e Capitale* Marx is supplemented with Nietzsche – the proletarian subject becomes the principal agent of the Will to Power” (Mandarini 2008: 176). Tronti (2019: 328) regarded the use of Nietzsche as a stylistic matter and a gesture of reversal, putting Nietzsche on the side of the workers: “A sense of the grandeur of the conflict awoke in us a passion for the Nietzschean style: to speak in a noble register, in the name of those beneath.” Certainly also, for Tronti, the point was not to embrace subjectivism *per se*, but to trace how the objective forms of the productive forces are themselves the result of class struggles. In fact, Tronti (2016) argued that Gramsci placed too much emphasis on subjectivity and will, arguing that his own focus on workers’ autonomy can engage with the possibilities and limits of these struggles.

Despite these caveats the notion of simply inverting Nietzsche or stressing the composition of the objective forces of production as a result of subjectivity remain problematic. We are left with the risk that Tronti identified in Gramsci – a certain voluntarism and an over-valuation of subjectivity in which everything becomes a matter of consciousness. Also, the penetration of Nietzschean thematics of crisis, stagnation, and the necessary role of will to overcome that crisis are present in Tronti as well. Certainly, in the current context of defeat and disorientation the stress of the activity of the working class, even in defeat, remains a useful corrective to those who use objectivity to simply concede to reality. That said, the risk of subjectivism, evident in the work of Berardi (2009), is of an oscillation in which outbreaks of revolt or resistance are celebrated while the lapse back into capitalist normality is treated as catastrophic defeat and loss. This is not a dialectical movement, but rather a wildly swinging oscillation due to the fact that everything is driven by subjective will (Berardi 2021). The emphasis on the creative power of the worker, often extended across a whole range of agents, is supposed to arm the class but in fact leaves it without critical understanding. In this case, we might point to the lack of struggles as another instance of an awareness of this situation by the working class. What I want to suggest is that this adoption of Tronti’s arguments I am proposing is not about accepting their subjectivism or philosophy of subjectivity, but a more limited acceptance of how they trace the complex effects of fragmented class struggle within a situation too easily painted in apocalyptic and Nietzschean terms of disintegration.

With these reservations in mind Tronti’s argument about the deleterious effect on capitalism of the lack of struggle of the workers still has resonance. The implication of Tronti’s argument is that a situation of crisis in which class struggle is fragmentary and dispersed will also have a deleterious effect on the knowledge-capacities of the dominant class and bourgeois social forms. This is why contemporary capitalism can appear so profoundly lacking in knowledge (Osborne 2014). Deploying metaphors of illness to describe this situation is deeply problematic, both naturalizing crisis and harmful to those suffering from the disorders deployed (Sontag 1983). Instead, the situation appears to be one in which if class struggle is inchoate, intermittent, confused, then our own ruling class is hardly less so. In particular, we witness a crisis of the ability to grasp, understand, and conceptualize, historical temporality. If capitalist crisis has not yet resulted in a global movement of opposition, this lack afflicts the moment with a crisis of historical conceptualization. Guy Debord (1990: 20), in his *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, noted that: “once the running of a state involves a permanent and massive shortage of historical knowledge, that state can no longer be led strategically”. This lack of strategic sense seems reflected in cultural confusion over the recent past, the mutated reflections of class conflict as a generational matter, and the overload or excess of cultural forms of pastiche, such as vaporwave, the world’s most proliferate musical genre (Tanner 2016). The echo of Frederic Jameson’s diagnosis of postmodernism as a cultural dominant is telling, even if that characterization seems less effective as mapping the contours of the present moment (Osborne 2014).[[9]](#endnote-9)

These reflections emerge, partially, out of a particular site of national reflection and crisis. Therefore, in conclusion, it is worth bringing this site of reflection into focus and consideration. This is England or Britain, the difference itself a complex matter (Nairn 1988), and the contemporary impact of capitalist crisis on this site and its own complex history of theoretical engagement (Easthope 1988, Anderson 1992). The tension of articulation from this particular and peculiar position is not simply negative. Where once “laboratory Italy” become the phrase for Italy as site of political experimentation in struggles (Hardt 2006), England or Britain is a laboratory of particular and peculiar forms of reaction and also, often residual, forms of resistance (Anderson 1992). It is also important, in a related sense, to stress that the passive struggles that mark the present should not be enchanted into hope. They indicate struggles, certainly, but in an experience of weakness that makes them vulnerable to re-articulations and disruptive forms that do not align with our usual political compass.

Brexit, as the name for the British exit from the European Union, has often been treated as nostalgic and inward-looking. While this is true, it is also oriented to the future, which is aggressively post-imperial and a continuation of an orientation to a US-style model (Noys 2018). In this it speaks to the desire for the modern and modernization. We again have a rift in the past, in this case the reactionary myth of the British Empire and the rift of its failure, as well as a mythic future, of a Britain of unleashed finance capitalism shorn of any residues of the postwar Welfare state. This peculiarly English project, to become even more so shortly with the long predicted “break-up of Britain” seemingly imminent (Nairn 1918), is not only about the past but also shaping the future, through a project of modernization that has obsessed the English ruling class. Its appeal, which is real, forms around an inchoate resistance to experts and a desire to inhabit a destructive urge that is also self-destructive rather than continue with the wearying repetitions of the present. It motivates desires and passions that work within the forms of passive struggle. These passions are, I think, acutely post-imperial passions, indebted to imaginary projections of the imperial past as drivers to future status (Gilroy 1991). In this way, this particular political project combines similar orientations to a fractured past and utopian future, but in the service of galvanizing particular reactionary passions to supposedly resolve but in fact only extend the sense of crisis.

The difficulties are not new. The following remark from Benjamin Disraeli’s novel *Sybil* (1845), quoted by Raymond Williams (1958: 110), resonates today:

The people she found was not that pure embodiment of unity of feeling, of interest, and of purpose which she had pictured in her abstractions. The people had enemies among the people: their own passions; which made them often sympathize, often combine, with the privileged.

While the data around voting in the last UK-election seems remarkably opaque to clear interpretation we might still agree that at least some of the people did often sympathize, often combine, with the privileged as a result of their passions (Anderson 2020). It is not wise or sensible to assume that the passive signs of class struggle traced here necessarily indicate a radicalism that remains to be tapped or organized into a new project.

Raymond Williams (1958: 179) noted “it does not come as news to any one born into a poor family that the poor are not beautiful, or that a number of them are lying, shiftless and their own worst enemies”. This, as Williams (1958: 179) goes on to note, is itself part of the reason and demand for change “we are dealing with actual people under severe pressure”. Williams (1958: 205) noted also that this is not all there is to working class life: “it is rather, in such a life, the suffering and the giving of comfort, the common want and the common remedy, the open row and the open making-up, are all part of a continuous life which, in good and bad, makes for a whole attachment.” It is easy to use an idealized proletariat as a way of dismissing the empirical working-class with all its complexity of feeling and experience that Williams indicated. Similarly, it is also easy to focus on the malevolent forms of capitalist abstraction to say we are all subjects of capital, which is true, but in such a way as to diminish or obscure the combined and uneven experience of that subjection. In these ways, however, class becomes a myth or fairy tale, a floating abstraction of its own, one detached from the struggles and possibilities that lie in that experience (Eribon 2009).

There is no doubt that the notion of a past rift that disrupts the smooth unfolding of the present and the notion of a mythic future that might provide the dynamism to overcome present inertia are attractive. In the cases we have discussed, such images are put forward, in part, to break with the capitalist realism that supposes there is no alternative to capitalism and no way to overcome the impasses of the present (Fisher 2009). The tension is that such readings adopt a Nietzschean matrix that mitigates the capacity to integrate the present into a critical understanding of crisis. Instead, the present is translated into a site of crisis that can only be resolved by the heroics of subjective will that have turned to the past or to the future to achieve the necessary mythic motivation. In this way, crisis is inflated, by being treated as a crisis of civilization, but also diminished, in the supposition that the crisis can be resolved through a collection of subjective forces, even if those forces are extended into the non-human (Berardi 2021). What is absent is a critical account of the production of crisis as a “periodic cycle” as the fundamental feature of the capitalist mode of production (Marx 1990: 103), as well as how such objective forms of crisis are mediated subjectively.

The danger of such a position is that it might inadvertently lead to what the proponents of Pataphysics embraced: “a science of imaginary solutions” (Jarry 1996). While Pataphysics was intended as the disruption of common sense and the comic shattering of bourgeois conventions, we can also see how “imaginary solutions” carry the Nietzschean ring of mythic resolutions to real problems. This is the risk that is run by reading the present as only crisis, as empty moment, which can be resolved by subjective will in the turn to past or future. The desire for a deliberately pataphysical theory that embrace the turning of theory toward the imaginary and the fictional, as well as to the Nietzschean, can be found in Jean Baudrillard’s (1983: 34) “pataphysics of the social” proposed in his essay *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*. Confronting some of the problems of inertia and passivity in the masses that we have traced through Tronti and in accounts of the present, Baudrillard (1983: 34) argued for a very Nietzschean solution in which the radical passivity of the masses disabled any attempt to make sense or truth, whether from the left or right.

In a sense, Baudrillard returns us to the Nietzschean matrix, but this time without mediation or disguise. *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities* can be read as a rewriting of Nietzsche’s late notes *The Will to Power*, which collected his discussion of nihilism. Baudrillard blurs Nietzsche’s categories by attributing to the masses a passive nihilism of the kind Nietzsche diagnosed, but also suggesting that this indifference or passivity achieved an almost active sense that Nietzsche reserved for his free spirits and overmen. While this modifies Nietzsche’s aristocratic and reactionary radicalism, it still retains central features of it, valorizing the indifference of the masses to issues of liberation and equality. If Nietzsche saw socialism, feminism, anarchism and struggles against slavery as movements of the masses, as symptoms of the slave revolt in morality, Baudrillard translates these struggles into a blank inertia that leaves the masses satisfied as non-actors on the stage of history. While in some way prescient of mass experience in the age of social media, with its demands for passive consent and pseudo-activity, Baudrillard ratifies our contemporary “apocalyptic nihilism” (Lane-McKinley 2019: 334), and also the turning of theory into a mode of myth-making and fiction. Baudrillard, often treated as outdated and an embarrassment to contemporary theory, in fact unlocks the consequences of the turn of theory to “imaginary solution”.

It is obvious that contemporary theory, to its credit, does not directly embrace this Nietzschean crisis of truth. Instead, the turns to the past and to the future are aimed at re-energizing activity and struggle in the present. The problem is that the connections between past, present, and future, become frayed and imaginary, in which it is more a matter of resonant images than actual realities. This is the Nietzschean problem that has transmitted itself to us, in which aesthetic justification replaces rational understanding of the dimensions of capitalist crisis. If the ideologues of capitalism downplay crisis or regard it as salutary pain that will restart accumulation, contemporary theory tends to push crisis towards catastrophe in ways in which the only answer is a subjective will that results in redemption. It is certainly true that to put an end to capitalism as system constructed through a periodic cycle of crisis, to reach that point of final crisis, will require the organization and mediation of crisis through subjectivity. Such struggles will, however, also require objective understanding and the capacity to mediate between subjectivity and objective crisis. Contemporary theory is searching for answers, and this is to be recognized, but we must also consider how we can connect past, present, and future, in configurations of time that can grasp crisis and the potential for its overcoming.

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1. See Peter Osborne’s (2013, 2014) work on the category of the “contemporary”, the thinking of “the present moment” advanced by the current of communization (Theorié Communiste 2011), and the use of the concept of transition to grasp the present in the work of Étienne Balibar (Toscano 2014). See also the discussion of Black Study as a crisis method that recognizes the fissured present and its possibilities in the introduction to this volume (Brennan). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. This utopian moment is reminiscent of Nietzsche’s (2008a: 22) suggestion of a future Dionysian revival in which “the earth voluntarily gives up its spoils while the predators of cliff and desert approach meekly”. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. It is important to remember the value of “critical utopias” as forms of negation and encounters with failure that can unlock the impasses of the present (Lane-McKinley 2019: 336–38). The tension still remains of the degree to which such negations retain as well as disrupt elements of the present in these acts of negation as a labour of the negative (Taussig 1999). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. The alternative of “Mundane Afrofuturism” (Syms 2013) criticizes the myth-making and utopianism of Afrofuturism in the name of a more realistic and critical world-building attuned to the conflicts of the present. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. For a discussion of the mutations of this “slogan”, see Mieszkowski (2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Agamben’s debt to Nietzsche is especially evident in developments by Agamben of arguments from *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Agamben’s argument concerning power as abandonment in *Homo Sacer* is indebted to Nietzsche’s (2008b: 52–53) suggestion that the ban and banishment as defining mode of punishment. Agmaben’s (2003) discussion of the state of exception and state of emergency is not only indebted to Carl Schmitt and Walter Benjamin, but also to Nietzsche’s (2008b: 57) argument that “legal conditions may be nothing more than *exceptional states of emergency*, partial restrictions which the will to life in its quest for power provisionally imposes on itself in order to serve its overall goal: the creation of *larger* units of power.” [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Although we should note that we can find a similar fissure in Benjamin between the engagement with the past as site of rift and this embrace of a technological future that also struggles with historical mediation. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. One interesting sign of this infiltration, treated quite sympathetically, is the role of Nietzsche’s thought in the radicalism of the Black Panthers, especially Huey Newton and Bobby Seale (Caygill 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. For an intriguing reading of Jameson’s diagnosis of the replacement of time by space in parallel with the “warming condition” of climate change, see Malm 2020. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)