

## THERBORN'S WORLD-CASTING

### *The Left Against Dialectics?*

SINCE THE TURN of the millennium, the Swedish sociologist Göran Therborn has been developing a series of formidably ambitious arguments in these pages, providing a near comprehensive overview of global politics, its principal forces, trajectories and tensions, plus the changing aims and tactics of the left.<sup>1</sup> At the core of these expansive essays is a juxtaposition between the shape of twentieth-century history and that of the contemporary period—the primary processes by which capitalism has been consolidated or resisted in each era. Its basic premises are as follows. If the industrial age was governed by grand dialectics, pitting capital against labour and colonizer against colonized, its successor does not have the same binary structure. The productive system is no longer primed to create a singular emancipatory subject; which renders visions of an egalitarian future, whether in socialist theory or oppositional culture, increasingly opaque. Menaced by entrenched inequality, climate collapse and hostile geopolitics, the current course of societal evolution defies easy prediction. Perpetual crisis will likely determine the terrain of struggle in the coming years. Marxism was the foremost method of understanding the old reality, but its status in the new one is less certain. By drawing ecumenically on left social thought, however, we can still map the existing political-economic landscape in granular detail, locate its contradictions and identify ‘new masses’—mostly peripheral and surplus populations—that could plausibly transform it.

This project began with ‘Into the 21st Century’ (2001) and culminated in ‘The World and the Left’ (2022). It is marked by several features of Therborn’s wider oeuvre, which stretches back to the 1960s: a gift for

extracting theoretical insights from stacks of empirical data, like a miner chipping precious gemstones from a rockface; and a mastery of comparative analysis, drawing cross-connections between protest movements in the Sahel and political experiments in South America, currency crises in the EU and demographic changes in East Asia. The author's range has always been immense—few others would have the audacity or the ability to produce a two-hundred-page primer titled, simply, *The World: A Beginner's Guide* (2011). And his prose has always had an urgent pedagogical tone: lucid and unvarnished, pitched at front-line organizers as much as fellow scholars. Yet alongside these consistencies of method there has also been a significant reorientation of his writing, as it registers the recession of socialist prospects over the past four decades. The insurrectionary spirit of his early work has given way to a more sober and reflective register, even if his political commitment has not wavered. How should we assess this intellectual transformation and the texts that emerged from it? What do they reveal or occlude in the present conjuncture?

Born in 1941, the only child of a provincial landowning family from Kalmar, Therborn had an affluent and bookish upbringing, with the Hungarian uprising and Second Arab–Israeli war helping to crystallize a radical outlook during his teenage years. He studied at his local Gymnasium, where he acquired English, German and French, before attending university in Sweden's 'ecclesiastical metropolis', the medieval city of Lund. As a student activist his affiliations were fluid: by turns he established an anarcho-syndicalist society, drifted into the orbit of the Social Democrats, played a leading role in the independent Socialist Association—running unsuccessfully for parliament on its ticket—and served a stint in the Communist Party. In his twenties he became a regular contributor to the Stockholm-based journal *Zenit* and eventually ascended to its editorial committee, aiming to rebrand it as 'the *New Left Review* of the far north', with a multidisciplinary staff dispersed across the Scandinavian capitals.<sup>2</sup> At the same time he made contact with NLR

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<sup>1</sup> Therborn, 'Into the 21st Century', NLR 10, July–Aug 2001; 'After Dialectics', NLR 43, Jan–Feb 2007; 'Class in the 21st Century', NLR 78, Nov–Dec 2012; 'New Masses?', NLR 85, Jan–Feb 2014; 'An Age of Progress?', NLR 99, May–June 2016; 'Dreams and Nightmares of the World's Middle Classes', NLR 124, July–Aug 2020; 'The World and the Left', NLR 137, Sept–Oct 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Sven Hort and Gunnar Olofsson, 'A Portrait of the Sociologist as a Young Rebel: Göran Therborn 1941–1981', in Sven Hort and Gunnar Olofsson eds, *Class, Sex and Revolutions: A Critical Appraisal of Göran Therborn*, Lund 2016.

itself, publishing his first article—a critical survey of the Swedish left—in 1965. Yet it was not until the worldwide rebellion erupted three years later that his name became familiar to readers in the Anglosphere.

‘From Petrograd to Saigon’, written in the early months of 1968 while Therborn was still a graduate student, presented the Tet Offensive as a *volta* in the history of socialist struggle. Hitherto, the Cold War was widely if erroneously perceived as an equal confrontation between rival systems: liberal-democratic capitalism and authoritarian communism. As long as that was the case, the repression and scarcity associated with the USSR served to quell revolutionary impulses among subaltern populations in the West. Geopolitical antagonism diminished class division. Yet the hot wars of the 1960s could not be framed as a contest between equals. Their asymmetry was unavoidable—as plebian uprisings across Asia, Africa and Latin America met the full force of US firepower. With this shift, socialism mutated from an ‘alien social model’ into a ‘source of emulation’ for the oppressed strata of the capitalist world, led by the insurgent generation that flooded the streets that May. The projection of imperial power in the peripheries had reactivated internal conflicts in the core.<sup>3</sup>

Therborn’s writing over the following decade was imbued with this sense of imminent upheaval. Its tone is anticipatory, preparing for a moment of political reckoning amid the hegemonic crisis sparked by Vietnam. At this juncture his intellectual priorities were twofold—to develop a rigorous, Althusserian Marxism capable of directing the international workers’ movement, and apply it to what was at once the most pressing and most neglected strategic issue: the dynamics of state power in the First World. His doctoral thesis was a systematic investigation of the ‘social disciplines’—economics, sociology, historical materialism—which sought to define their conditions of emergence and objects of study. Published in English as *Science, Class and Society* (1976), it argued that each of these traditions had discovered a distinct ‘pattern of societal determination’: the *market*, with its operations of supply and demand; the *ideological community*, with its matrix of values and norms; and the *laws of historical motion*, based on contradiction and class division. Marxism distinguished itself from its predecessors by grasping society as a ‘unity and conflict of opposites’, a field of structural incongruities

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<sup>3</sup> Göran Therborn, ‘From Petrograd to Saigon’, NLR 1/48, Mar–Apr 1968.

shaped by the imperatives of accumulation. It replaced the 'social whole' with the 'complex totality', 'sovereign individuals' with 'relations of production', 'cause-and-effect' with 'overdetermination'. Any relapse into earlier economic or sociological discourses would, Therborn claimed, betray its unique scientifico-political mission.<sup>4</sup>

This search for a purified Marxist methodology also motivated Therborn's scathing attack on the Frankfurt School, whom he accused of pedalling a 'metaphysical humanism' that abjured any concrete assessment of the social structure. In the work of Horkheimer et al., theories of man eclipsed conjunctural analysis; a simple dichotomy between capitalist alienation and the human essence obscured the real processes by which the system condensed or displaced its contradictions. The retreat into speculative philosophy, occasioned by the horrors of the thirties, offered no guide to political action after '68.<sup>5</sup> Having diagnosed a similar disjunction between theory and practice, Perry Anderson's *Considerations on Western Marxism* (1976) summarized the most critical questions for post-classical socialism: 'what is the real nature and structure of *bourgeois democracy* as a type of State system . . . ? What type of *revolutionary strategy* is capable of overthrowing this historical form of State—so distinct from that of Tsarist Russia? What would be the institutional forms of *socialist democracy* in the West, beyond it?'<sup>6</sup> As if taking his cue from Anderson, Therborn's next book, *What Does the Ruling Class Do When It Rules?* (1978), set out to address these problems with an organizational theory of the advanced capitalist state, contrasted with its feudal forerunner and proletarian successor.

This apparatus was conceived not merely as a committee for managing the common affairs of the bourgeoisie, nor a materialized concentration of class relations, but a locus of 'political technologies'. Among the most important were Weberian bureaucracy and parliamentary government. The first contained the chaos of market competition with a regime of impersonal rationality: a framework of calculable rules that generated specialized and hierarchized forms of knowledge.<sup>7</sup> The second

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<sup>4</sup> Göran Therborn, *Science, Class and Society*, London 1976.

<sup>5</sup> Göran Therborn, 'The Frankfurt School', NLR 1/63, Sept–Oct 1970; Göran Therborn, *What Does the Ruling Class Do When It Rules?*, London and New York 2008 [1978], p. 250.

<sup>6</sup> Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism*, London 1976, p. 103.

<sup>7</sup> Therborn, *What Does the Ruling Class Do When It Rules?*, pp. 51–2.

managed the conflicting interests of capital's different factions (mercantile, financial, industrial, agrarian) by institutionalizing disunity—using deliberative decision-making to mediate between rival profiteers.<sup>8</sup> During the post-war period these technologies were adapted to accommodate parallel developments in the economies and politics of the West. A growing need for targeted state intervention in private industry supplemented bureaucracy, based on fixed protocols and vertical networks, with technocracy, in which experts would adjust and refine their policies to guarantee optimal efficiency. The widening of democratic participation—a desideratum to secure national cohesion—meanwhile rendered classical parliamentarism obsolete, giving rise to a political culture in which candidates tried to convince the public of their outstanding personal qualities: competence, fortitude, sound judgement and so on.

The anatomy of a workers' state was fundamentally distinct. Whereas capitalism economized the political sphere, socialism politicized the economy. Whereas bourgeois politicians were bound by no specific mandate once they had sold themselves to the electorate, the legitimacy of proletarian officials was contingent on their 'class representativeness'. To switch from one mode to the other would require more than sweeping nationalization or revolutionary repression, wrote Therborn. It would mean altering the class character of the state itself: empowering mass organizations at the expense of expert advisory panels, 'dismantling bureaucracy, technocracy, and the exclusive and ritualistic forms of parliamentary and plebiscitary politics.'<sup>9</sup>

Convinced that such a transition had 'again become a concrete possibility in certain developed capitalist societies: especially France and Italy', Therborn concluded with an analysis of far-left strategy spanning the Second International, the early Comintern, the Popular Front and, most pertinently, Eurocommunism—described as an attempt to end the domination of monopoly capital by assembling a coalition of progressive forces with allied workers' parties at its centre.<sup>10</sup> Like the Swedish Left Party, of which Therborn was a prominent supporter, the PCF and PCI hoped to capture bourgeois institutions through electoral campaigns supported by non-violent mass struggle, under the banner

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<sup>8</sup> Therborn also dealt with this topic in 'The Rule of Capital and the Rise of Democracy', *NLR* 1/103, May–June 1977.

<sup>9</sup> Therborn, *What Does the Ruling Class Do When It Rules?*, pp. 72, 76, 79, 123.

<sup>10</sup> Therborn, *What Does the Ruling Class Do When It Rules?*, p. 12.

of *la démocratie jusqu'au bout*. They had so far succeeded in rejuvenating the labour movement and exploiting the fissures in Fordism.<sup>11</sup> Yet in their repudiation of 'proletarian dictatorship' they had not developed a viable plan, tailored to each national context, for overhauling the state machinery: an omission which meant that breakthroughs at the ballot box were unlikely to amount to social revolution. The next frontier for Marxism was therefore to create robust political and ideological defences against the 'bureaucratic-managerial reproduction of the subordination of the workers'.<sup>12</sup>

The self-described sequel to *What Does the Ruling Class Do When It Rules?* was an immanent critique of Althusser's theory of interpellation, and an alternative conception of the procedures by which the state produces docile subjects. *The Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology* (1980) levelled a number of charges at its author's theoretical lodestar: that he had understood ideology too narrowly as an 'imaginary distortion of real relations', that the consequent separation between true and false consciousness was untenable, and that he had failed to interrogate ideology's role in curbing or sharpening class conflict. For Therborn, the notion that workers had a fixed set of 'rational interests' was a utilitarian hangover in contemporary Marxism with little explanatory value. It elided 'how members of different classes come to define the world and their situation and possibilities in it in a particular way'. A more accurate theory would focus on the 'mechanisms of subjection' operative in different ideological systems: the means they employ to establish a basic sense of 'what exists, what is good and what is possible'. According to this typology, a regime could sustain itself by presenting its form of rule as inevitable, as morally righteous, or as the best option within the present historical parameters. Where these methods failed, substitutes could be found: compensating for a loss of active support by instilling an attitude of deference in citizens, for instance, or attaching a sense of fear to the pursuit of political alternatives.

Therborn conceded that such techniques had effectively restabilized bourgeois-democratic governments amid the economic shocks of the late seventies: overcapacity, stagflation, rate hikes. He wagered that a revolutionary situation could still take shape, but only with the outbreak of

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<sup>11</sup> Göran Therborn, 'Eurocommunism: Can It Regain the Initiative?', *Marxism Today*, April 1980, pp. 14–15.

<sup>12</sup> Therborn, *What Does the Ruling Class Do When It Rules?*, pp. 263–8, 279.

another political crisis in which the socialist movement could dislodge existing interpellative mechanisms and mobilize its own. Straying from the usual vocabulary of structuralist Marxism, he predicted that victory in this endeavour would hinge on ‘harnessing the existential dimensions of human subjectivity’—‘meanings related to being a member of the world, i.e., the meaning of life, suffering, death’, typically addressed by ‘mythologies, religions, and secular moral discourse’.<sup>13</sup>

### *Realignment*

By 1980, then, Therborn had gone from forecasting the socialist conquest of the state to explaining its resilience. While he had hoped to reconnect social theory with political activity after the detour of Western Marxism, his prescriptions for transcending bourgeois democracy appeared increasingly remote from conditions on either side of the Iron Curtain, as labour was disciplined and expectations were lowered by a redoubtable new right. On a practical level, he reflected, the necessary steps for renewing Eurocommunism were evident, if not easily implementable: mediating between mass politics and parliamentarism, cooperating with social-democratic parties, articulating popular alternatives to austerity and wage restraint, and forging an internationalism that could encompass non-Communist forces in the developing world.<sup>14</sup> But the most productive theoretical pathway was less clear, for the central precepts of Therborn’s earlier research had been seemingly called into doubt. The scientific study of capitalist contradictions had little practical purpose if it could not grasp the subjective processes that enabled or inhibited class politics. And preparations for proletarian government were futile if they neglected the more proximate battleground of civil society.

This changing balance of forces prompted a range of neo-Hegelian and neo-Gramscian responses: Jameson’s *Kulturkritik*, Rose’s metaphysics, Laclau’s left populism. Therborn, however, gravitated closer to the traditional concerns of his discipline—becoming president of the Swedish Sociological Association and publisher of the academic quarterly *Acta Sociologica*. While teaching in Nijmegen and Gothenburg during the eighties and nineties, he embarked on what were perhaps his most generative works of scholarship: retaining his radical commitments and

<sup>13</sup> Göran Therborn, *The Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology*, London and New York 1999 [1980], pp. 10, 94, 107, 111, 117, 23–4.

<sup>14</sup> Therborn, ‘Eurocommunism: Can It Regain the Initiative?’, pp. 19–20.

totalizing reach, but without the same atmosphere of political urgency. If *Science, Class and Society* claimed that sociological inquiry was anachronistic after the advent of Marxism, Therborn later seemed to resile from that position. *Why Some People Are More Unemployed than Others* (1986) scrutinized employment patterns and industrial strategies in the OECD countries, demystifying their divergent outcomes, while *European Modernity and Beyond* (1995) sketched the condition of the continent from the post-war period to the latest *fin de siècle*, reviewing the major transformations in its social institutions, demographic composition, collective identities, moral foundations and ideological conflicts.<sup>15</sup> Therborn also began to draw up an exhaustive account of the ‘geocultural’ family systems of the twentieth century, based on the interlocking norms of patriarchy, marriage and fertility.<sup>16</sup> Such monumental studies are beyond the scope of this essay; but for our present purposes we can simply register the shift they represented: away from an *engagé* standpoint towards an Olympian one; substituting retrospection for prospecting; abandoning doctrinal Althusserianism for a comparativist historical sociology which at times seemed to dispense with Marxism—if not leftism—altogether.<sup>17</sup>

Yet the *décalage* between early and late Therborn was not just the result of Eurocommunism’s fading prospects. It was symptomatic of a larger world-historical process that he would go on to describe in a compendium of articles for NLR: the left’s gradual relinquishment of a ‘modernist’ perspective, one that ‘turned its back on the past—the old, the traditional, the passé—and looked into the future as a reachable, novel horizon’.<sup>18</sup> For decades, this temporal orientation had sustained socialist agitators amid intolerable conditions and rallied countless

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<sup>15</sup> Göran Therborn, *Why Some People Are More Unemployed than Others*, London and New York 1986; *European Modernity and Beyond: The Trajectory of European Societies, 1945–2000*, London 1995.

<sup>16</sup> Göran Therborn, *Between Sex and Power: Family in the World, 1900–2000*, London 2004.

<sup>17</sup> Perry Anderson, ‘Atlas of the Family: Göran Therborn’, in *Spectrum: From Right to Left in the World of Ideas*, London and New York 2005, p. 230: ‘Although *Between Sex and Power* pays handsome homage to the role of Communism in the dismantling of patriarchy in the twentieth century, it displays no especially Marxist stance towards the family . . . Therborn speaks with the humane voice of a level-headed Swedish reformism that he understandably admires, without himself having ever altogether coincided with it.’

<sup>18</sup> Göran Therborn, ‘After Dialectics’, p. 72.



numbers to their cause. Marxism had proven itself ‘without rival’ as an ‘interpretation, a criticism, an analysis, and, occasionally, a government of modernity’.<sup>19</sup> Yet by the year 2000 Therborn was sceptical about not only whether political conditions were favourable to this emancipatory outlook, but whether its fundamental bases still existed.

From its inception, he now wrote, Marxism was rooted in two grand dialectical processes: the opposition between forces and relations of production, and the confrontation between capital and labour, or metropole and colony. These were the active ingredients of twentieth-century history, shaping its major events and inspiring its primary agents. In this dichotomous structure, the dominant side had an ineluctable tendency to generate its antithesis. Inherent in the apparatus of exploitation was a destabilizing element (the industrial proletariat, the colonial subject) capable of effecting its collapse. Alternative realities were imaginable on account of this anti-systemic agent. Socialism was foreseeable because its progenitors already existed in the here-and-now. The future was latent within the present.<sup>20</sup>

Yet from the eighties onward a new political logic emerged, as ‘labour was weakened and embryonic systemic alternatives fell apart, or were completely marginalized’.<sup>21</sup> Therborn began to trace the outlines of this era in ‘Into the 21st Century’ by contrasting the modern state structures that were lost to history with those that had weathered its violent course. He noted that the ‘economically inward-looking, little-trading’ model, in its multiple incarnations, was an abject failure: Communist nations had been prised open, postcolonial socialism in Africa had foundered, import-substitution had run aground in Latin America, and Europe’s traditionalist autocracies had embraced eversion. The general explanation was the rise of intra-industrial trade after WWII, which, by setting in motion technological advances which bypassed states isolated from the world market, compromised their ability to implement coherent national programmes and prompted their relative decline. Outward-looking welfarist and developmentalist models, on the other hand, had benefited from such runaway progress. Years of globalization had so far failed to unravel these formations. The richest countries had seen their

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<sup>19</sup> Göran Therborn, ‘The Dialectics of Modernity’, *NLR* 1/215, Jan–Feb 1996, p. 80.

<sup>20</sup> See Therborn, ‘Class in the 21st Century’, *NLR* 78, Nov–Dec 2012, pp. 11–12; ‘After Dialectics’, p. 65; pp. 27–8

<sup>21</sup> Therborn, ‘After Dialectics’, p. 65.

public sectors continually expand along with their expenditures, while peripheral export-oriented economies had devised effective methods of controlling and directing capital. Corporations had grown, but not as much as states, which were more capable than ever of undertaking large-scale transformative projects, so long as they could remain competitive internationally.<sup>22</sup>

The problem, then, was not humanity's potential to determine its destiny; 'humankind today is at a historical peak of its possibilities, in the sense of its capability and resources to shape the world, and itself'.<sup>23</sup> It was rather that the waning of 'dialectical modernity' had routed the socialist movement and eclipsed its totalizing vision for society. For Therborn, the left's successes over the past century were considerable: discrediting racism and colonialism, establishing the post-war social settlement, beating back cultural reaction and gendered oppression. Its losses, however, were incalculable: misalignment between the '68 protesters and the labour unions, retreat from the distributive conflicts of the seventies and eighties, geopolitical fractures among Communist regimes and their eventual evaporation. Thanks to these serial defeats, he argued, the secular trend towards the socialization of productive forces had been reversed, nullifying their contradiction with productive relations. The key industries of the developed world were privatized, fragmented, outsourced—their workers deracinated and scattered across supply chains. Class struggle had given way to new forms of contestation centred on 'life politics, ecology, cultural expression', left parties to looser activist coalitions.<sup>24</sup> Rulers and ruled did not form a divided unity in which the empowerment of one side met the collective resistance of the other. 'Industrial capitalism has mutated into a form of digital-financial capitalism which does not produce or develop its own adversaries.'<sup>25</sup>

This marked the transition to a post-dialectical age, in which the working class no longer constituted one pole of a binary societal antagonism. Socialism, by extension, lost its erstwhile meaning as the immanent triumph of this pole over its opposite. This, Therborn stressed, was not quite the 'historical defeat' registered by Anderson's 'Renewals'

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<sup>22</sup> Göran Therborn, 'Into the 21st Century', pp. 93–5.

<sup>23</sup> Göran Therborn, 'An Age of Progress?', p. 27.

<sup>24</sup> Therborn, 'Into the 21st Century', pp. 101–5, 108.

<sup>25</sup> Göran Therborn, 'The World and the Left', p. 37.

(2000), in which ‘capital had comprehensively beaten back all threats to its rule’.<sup>26</sup> It could be better described as a situation of ‘*impasse* and exhaustion’, where ‘an industrial era of revolution and reform’ had finally run its course.<sup>27</sup> What were the implications? Intellectually, it was uncertain whether Marxism could retain its relevance. Since the late nineteenth century, he wrote in ‘After Dialectics’ (2007), this system of thought had triangulated between social science, philosophy and politics—focussing variously on the process of capitalist development, its dynamic of alienation and fetishization, and the power structure that protects it. The final element was the determinant one. Only a political current with revolutionary ambitions could bind the other discourses into a world outlook. In its absence, Marxism had mostly retreated into the corridors of the academy. There was no ruling out a left resurgence in the new millennium, yet its content would probably be novel, perhaps unrecognizable: ‘the underdevelopment of Marxist political theory, together with the social restructuring of capitalist societies, make it unlikely that an ascendant socialist politics would be very Marxist . . . Marx will be rediscovered many times over in the future; novel interpretations will be made and new insights found—but conducive to little *ism-ish* identification.’<sup>28</sup>

Without this forward-looking and politically-oriented social theory, much of the left had succumbed to postmodern stasis, while the right had steadily consolidated its own modernist worldview. Neoliberalism promised liberation from backwards regimes, limitless growth and perpetual innovation. Under the project for a New American Century, the dream of socialist revolution had been supplanted by the doctrine of capitalist ‘regime change’.<sup>29</sup> One could still imagine alternative futures, but they were increasingly beholden to the market. Therborn’s ‘Class in the 21st Century’ (2012) noted how the utopian energies drained from the industrial proletariat had been reinvested in the middle-class fantasy of ‘boundless consumption’: ‘taking possession of the earth’, liberalizing its every corner, luxuriating in its cheap credit and commodities. This gave the global middle classes an ambiguous political subjectivity. It excluded anyone without the requisite assets or income, demonizing them as ‘deplorables’ and in some cases debarring them from democratic

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<sup>26</sup> Perry Anderson, ‘Renewals’, *NLR* 1, Jan–Feb 2000, p. 16.

<sup>27</sup> Therborn, ‘The World and the Left’, p. 34.

<sup>28</sup> Therborn, ‘After Dialectics’, pp. 69–70, 77.

<sup>29</sup> Therborn, ‘After Dialectics’, p. 77.

participation. But it also sparked conflagrations like the Arab Spring or Argentine riots, in which intermediate layers aligned with the masses in defence of their economic prospects or personal freedoms.<sup>30</sup>

This created a temptation for plebeian classes to accept the ‘burgeoning bourgeoisie’ as their political vanguard—hoping that, when neoliberalism failed to deliver on its promises, downwardly-mobile professionals would rise up against the oligarchy.<sup>31</sup> But even the most optimistic version of this scenario offered no relief from capitalist realism. The likelihood was that any populist alliance based on a politics of consumption rather than production would split the moment it took power, with poorer fractions banished to its margins. The other option was for the poor themselves to become protagonists. In ‘New Masses’ (2014), Therborn examined three groupings that might do so: pre-capitalist indigenous peoples; extra-capitalist surplus populations—peasants, migrants, casual labourers, slum-dwellers; and manufacturing workers in emerging centres of accumulation—China, Bangladesh, Indonesia. None of these sectors, on its own, was powerful enough to pose a systemic challenge. The first was relatively small and isolated, the second was rarely activated without a ‘triggering event’, while the third was pacified by consumer capitalism and weakened by abundant labour supplies.

A serious opposition movement would therefore need to enlist the salariat as a junior partner—which relied, in turn, on the articulation of a hegemonic ideology that could take the place of Marxism. In pursuit of this vision, Therborn considered the foremost ‘critical themes’ in contemporary culture. During the 2000s, the drive for total commodification and its corrupting effects had generated public interest campaigns targeting corporate racketeers and their political conduits. Climate breakdown had spawned environmental and conservationist movements, giving rise to a ‘planetary consciousness’. And imperial arrogance had provoked reactive forms of solidarity in the Global South, manifest in institutions like the World Social Forum.<sup>32</sup> These were not dialectical negations of the regnant order, but disruptive tendencies within it. Their sense of futurity, where it existed, was abstract and often

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<sup>30</sup> Göran Therborn, ‘Class in the 21st Century’, pp. 17–18.

<sup>31</sup> Therborn explored this topic at greater length in ‘Dreams and Nightmares of the World’s Middle Classes’.

<sup>32</sup> Göran Therborn, ‘New Masses’, pp. 8–9, 12–15.

accommodationist. Whether they could metastasize into a societal alternative was unclear.

### *New lefts*

Therborn's appraisal of the new century, then, yielded several striking conclusions: that the state forms descended from the previous era laid the foundations for continuous human progress; that seizing them from the oligarchy would involve a contest between the working and middle classes to hegemonize anti-neoliberal politics; and that 'the twenty-first-century left is most likely to be de-centred', since 'Europe can no longer provide a global perspective for emancipation' and no other part of the world-system was primed to take its place.<sup>33</sup> Still, without the guiding compass of Marxism, concrete strategies and predictions—of the kind Therborn posited in the seventies and eighties—were out of reach. 'In the current situation', he wrote, 'a certain *defiant humility* seems to be the most adequate intellectual stance. Defiance before the forces of capital and empire, however powerful. Humility before the coming new world and the learning and unlearning that it will call for.'<sup>34</sup> What that meant in practice was sifting patiently through the empirical evidence: tracking the slow mutation of these forces and the moments of resistance they encounter, so as to gauge their primary patterns in the post-industrial age.

This approach was demonstrated most comprehensively in 'The World and the Left'—a survey spanning every continent, in which Therborn profiled the myriad 'new lefts' that have appeared over the last twenty years and the constraints acting upon them. Such oppositions, no longer relying on the propulsive force of structural dialectics, and often disinherited from their political progenitors, were instead driven by an affective impulse in the present: an unmediated *indignación* at the cruelty of late capitalism. 'Ignoring the bleak old era of their mothers and fathers, the new left from around the turn of the millennium took radical politics onto a new level.' It had not revived anything resembling left-modernism; yet its success in preserving socialist politics beyond the historical conditions that spawned it was astonishing. For Therborn, it was only because of the 'creative dynamism' of these agitators and

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<sup>33</sup> Therborn, 'Class in the 21st Century', pp. 28–9.

<sup>34</sup> Therborn, 'After Dialectics', p. 114.

organizers, ‘in contrast to the fatigue and despondency of the left in the early neoliberal era’, that social transformation remained conceivable. Such movements, ‘stepping out of the shadows of the great moulders of the twentieth century’, had ‘updated and revitalized the entire radical tradition’. That alone provided ‘rational grounds for cautious optimism’.<sup>35</sup>

The actors that accomplished this momentous task were varied. The starting-gun was fired by alter-globo, which contrasted an internationalism rooted in solidarity to one based on outsourcing and speculation. Its example of an intransigent left, as heedless of national borders as its adversaries, was followed by militant climate activism, which gained momentum in the mid-2000s and sparked ‘the fastest-growing social movement in history’, Fridays for Future, in the late-2010s. In parallel, urban rebellions—Occupy, 15-M, Gezi Park—skirted the barriers to class consciousness by pitting an undifferentiated ‘people’ against a parasitic ‘elite’. They foreshadowed the combative social democracy embodied by Corbyn, Sanders, Iglesias and Mélenchon, which combined the concrete proposals of twentieth-century reformism with a ruptural strategy to wrest state power from elites.<sup>36</sup> Peripheral countries were meanwhile roiled by perpetual industrial revolt, even if the struggles of the new manufacturing proletariat were largely constricted to pay and conditions. In Africa, the ‘IMF riots’ against structural adjustment plus ongoing protests against the cost of living and corruption had partially renewed the contestatory spirit of anti-colonialism. And in Latin America, the Pink Tide managed to curb inequality and improve social provision while instating new models of participatory democracy and cooperative production: a considerable achievement given the stranglehold of the world hegemon. Morales and Correa, in particular, combined indigenous communitarian traditions with bold redistributive policies—their focus on conservation and *bien vivir* offering an antidote to the ‘modernist myopia’ of the old left.<sup>37</sup>

Twenty-first-century leftism was, moreover, distinguished by its novel tactics and instruments. In lieu of the mass party, the social network; alongside elections and industrial action, divestment campaigns and

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<sup>35</sup> Therborn, ‘The World and the Left’, pp. 38–9, 72.

<sup>36</sup> Therborn observes that the first two decades of the new century also set a historical record, post-1900, for ‘maximalist’ social uprisings demanding the removal of incumbent governments.

<sup>37</sup> Therborn, ‘The World and the Left’, pp. 39–52.

reclamations of public space. ‘Democracy’ had become integral to its discourse: no longer a means to the end of socialism, but a synonym for it, and a telos in itself. Therborn conceded that none of these movements could boast a perfect record. Alter-globo failed to programmatize its demands; environmentalism was largely assimilated by the liberal centre; transatlantic left populism was repelled at the ballot box; African insurgencies were ephemeral and easily repressed; while the Pink Tide struggled to reconcile communitarianism with developmentalism—splitting its social base and exposing it to right-wing counter-offensives. In each case, ‘the left’s great lacuna was a vision of transformative power or a strategy for winning it’. Outbursts of popular anger may have signalled the enduring possibility of a revolutionary subject by convening ‘coalitions of workers, peasants, students, professionals, indigenous people’s organizations, the precariat and the unemployed youth’ in various configurations. But even when this bloc was powerful enough to topple governments, it stumbled in trying to administer its own.<sup>38</sup>

If the left struggled to dream up ‘an inspiring imaginary future’—a clear direction for its long march—it could at least take solace in the fact that liberalism, too, had abandoned its modernist orientation. The US-led project of extending ‘market sovereignty over the entire world’ had, by enabling the precipitous rise of China, generated a contradiction between the unfettered advance of capital and the interests of the American juggernaut. In attempting to shore up its strength, Trump and Biden had facilitated the shift away from neoliberalism towards a monopoly capitalism ‘bent upon accumulation within state-defined geopolitical parameters’. With the advent of the New Cold War, this had rapidly calcified into a doctrine of ‘sado-liberalism’. While the US had previously deployed sanctions or shock and awe as the necessary precursors to liberalizing reform, it had since become obsessed with punishing aberrant states ‘without any realistic prospect of behavioural change’, merely for the ‘satisfaction of punishing’.<sup>39</sup> Illusions of free-market utopia had vanished. In their place was a weakened empire, unable to accept the prospect of multipolarity, enflaming proxy wars and lashing out at competitors with no pretence of ‘progress’.

This ubiquitous lack of vision leaves humanity in a precarious position when confronting the processes that are beginning to shape

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<sup>38</sup> Therborn, ‘The World and the Left’, pp. 51, 71.

<sup>39</sup> Therborn, ‘The World and the Left’, pp. 73, 37, 61.

contemporary history in lieu of grand dialectics. Therborn concludes his study by identifying three: climate spoliation, as wealthy nations continue to exceed emissions records; Great Power conflict, with America the primary agent of escalation; and monstrous inequality, aggravated by deregulation and austerity. These bequests of the last century are likely to create a political landscape ravaged by recurrent crisis and disaster. The author, defiantly humble, offers no practical solutions; but he does attempt to define the left's conceptual priorities in each area. The ecological threat, he urges, should prompt serious engagement with the capabilities of green finance—the climate settlement it could install and the conditions for organizing therein. Geopolitical antagonism should give rise to a 'truly global and planetary' perspective, in which the horrors of US domination are acknowledged along with the virtues of a pluralist alternative. And the combustibility of class relations, at a time when subaltern populations have never been more connected to the outside world and to each other, should not be understated.<sup>40</sup>

### *The triadic present*

The scale of Therborn's intellectual achievement, in synthesizing these contemporary trends and situating them within an original, globe-spanning narrative, is remarkable. And his political prescriptions are useful, as far as they go. But the first step in evaluating this global snapshot is to consider its foundational assertion that Marxian dialectics have been surpassed. 'The World and the Left' describes the dialectic as 'an endogenous process' marked by constitutive contradiction, 'deriving from the developmental logic of the social system'—the primary example being capital and labour, whose collision appears to demand a new historical synthesis.<sup>41</sup> Yet a different characterization can be found in *Science, Class and Society*, where Therborn writes that

The opposition and struggle of classes . . . does not in itself point to the necessity of a solution, to a transformation of the system of classes or to their abolition. Indeed, as a matter of fact *Capital* does not speak of contradictions between classes, but of contradictions within the structure and processes of the capitalist mode of production, which develop in the course of the class struggle between the bourgeoisie and proletariat, and which determine the mode of existence of their antagonism and the relations of strength between them.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Therborn, 'The World and the Left', pp. 56–7, 59, 62.

<sup>41</sup> Therborn, 'The World and the Left', p. 37.

<sup>42</sup> Therborn, *Science, Class and Society*, p. 396.



For the young Therborn, the only genuine ‘systemic contradiction’ adhered to the mode of production: its forces and relations. This was the determinant dialectical opposition—the engine of history and futurity. It could intensify or attenuate a highly contingent realm of class struggle; but class struggle, in itself, did not ‘point to the necessity of a solution’, nor was its dynamic inherently contradictory, given the potential for particular material or ideological conjunctures to prevent mass challenges to capital. As a result, the contraction and fragmentation of the twentieth-century proletariat would, by Therborn’s earlier criteria, have little bearing on the question of dialectics as such. It would rather be downstream from more fundamental processes in the structure of accumulation. The halting of labour’s ‘forward march’ may have neutralized the conflict between socialized forces and capitalist relations, but this hardly precludes the existence of new primary contradictions.

With this in mind, we might look again at Therborn’s triad of contemporary politics: ecology, geopolitics, inequality. Can any of these be said to have a dialectical structure? It is worth recalling, initially, that the term ‘productive forces’ applies not only to the given stage of technological development, but also to the technical organization of production—its coordination in the slave plantation, the factory system, the digital economy and so on. Accordingly, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the rise of fossil capital and the recoil of climate breakdown constitutes a dialectic in the strictest sense. The capitalist imperative of self-sustaining growth could only be fulfilled, from the second quarter of the nineteenth century onward, through the switch to coal power as the energetic basis of production, since it was more amenable than air or water to private sequestration. Fossil fuel subsequently became what Andreas Malm calls ‘a necessary material substratum for the production of surplus value’, creating a novel paradigm in which ‘the exploitation of labour by capital is impelled by the consumption of this particular accessory’.<sup>43</sup> The transition to oil preserved this function, enabling productivity breakthroughs and cheaper manufacturing which underpinned the post-war expansionary cycle. Now, carbon-intensive commodity production is mostly delegated to the East and financed by the West—whose belated attempts at ‘green onshoring’ have had minimal impact, and have been offset by increases in environmentally ruinous military spending.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam-Power and the Roots of Global Warming*, London and New York 2016, pp. 297–8, 288, 290.

<sup>44</sup> See Ed McNally, ‘Green Empire?’, *NLR–Sidecar*, 2 February 2023.

Extreme weather events show that this fossil regime is already facing the revenge of its structural antithesis: a natural world which, as it breaks down, threatens the conditions for accumulation by leaving stranded assets, depleting demand, rupturing supply chains and destroying vital infrastructure. The transgression of planetary boundaries elicits their reassertion. The system's 'developmental logic' subverts itself.<sup>45</sup>

Although Therborn treats them separately, this dialectic of climate crisis is bound up with the dynamic of geopolitics. The two are inextricable and co-constitutive. For it was partly US state investment in petrochemical innovation during WWII that allowed the country to exercise control over the inter-state system in its wake. Adam Hanieh writes of a 'mutually reinforcing relationship between the rise of American hegemony, the shift to an oil-centred global energy regime and the revolution in commodity production inaugurated by petrochemicals'.<sup>46</sup> America's status as the source of world liquidity—its role as the organizing centre of global production, and its attendant seigniorial privileges—were rooted in its petroleum feedstock. When this hegemony was imperilled by increasing industrial competition with Germany and Japan—which, along with heightened labour militancy and global monetary disorder, began to exert downward pressure on American manufacturing profits in the 1970s—the US policy response represented another turning point in the history of fossil capital: one which strengthened both the imperial matrix and its energetic foundations. By hiking interest rates, raising the value of the dollar and incentivizing speculation, the US under Reagan orchestrated something close to an industrial 'shakeout', in which firms were forced to reroute investment from fixed capital into financial channels. This shift was instrumental to winning the Cold War, as America's self-reinvention as the primary debtor nation granted access to vast capital flows that allowed it to outpace the USSR in the arms race.<sup>47</sup> At the

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<sup>45</sup> On the ecocidal logic of the productive forces, see also Kōhei Saitō, *Marx in the Anthropocene: Towards the Idea of Degrowth Communism*, Cambridge 2023, pp. 147–8; Nancy Fraser, *Cannibal Capitalism: How Our System Is Devouring Democracy, Care, and the Planet—and What We Can Do about It*, London and New York 2022, pp. 83–5. Of course, this self-subverting tendency does not imply that capitalism will prove unable to adapt to the erosion of its current ecological basis, as Alyssa Battistoni and Geoff Mann explain in 'Climate Bidenomics', NLR 143, Sept–Oct 2023.

<sup>46</sup> Adam Hanieh, 'Petrochemical Empire', NLR 130, July–Aug 2021, p. 38.

<sup>47</sup> Giovanni Arrighi, *Adam Smith in Beijing: Lineaments of the Twenty-First Century*, London and New York 2009, pp. 145–7, 161–4.

same time, though, it precipitated China's remaking as 'the chimney of the world', with mobile capital flooding into its growing export economy. To secure an energy supply for these industries, and meet Western demand for their output, the PRC deregulated its domestic coal market while ramping up fossil fuel imports in the 1990s.<sup>48</sup> Global emissions rocketed from 25 to 33 billion annual metric tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> over the first decade of the new century. By 2020, China's annual share of worldwide discharges had risen to 31 per cent.<sup>49</sup>

Climate crisis is therefore entangled with another, equally dialectical process: Great Power conflict. In the twentieth century, the oil-based development of the productive forces entrenched asymmetrical productive relations in which America reigned supreme. Yet this led to the problems of industrial overcapacity and falling profit rates described by Robert Brenner, necessitating a *volte-face* in imperial strategy: from encouraging domestic manufacturing to uprooting it abroad. That outsourcing operation created the conditions for a new coal-fired superpower in the East. China's high-speed growth subsequently enabled its emergence as a nonconforming actor in the international system—expanding its influence by forging Third World trade partnerships, investing in strategic sectors and increasingly prioritizing its internal market. The US, still suffering from persistent stagnation and sapped state capacity, has come to view this as an impingement on its sovereign authority, and responded with an aggressive programme of economic containment and military encirclement. The head of the US Air Mobility Command now predicts the two countries will be at war by 2025.<sup>50</sup> How else to describe this historical trajectory, other than an endogenous dialectic in which forces of fossil-backed production enter into contradiction with relations of American domination?

Inequality—Therborn's third category—might not have the same dialectical structure, since it is not a historical inevitability that oppressed populations will rise up against their rulers. But given the effects of environmental collapse and geopolitical tension, there is every

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<sup>48</sup> Malm, *Fossil Capital*, pp. 343–4.

<sup>49</sup> Hannah Ritchie and Max Roser, 'China: CO<sub>2</sub> Country Profile', *Our World in Data* website 2020.

<sup>50</sup> See Edward Luce, 'China is right about US containment', *Financial Times*, 8 March 2023; Dan Lamothe, 'Air Force maverick who warned of war with China sticks to his guns', *Washington Post*, 29 July 2023.

reason to believe that wealth disparities could produce forms of class antagonism that are just as sharp and binary as those of the last century. Inadequate climate adaptation measures will leave more people vulnerable to failing ecosystems, blurring class distinctions between the lower strata. Attempts to minimize the fallout through welfare policies will be compromised by inflated arms budgets and sluggish growth rates. Elites and their state relays will resort to further ‘politically driven upward redistribution’ to maintain their position amid the ensuing instability.<sup>51</sup> In this context, we might get what Gopal Balakrishnan terms ‘Pikettyian’ class struggle—‘in the simplified, more abstract, and classical form of rich versus poor’.<sup>52</sup> Here the primary social cleavage will be *fiscal*. When Therborn writes, somewhat obscurely, that class in the twenty-first-century is not a ‘structural category’ but a ‘compass of orientation’,<sup>53</sup> perhaps this is what he means: not a fixed position in the system of production, but a location on one side of the division between those with the resources to insulate themselves from crisis and those without them. *Mutatis mutandis*, the polarization of society into these rival blocs would resolve Therborn’s uncertainty about whether the consumptionist middle class or the atomized working class will lead the movement for liberation—as the line between the two might be erased, politically if not materially.

### *Rise of the right*

If, on this basis, we can posit the existence of new dialectical currents with the potential to ignite class struggle, then Marxism may not be as obsolete as Therborn assumes. Still, there are determinate reasons why it seems to have lost much of its political relevance since the apex of the labour movement. These are related to the transformation of historical dialectics that occurred with the deindustrialization of the Global North. Before this process took hold, the socialization of production meant that Marxism, and the movements that grew out of it, could root themselves in an inherent trend in the process of capitalist development. Their aims involved unfettering this trend from private property relations—unleashing progress by allowing one side of the dialectic to win out over the other. This enabled the intuitive adoption of a futurist disposition.

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<sup>51</sup> Robert Brenner, ‘Escalating Plunder’, NLR 123, May–June 2020, p. 22.

<sup>52</sup> Gopal Balakrishnan, ‘Swan Song of the Ultra-Left’, *Sublation*, 30 May 2022.

<sup>53</sup> Therborn, ‘Class in the 21st-Century’, p. 26.

Yet that outlook has since been shattered by the ‘neoliberal interlude’ and replaced by the grand dialectics of climate and geopolitics: two structural trends with no progressive character. Here, the ‘oppositional’ forces (with the potential to destabilize present relations of production) are, respectively, the poisoning of the biosphere and the rise of China. The left can ally itself with neither. Its sense of futurity therefore cannot come from bringing to fruition an existing tendency within the system; for, rather than prefiguring emancipation, these binaries merely pit differently destructive forces against each other. They may still end up deepening class divisions over the coming decades. But in this new reality, no single class can occupy the proletariat’s erstwhile role as the bearer or embodiment of dialectical negation.

This marks the transition away from a hopeful dialectic towards a darker one. So far, socialists have struggled to respond to these shifting sands, whereas the nationalist right has rallied, becoming the main beneficiary of popular discontent with neoliberalism across greater Europe and North America. Therborn does not deal at length with this phenomenon. He attributes it to the ‘peripheralization of working-class heartlands’, their neglect by both the left and the centre, and the arrival of ‘skilful political entrepreneurs’ who have enflamed resentments against migration.<sup>54</sup> But this account, more descriptive than explanatory, fails to capture the underlying logic of the right’s ascent. A fuller analysis might begin, instead, with Therborn’s suggestion that liberalism has lost its modernist perspective. No longer invested in the fantasy of endless growth, unable to deliver social progress at home or abroad, it is reduced to superintending distributive conflicts in conditions of stagnation. It has replaced technocracy (policy fixes that promise perpetual improvement) with managerialism (easing social tensions in the absence of such fixes). This is a symptom of the broader ideological condition known as ‘presentism’: confinement to the horizon of the immediate.<sup>55</sup> The left, too, suffers from this affliction, since its rejection of capitalism is based on an affective revulsion rather than an alternate vision. The dialectics of the twenty-first century have deprived it of a spontaneous futurism. Which means that the right alone can claim a monopoly on opposition to the present—by retreating into the past.

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<sup>54</sup> Therborn, ‘The World and the Left’, p. 56.

<sup>55</sup> François Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time*, New York 2015.

This regressive movement is presented as a defensive response to insecurity and precarity: a position that resonates instinctively with workers seeking refuge from capital's onslaught. An age of escalating crisis may further heighten its appeal. Yet it is important to note that hard-line nationalism operates not by posing any real threat to the dominant liberal ideology, but by appropriating and repurposing its elements. The Third Way was, among other things, a means of enforcing market discipline on racialized communities, whose members were subjected to punitive forms of surveillance, monitoring, incarceration and deportation. Under this regime, interventionism abroad was complemented by authoritarian crackdowns at home, and national chauvinism was mobilized in the cause of selling one's country to investors. As centrist parties have fallen out of favour, the 'new rightists'—from Trump to Farage to Meloni—have leant into these trends while styling themselves as an alternative. Their performative invocations of the past allow them to affect dissent from the status quo, yet they also speak the common sense of the present: the values of Blair or Clinton, without the same sanctimony or hypocrisy. This Janus-faced nature allows the nationalist right to reap the benefits of liberal ideology—its persistently hegemonic status in public life—while also capitalizing on frustration with it. It dislodges the political centre by accelerating its project and borrowing its tropes.

Yet if such basic conformity with liberalism gives the right its strength, it is also a potential weakness. Once in power, nationalist politicians betray the continuities with their 'globalist' predecessors: identical fealty to corporate interests, disregard for rustbelt populations, subservience to American empire. Nostalgic paeans to the nuclear family and gestural attacks on migrants may not be enough to mask this resemblance in the long run—which creates an opportunity for the left to offer a genuinely counterhegemonic programme, rather than its simulacrum. It can only do so, however, if it outgrows the presentist constraints by which it is entrapped—the anti-futurist reformism famously advocated by T. J. Clark.<sup>56</sup> For what Therborn calls the 'disaster-generating legacies' of the twentieth century cannot be confronted by a socialism whose primary basis is immediatist and affective. Mere outrage, of the kind that propelled the progressive populism of the 2010s, is a flimsy foundation

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<sup>56</sup> T. J. Clark, 'For a Left with No Future', NLR 74, Mar–Apr 2012.

for transformative politics. It neither distinguishes the left from its adversaries (who are equally capable of marshalling indignation) nor equips it with a coherent plan for government. It thus leaves socialists facing the same crisis of credibility as centrists: hurtling towards a bleak future, without the necessary temporal orientation to change course.

### *Contra dialectics*

The central question then becomes: can the global left regain its modernist momentum? Can it reconstitute itself as the sole representative of opposition to the present—outflanking the populist right? Writing in *Jacobin*, Alyssa Battistoni argues that radical politics in this century starts from the premise that current conjunctural trends have no long-term direction other than generalized devastation. ‘Told we’d reached the end of history, it turns out that we’ve actually arrived at the end of the future, or at least the one we knew.’ Once this is acknowledged, the association between optimism and utopianism breaks down, since the assumption that everything will be alright is precisely what beckons Armageddon. It is only ‘clear-eyed pessimism’, unflinching recognition of our predicament, that opens up a hopeful space beyond it.<sup>57</sup> An apocalyptic sensibility, then, is not incompatible with a utopian one. The former may even be the precondition for the latter—providing the necessary impetus to effect a terraformation. Therborn described this prospect some four decades ago in *The Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology*, when he wrote that ‘it is possible to mobilize the future against the present’: ‘In the really dramatic socio-political mobilizations . . . the future has predominantly taken the form of an imminent threat flowing from current tendencies, which has called for pre-emptive action in the present. We might term this process *mobilization by anticipatory fear*’.<sup>58</sup> This is surely the appropriate formula for our times. Contemporary dialectics may not have a progressive structural trend with which the left can ally itself. But they do have a tendency towards calamity which could, out of sheer terror, incite the imagination of alternative realities.

By organizing on this basis, the left would become the nemesis of dialectics. In the two-sided conflicts between capital accumulation and

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<sup>57</sup> Alyssa Battistoni, ‘Back to No Future’, *Jacobin*, 18 June 2013.

<sup>58</sup> Therborn, *The Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology*, p. 123.

climate breakdown, America and China, it would be a third force: an exit-route from these various cycles of catastrophe. This is not an easy position to occupy. It was simpler for twentieth-century socialism to play its historic role, since it could rely on certain in-built tendencies of capitalist production. The absence of such tendencies today means that socialists are working against the forces of history rather than with them. This leaves their movement more susceptible to splintering, disorientation, despair; for how can it decide on a positive direction when its relation to the present is seemingly one of absolute negation? Perhaps these maladies can only be avoided if the new left coheres around its *own* history. Rather than 'ignoring the bleak old era of their mothers and fathers', its partisans could draw strength from the struggles of their predecessors. As the early Therborn writes, 'it is possible to mobilize on the basis of the past, of what has existed, of past experiences, values, symbols . . . If such *mobilization by revival* is to be successful, it must be possible for the experiences and values of the past to enter into the order of the day'.<sup>59</sup>

Mobilization by anticipatory fear and mobilization by revival. The first allows socialism to position itself outside the existing dialectical structure and criticize its trajectory. The second allows it to fall back on a distinct historical tradition that acts as a bulwark against dejection. Together, they create a link between past and future that transcends the present. For Enzo Traverso, the seeds of this temperament can already be seen in the twenty-first-century left. Though it appears to be a presentist creature, it is actually defined by an inability to forget its history—a persistent if largely unconscious melancholia following the collapse of communism, experienced as 'both a finished experience and an irreplaceable loss'. This feeling of lack can have a stultifying effect, in that it inhibits the development of new political projects, 'obstructing the separation from the lost beloved ideal as well as a libidinal transfer toward a new object of love'. But, at the same time, refusal to mourn the death of utopia keeps it alive—for 'successful mourning could mean identification with the enemy: lost socialism replaced by accepted capitalism'.<sup>60</sup> The failure to develop new attachments prevents capitulation to a fallen reality. The presence of a haunting, spectral past helps the left to maintain its critical

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<sup>59</sup> Therborn, *The Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology*, pp. 121–2.

<sup>60</sup> Enzo Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory*, New York 2017, p. 45.



distance from the current system: a precondition for reclaiming futurism as its own. Were it to make this presence *conscious*—no longer a repressed origin, but a proud inheritance—then perhaps it could ‘enter into the order of the day’ with greater force. Therborn’s world-casting essays stop short of theorizing this endeavour. Yet in tracing the long arc of socialist organizing across decades and continents, they will be a vital resource for realizing it.