

DIALECTICADN
IRREVERS
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AGENCYCI

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We are living in strange times, going through multiple crises: economic, political, psychological and environmental disasters are reinforcing each other. There is a widespread sense of irreversibility. 'Capitalist realism' refers to the widespread belief that capitalism is the only feasible economic system and that no concrete alternative can be imagined. Is this an accurate prediction of the current political landscape or rather a self-fulfilling prophecy?

*"The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear."*¹

1. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks, "Wave of Materialism" and "Crisis of Authority"* (New York: International Publishers, 1971), pp.275-276.

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NIETZSCHE AND MARX'S DIFFERENT EVALUATIONS OF THE SOCIAL CRISIS

In this text I will first draw on Nietzsche's and Marx's different evaluations of how social crises can lead to historical changes. Then I will try to construct a psycho-political explanation of what hinders political agency by using Mark Fisher's account of capitalist realism and Frederic Lordon's account of the co-linearization process. Lastly, I will give concrete examples from two films to illustrate the causal mechanisms that lead to the emergence of two opposite kinds of political agency: politics of resentment and politics of indignation.

"The will to reverse or resist seemingly irreversible processes or events forms the basis for systems of justice, memory or insurance; the will to accept irreversibility on the other hand celebrates life as a process of spontaneity and exertion." When I read this announcement for the workshop *Mapping the Irreversible* at the University of Graz, I thought about an imaginary dialogue between Marx and Nietzsche. Can we read Marx's dialectical account of history and his call for a revolutionary politics as the will to reverse seemingly irreversible processes? The answer is yes and no. Yes, because of Marx's harsh critique of the ideology that justified capitalism as the end of history and his introduction of the possibility of going beyond capitalism. But also no, because history is neither reversible, nor irreversible: every event indirectly affects many other events and it is neither possible to rewind history, nor possible to erase the traces in our memories. Besides, history can take many different paths; even when it seems like a canonical musical piece, there are so many minor themes and motifs that can change the whole meaning of the piece. History is a complex, emergent, open-ended system and the dialectical method can help us reveal its many different overlapping layers, as well as the contradictions and cracks that make changes possible.

Can we interpret Nietzsche's amor fati as "the will to accept irreversibility (which) celebrates life as a process of spontaneity and exertion"? Yes, because Nietzsche's account of eternal recurrence hints at a conception of history which is cyclical, rather than progressive. The historical loops are irreversible. Even if all the matter of the universe has only been recycling from the very beginnings of time, the concrete manifestations of the 'will to power' in different individuals make all the difference. Hence, the affirmation of life for Nietzsche does not imply being passive observers of whatever life offers us. Nietzsche agrees with Spinoza that *conatus* or striving is the essence of life.

Marx and Nietzsche agree on the values of affirming life but choose different methods to achieve this goal. Nietzsche's aristocratic individualism and anti-humanism, which allows the sacrificing of humanity for the emergence of the overman, is definitely at odds with Marx's humanism and his call for a collective emancipation. However, both Marx's critique of ideology and Nietzsche's genealogy of morals, involve an immanent critique and embrace a perspectivism without falling into total relativism. The way to achieve 'the truth' or objectivity is not by having a 'neutral' standpoint, a view from nowhere, which is impossible. Rather, it requires seeing the same event from the perspective of different groups and classes whose interests conflict with each other. The more perspectives we can access, the better can we grasp the whole.

Nietzsche's diagnosis of the social crisis is through the lens of aristocratic individualism. After the death of God, there remains no foundation for objective values except the 'health of an individual'. The free spirit is the one who affirms life, who invents themselves as a warrior and artist rather than accepting to be a victim. By admitting their will to power, they affirm life with all its pain and misery. This is very similar to Mill's description of the energetic character. Here, both philosophers admire pagan self-assertion and criticise the impact of Christian asceticism as producing docile and weak individuals. Both Nietzsche and Mill look down on the working class and the middle-class' conformism with contempt.

Their common verdict is that in modern society individuality is threatened by mass culture. But people with individuality are the 'salt of the earth', essential for social progress, even if masses cannot understand or appreciate them. In this sense, what is good for the individual diverges from what is 'good for the society'. Here, they link the social good with 'public opinion'. The society wants an easy, comfortable, happy life, an expansion of their choices as consumers and an improvement in their social status. The individual wants to overcome themselves, push boundaries, challenge norms, self-actualise and self-expand, which resembles psychologist Carol Dweck's contemporary distinction between fixed and growth mindsets. It is also in line with the ideal of meritocracy, where social rewards should be distributed according to people's different merits, rather than as a matter of equal human rights or with respect to the diverse needs they have.

One symptom of the social crisis for Nietzsche and Mill is that while the masses take ignorance as a bliss, the 'special individuals' suffer from an 'alienated consciousness' (feeling impotent, not admired, even betrayed) which provides fertile soil for a politics of resentment. Both Nietzsche and Mill consider history as irreversible, civilisation

leading to tyranny of opinion and collective mediocrity. It is here that Marx offers a way out of this individual versus society antagonism.

Marx's diagnosis of the social crisis assumes a different, dialectical account of the relation between socialisation and individualisation. Individuality is not threatened in modern society; it has become a more widespread value. The reason why people cannot achieve individuality is not due to the pressures for social conformity, but is rather rooted in alienation. Not only workers, but everyone, even the capitalists are alienated. This is because of commodity fetishism and the main contradiction of capitalism, which is the creation of mass poverty amidst abundance; expansion of exchange values and devaluation of humans. The reason why so many people cannot imagine a way out of capitalism is because most people (not only the 'special individuals') have an alienated consciousness.

Limits of the possible are determined by limits of the permissible, especially under surveillance capitalism. Seeing history as irreversible and capitalism as the end of history results from the weakening of our imagination and capitalism's flexibility, adaptability and increasing sphere of influence, like a giant snowball that swallows everything on its way. If we can't get outside of it, how can we kill the monster from within? The trick is expanding the scope of possibilities. Alienation does not necessarily produce alienated consciousness; it also produces the possibility of becoming conscious of alienation. The former way leads to the politics of resentment ranging from cynicism and nihilism to the New Right and Social Darwinism. The latter way leads to a politics of indignation as expressed in new social movements such as Black Lives Matter, ecology movements, Defending the Commons, Right to the City, Nobody is Illegal, etc.

What mainly differentiates Nietzsche and Marx is their two opposite interpretations of Hegel's master-slave dialectics. This eventually leads to two ways of becoming political agents: through resentment, or through indignation respectively. Although Nietzsche disapproves of the reactionary feeling of resentment and Marx disapproves of making a merely moralistic critique of capitalism, somehow their accounts strengthen the shadows they try to repress.

2. Ashraf Mansour, "Hegel's Critique of Liberalism and Social Contract Theories in the Jena Lectures" <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/txt/mansour.html>

In the first stage of Hegel's master-slave dialectics, two self-consciousness subjects confront each other and engage in a life and death struggle for recognition. This contrasts the Kantian and liberal assumption that all people are born as subjects with free will and innately have dignity. Hegel's master-slave dialectics takes place in a hypothetical pre-social setting and asserts that one is not born a subject but can only become a subject through struggle, through risking everything.² Becoming a subject requires proving to oneself and the other that they value freedom and recognition more than even the instinct for survival. This is why at the end of the first stage, the one who yields to fear of death becomes the slave and the one whose need for recognition overcomes the instinct for survival becomes the master. The master is now free and has power over the slave. But everything is reversed in the second stage when the slave's subjectivity changes through fear, service and work. Through fear and service, they are forced to overcome their selfishness; through work they become both aware of their productive capacities as well as conscious that it is actually the master who is dependent on their work and that it is unfair that the one who does all the work is treated like an object, rather than being recognised as a subject. This consciousness of alienation is the turning point for the slave's rebellion to construct a world in which there are no masters and slaves, so that everyone can have equal recognition.

Here, we have a dialectical, but very optimistic, story about the emergence of a new political agent, who both transforms himself and the world by destroying social hierarchies. Two immediate questions come to our minds: why does the former slave not want to become the new master and take revenge on their former master? Wouldn't the master prevent the slave from rebelling or destroy the rebellion in its initial phases?

In her book *Hegel, Haiti and Universal History* (2009), Susan Buck-Morss claims that Hegel was inspired by the Haitian Rebellion in 1804, the first big victory against colonialism. Hegel's master-slave dialectics is a part of his book *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which was published in 1807, the year when slavery was abolished in Britain.³ Hence, that slaves overcome masters is not merely a thought experiment or a utopian construct but a historical fact, since the leader of the Haitian revolution Toussaint L'Ouverture and revolting slaves defeated French, Spanish and British forces. It is a tragedy of history that years later Haiti has become one of the poorest countries, suffering under dictators that support new colonialism: it was the former masters who took their revenge, not the former slaves.

Nietzsche's story about the slave revolt in morality, in his book *Genealogy of Morality* (1887), is the very opposite of Hegel's optimistic account. It shares the same cultural milieu with the bourgeoisie, who became conservative after the 1848 revolutions. Nietzsche's aristocratic individualism proposes that the historical origins of the good-bad distinction was the masters being proud of themselves and their feeling contempt for the common people. This is why 'good' was originally a self-affirming word and 'bad' only meant 'not worth considering'. The slaves, or rather all the common people were simply invisible for the aristocrats in the first stage of master-slave dialectics. Christianity with its egalitarian doctrine that all people are equal before God, praising humility rather than pride, telling people to 'turn the other cheek' rather than fight, was the beginning of the slave revolt in morality, which led the master's notion of the 'good' to be transformed into 'evil' in the new humanitarian value system. This reversal of the traditional values, blaming masters for their oppression of the slaves, led to the emergence of concepts such as free will, guilt and moral responsibility. This was the slaves' deceitful revenge on the masters, making them feel guilty for their deeds.

3. For Hegel, slavery is a necessary stage in the history of nations. Hence, it is relatively justified. "This subjugation of the slave's egotism forms the beginning of true human freedom. This quaking of the single, isolated will, the feeling of the worthlessness of egotism, the habit of obedience, is a necessary moment in the education of all men. Without having experienced the discipline which breaks self-will, no one becomes free, rational and capable of command. To become free, to acquire the capacity for self-control, all nations must therefore undergo the severe discipline of subjection to a master [...] Slavery and tyranny are therefore in the history of nations, a necessary stage, and hence relatively justified. Those who remain slaves suffer no absolute injustice; for he who has not the courage to risk his life to win freedom, that man deserves to be a slave; on the other hand, if a nation does not merely imagine that it wants to be free but actually has the energy to will its freedom, then no human power can hold it back in the servitude of a merely passive obedience to authority." G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 175.

However, just as a bird of prey cannot be blamed when it kills a lamb, a master cannot be blamed when it merely expresses their power through violence. Hence for Nietzsche, the spread of humanitarian values is a sign of decadence, rather than moral progress. The masses can be sacrificed for the emergence of the 'overman'; this is real progress for Nietzsche. Although he claims that resentment and not contempt poisons the soul, his account is full of resentment against the Christians, liberals and socialists. It is a reactive attitude, full of nostalgia for the old aristocratic values, just like the contemporary increase in racism and misogyny is a backlash to the victories of the social justice movements from the 1960s.

Let's now link these two opposite interpretations of the master-slave dialectics with the films *Fight Club* (1999, David Fincher) and *Sorry to Bother You* (2018, Boots Riley). In *Fight Club*, Tyler is the master who has overcome his fear of pain and conformism, and Jack (Tyler's alter-ego) is the slave, addicted to consumerism. It is the master which liberates the slave, in contrast to Hegel's story where the slave liberates everyone.

On the other hand, similar to Hegel and Marx, the awareness of unfreedom in the film, i.e., being a discontented slave is the first step in liberation. The dissolution of stability is the second step. In Tyler's words "only after you have lost everything, you are free to do anything". This theme of being reborn from one's ashes is a theme common in Marx and Nietzsche. For Nietzsche 'the enemy that cannot kill me makes me stronger' and for Marx workers can become revolutionaries only when they have nothing to lose but their chains. It is also expressed in the widespread motto in various social justice movements: "they tried to bury us, they didn't know we were seeds." Not seeing oneself as a victim and transforming one's pain into revolutionary action is essential for liberation.

2 PSYCHO-POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS: ALIENATED CONSCIOUSNESS VERSUS CONSCIOUSNESS OF ALIENATION

5. "In most people a capacity for the nobler feelings is a very tender plant that is easily killed, not only by hostile influences but by mere lack of nourishment; and in the majority of young persons it quickly dies away if their jobs and their social lives aren't favourable to keeping that higher capacity in use. Men lose their high aspirations as they lose their intellectual tastes, because they don't have time or opportunity for indulging them; and they addict themselves to lower pleasures not because they deliberately prefer them but because they are either the only pleasures they can get or the only pleasures they can still enjoy." John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.7.

4. Walter Benjamin, Paralipomena to 'On the Concept of History', in: *Selected Writings*, Vol. 4: 1938-1940 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), p.402.

"Marx said that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps things are very different. It may be that revolutions are the act by which the human race travelling in the train applies the emergency brake."⁴

Applying Benjamin's metaphor of 'emergency break', individuals in periods of crises are faced with two possibilities: alienated consciousness and consciousness of alienation. The first one is a self-defence strategy, either trying to convince oneself that everything is ok, denying that we are on a train moving fast towards an abyss, being indifferent to miseries and catastrophes, living life on auto-pilot mode. The second is like the existential attitude of a direct confrontation with despair, rather than trying to escape from it. This is why for Marx alienation is not the opposite of freedom and self-realisation, but rather the precondition for liberation because it has the potential of creating new subjectivities (new forms of life) that could initiate revolutions and form a new society. Thus, the real revolution is becoming somebody else and creating new communities.

According to Marx, not only the workers but also the capitalists are alienated: with the reduction of all needs to the need for money, and the reduction of reason to instrumental reason, commodity fetishism leads to one-dimensional people and to the loss of a sense of community. Alienation is not the loss of an authentic human nature, but rather the contraction of the self. When one is preoccupied with selfish interests, one is unaware that supporting the freedom of others is essential for one's own freedom. We are our worlds, the more we care about others, the more expanded our self becomes.⁵

6. Mark Fisher,
*Capitalist
Realism: Is
There No
Alternative?*
(New Alresford:
Zero Books,
2009).

The alienated consciousness does not feel alive, since it finds nothing worth striving for, since the previous ready-made goals seem meaningless now. In his book *Capitalist Realism*,⁶ Mark Fisher explains the psycho-political symptoms of the current age where the future seems to be cancelled, where it is easier to imagine the end of the world, than it is to imagine the end of capitalism. The consumer-spectator with an ironic distance to the world's problems is like "the perspective of a depressive who believes that any hope is a dangerous illusion." Fisher continues "Capital is an abstract parasite, an insatiable vampire and zombie-maker; but the living flesh it converts into dead labour is ours, and the zombies it makes are us." Fisher gives four examples on why capitalism is dysfunctional: environmental catastrophes, the mental health plague, bureaucracy going off the rails and the crisis in the education system. Here, I will only focus on the second, the mental health plague. Fisher explains depressive hedonia as the "inability to do anything else except pursue pleasure" which is a consequence of people being squeezed between their worker roles as subjects of a

Let us trace the three crucial steps through which he transforms from a spectator-consumer to an engaged political agent. First, the old should be destroyed to open up space for the new; he is saved from his addiction by spending money — 'buying the commodities that best reflect himself' — when Tyler blows up his flat. Then he gets rid of his 'submissive worker' role when he stands up to his boss and shows how dangerous he can be. Thirdly, he invents a new organisation, namely 'fight clubs', where people can experience struggle and pain as liberating and distance themselves from the fetish of happiness and security. There is a clear transformation of his subjectivity, but why call it the emergence of political agency? Every attempt to go against social norms and turn oneself into a declaration of this rebellion is a case of political agency. Hence, political agency only emerges when there is a challenging of the boundaries. For example, starting from summer 2022, climate activists, in particular a group called Extinction Rebellion started a new kind of protest by gluing their hands to famous paintings in museums in cities such as Florence, Madrid, London and Copenhagen. This form of protest is intended to make the audience aware that they value masterpieces more than they value preventing climate crisis. I think this is the message they are trying to give: 'Not only art, but also nature is sacred and you are merely passive spectators of the destruction of nature. You are pretending that everything is normal, when we are at the edge of mass destruction.' This 'desperate' call for making people confront the tipping point, the point of no return, contrasts the figure of a passive, law-abiding citizen. Not violating other's rights and voting once every four years is not sufficient to be a political agent. Transformative experiences are essential.

7. Frédéric Lordon,
*Willing Slaves of
Capital: Spinoza
and Marx on Desire*
(London/New York:
Verso, 2014).

Frederic Lordon, explains the dynamics of voluntary servitude by depicting capitalism as a "co-linearisation machine".⁷ Workers align with the master's desire and try to achieve the love of their bosses, in an "amorous search for recognition". This is why capitalism needs the production of normalising desires, in other words "the veil of joyful affects against the backdrop of sad affects". It promises 'self-fulfilment' and rising above one's class for those who comply and threatens people with invisibility and being perceived as trash for those who don't comply with the Performance Principle. Overcoming capitalism is possible only if counter-desires and emotions are produced that lead workers to rebel. In contrast to Marx, it is not a matter of workers gaining class consciousness but rather having new subversive desires, a collective "becoming-orthogonal" that would reduce the power of the master desire. Lordon says: "Spinoza calls this affect, generically, 'indignation'. It is not a moral but an eminently political affect, which drives the subjects to unite in revolt in the wake of an offence, perpetrated as it may be against only one of them, but which they experience as concerning them all."

Alienation for Lordon is not a loss of power but rather a contraction “the fixation of one’s power on very limited objects assigned by the master desire” just like the case of a drug addict. This is in line with Marx’s claim that capitalism reduces all needs to the need for money, so exchange-values dominate over use-values. Spinozist freedom is the power of affecting and being affected. This is very similar with Marx linking freedom with the emancipation of sensibilities and the emergence of universal individuals who are rich in their needs. Our needs do not only represent our vulnerabilities and dependencies but also signal different ways in which we have to form new connections with others and nature. “Becoming hateable while striving to make itself liked, capitalism spreads discontent and feeds the common passion by which a multitude could come together” says Lordon.

3

POLITICS OF RESENTMENT VERSUS POLITICS OF INDIGNATION

Can a standpoint which liberates the individual be detrimental when applied to a social group? To approach this question, let me first compare the two forms of political agency between two social groups in *Fight Club*. The first group are the participants of flight clubs themselves. Fight clubs, where men met secretly once a week to engage in combat with each other, served to test the limits of how far they could endure

suffering as well as a providing a means for improving their capacity for self-defence. Fight clubs were very effective in increasing the participants’ self-esteem and overcoming their fear of pain: the fighters became stronger (physically and mentally) and achieved a sense of community, a feeling of being special and non-conformist, strengthening both their sense of individuality and sense of belonging. In contrast, the second social group, the Space Monkeys, who are members of the organisation Project Mayhem, completely lose their individuality, becoming reduced to numbers, docile soldiers and pieces of a war machine. In the film, members of Project Mayhem bomb seven symbolic buildings in order to ‘crash the system’. Their goal is to destroy capitalism and start civilisation from scratch, assuming that these bombings would erase the entire financial debt of the population – an act that seemed to be more efficient than joining fight clubs.

However, contrary to the kind of strategy presented by Project Mayhem, I believe such actions only make a state of emergency more likely, increase surveillance and fuel the rise of more authoritarian governments. This is the point where the tension between politics and ethics is revealed. If politics has priority than ends could justify the means, if ethics has priority, no political goal can justify the killing of innocent people. It was exactly this debate that turned Sartre and Camus into enemies. Is revolutionary violence ever justified? If yes, in wars of independence against colonisers, then why not in the case of anti-capitalist struggles? Isn’t structural violence involved in both colonisation and capitalism?

I want to argue that the transformation of alienated consciousness into consciousness of alienation is always liberatory for the individual, but not always for a group of people, if they engage in a politics of resentment. In *Fight Club* the individual liberation occurs through two phases of Jack’s identity crisis: from his former consumerist self, and from his alter-ego Tyler. If we translate these ideas from the fictional realm to our world, then I believe there would have been no corresponding collective liberation. In real-life fight clubs would have been commercialised, and the outlet for people’s frustration domesticated and contained.

In the film *Sorry to Bother You* the individual liberation of Cashius (Cash) Green is through his moral awareness of the price of rising above his class, his humiliation by the boss at the party and most importantly, his accidental witnessing of the suffering of a half-horse half-man. The narrative focusses, on WorryFree – a giant company, which uses ‘voluntary’ slave labour – it provides ‘free’ accommodation and daily meals for workers working in the nearby factory. The company plans to make their workers more profitable (both stronger and more obedient) by transforming them into hybrid ‘Equisapiens’ through the snorting of a gene-modifying powder. The most shocking part of the film, for me, was Cash’s realisation that knowledge of truth was not sufficient to make people protest ‘worry-free’ that humans were being turned into horses. On the contrary, the company is hailed as pioneering and its stock increases in value to an all-time high. Another important theme of the film was about how the public loves seeing people humiliated. A video of Cash, who is wounded after being hit by a Coke can goes viral in social media and he goes through a humiliating experience appearing on a TV show. I recently learned that there is a word in German to describe this emotion. Schadenfreude: experience of pleasure when witnessing the humiliation of another person. There is an intrinsic connection between the rise of new fascisms and the resentment against feminists, socialists, LGBTQ+ and immigrants, who are all declared as scapegoats. Lumpen capitalists like Trump and their followers, who are ignorant of their class-position and hypnotised by the dream of making their country great again, are not specific to the USA. A similar political landscape exists in Brazil, India, Hungary and Turkey.

The film *Sorry to Bother You* was described by its director Boots Riley as an “absurdist dark comedy with magical realism and science fiction.” Because it was mixing different genres, passing from comedy to horror in less than a minute; it was very effective in showing us why we are not shocked by such horrifying events, just like ‘in your face’ theatre. Even though it was a dark comedy, it had an optimistic ending: to achieve collective freedom, it is not necessary to wake everyone up. The collective struggle of an engaged minority – those people who care for the suffering of others – is enough. In the film, trade unionists, avant-garde artists, disillusioned managers, football players and horsemen form an intersectional rainbow coalition. *Schadenfreude* is just the opposite of feelings of indignation, which I claim to be essential for uniting different groups, suffering under the same economic system. The current anti-capitalist struggles are fuelled by a deep sense of injustice. Intersectional accounts acknowledge that class struggle versus identity politics is a false dilemma since class is always mediated by race, gender and ethnicity. It is a form of humanist politics of indignation. But after the ecological crises became dominant in the last decade, and immigrants become the new scapegoats, the humanist aspect has weakened. It now has the dangerous potential of transforming into another variant of politics of resentment, as in the case of eco-fascism and anti-natalism.

Losing specific battles could still be victorious when considered from the perspective of the bigger picture and extended timeframe, because not yielding is in itself a victory. In contrast, if one assumes that a goal is justified by any means, winning the battle in the short-term may imply a loss in the long run (if one has acted in contrast to their moral principles). The former makes parallels with the politics of indignation, which calls for means which are morally suitable to the goal. On the other hand, the latter corresponds more to a politics of resentment, which aims to destroy ‘the enemy’. In the metaphorical sense we can understand this as aiming to reverse the role between masters and slaves, rather than abolishing slavery altogether.

Politics of indignation can be seen in practise, from the protesters against Worry Free in *Sorry to Bother You* to the contemporary Extinction Rebellion activists. The activists continue to fight, even though, from the perspective of the ‘ordinary citizen’, they seem only to engage in futile and ‘irrational’ activities exhausting their energy by battling ruling groups. The following sentence by Paulo Freire exemplifies the real benefits of subversive practices: “One of the conditions for continuing the struggle against a dominating power is to recognise ourselves as losing the fight, but not as defeated.”⁸

8. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Indignation* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2005), p.23.