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# Foreword

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## The Hegemony of Novelty

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I

Antonio Gramsci states in one of his best-known remarks that the most important historical events take place in a strange state of suspension and confusion; that they emerge from among the unclear outlines of time and from the dark influence of forces alienating humanity in its entirety: "[...] the old is dying and the new cannot be born: in this interregnum, morbid phenomena of the most varied kind come to pass."<sup>1</sup> Gramsci further observes that the present is not ontologically but rather empirically privileged: the important things are those that are perceived here and now, in a single frame of time and space; those which broaden the sensory field, but which can also be bound by that very present into a narrow band of subjective impressions and emotions. As a communist, Gramsci knows perfectly well that the emancipatory path, pioneered by Karl Marx, leads towards a more free reality, where existence lives out its life without atavistic fear, experiencing a reciprocal relationship with the Other. Nonetheless, a present shaped in such a manner is not the means towards some ecstatic, supposedly fully embodied experience of wholeness, because this present never "is," in the strictest sense; or, in other words, it

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<sup>1</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, vol. 2, ed. and trans. Joseph A. Buttigieg (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 33.

cannot become a point of reference. And if it is so, then the modalities of time cannot order the state of the world along a constant ontological axis. A world defined by such a heterogeneous form of temporality conjoins irreducible, and sometimes outrightly contradictory elements or phenomena: the human and the inhuman, the intellectual and the practical, personal and interpersonal, intimate and public, self-centered and socially committed.

Marx was therefore right in pointing to time as being fundamental for history. Though it is a history understood in a specific way, one that is more anachronistic than presentist. From this point of view it can be seen as interweaving events and structures from different temporal orders: archaic and contemporary. In consequence of this, history has little in common with the cliché of progress as the unstoppable march of history (supposedly derived from Hegelian idealism), or with the idiosyncratic reading of Friedrich Nietzsche, who wished to destroy the antique shop of facts and in a gesture of creative nihilism intended to rid humanity of the burden of tradition. Turning to *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, a work as discursively lush as the experimental prose of James Joyce, Robert Musil, or Virginia Woolf, and the most intense form of speculation that is *Science of Logic*, Marx performs a double appropriation. First, he treats the materiality of the world in the broadest possible sense, creating a new, non-Kantian, critical philosophy, that is, political economy. In this sense temporality proves to be the superior principle, overshadowing even the principle of production, because the deregulation of temporal modes of alienated life leads towards the unmasking of inequality. Still, time in its presentness is nothing more than a formally vacant object, which allows the observation – from a birds eye view, synoptically, as well as in microscopic detail – of the most diverse forms of enslavement, injustice, violence, and lawlessness. Second, the strong program of Marx's anthropology lays bare the fundamental principle of modern criticism. If we are thrown into time, then its historical form, structured in various ways, prevents us from turning to some metaphysical instance; any attempt to enter some "other scene" – one not human, but also not yet divine – is pure phantasy. The material, bodily, or civilizational reality cannot be conceived in the confines of isolated subjectivity which, akin to a founder or a CEO, directs time that is perfectly coherent and organized for the incessant increase of monetary value or, similarly, non-material gains: cultural prestige, achievement of desired position in the social hierarchy, and finally, transforming the unreflective personal autonomy into the ruling principle.

Marx, following Georg W. F. Hegel, proposes a different method of thinking in the framework of time, which is neither momentary ecstasy nor oppressive narrative. The latter, in a more or less fortunate way, masks the perfect mechanism of creating an ideological veil, which most often obscures the obscenity of power. Time is synonymous with money – a translucent principle of modern equivalence, according to which social, political, and economic conflicts incessantly fuel subsequent catastrophes of capitalism. Capitalism, of course, is also the spirit of the time and

of the times, which becomes an ever greater monstrosity. Akin to some anthropological machine it produces ever more nuanced differentiations, and thus manages to escape unscathed from yet another, seemingly final, defeat. What is more, each time it seems to grow only stronger; thwarting, as if incidentally, successive efforts directed at creating the experience of social solidarity. Unquestionably, this is why the 2008 crisis reflected so strongly in the actions of people who were left on their own, and who were shown by the financial elite, deriving from the "too big to fail" institutions, the regressive or, otherwise, the vegetative face of that fiscal-mortgage catastrophe. Those deprived of the roof over their heads and of the means of making a living, were left to subsist in immanent time, in no man's land, in temporary shelters that were constructed to last an eternity.

That is why revolution is necessary; it is not some utopia or a futuristic outline of a better life. This proleptic, suggested, "expanding," or projecting life will not be able to socially harmonize its existence with other forms of life. The time of financial randomness, rightly called "precariousness," requires not only varied forms of socialization, but most of all the liberation from the necessities of the overly forceful visions of the future. They themselves perfectly exemplify that pre-ordained emancipation cannot succeed; even more so – that it brings about opposing results, destroying social forms wherever there emerge examples of emancipated life or – to borrow a term from Jean-Luc Nancy – of "being singular plural." It is easier to imagine a complicated scenario of a better future than a subtle realignment within the alienating here and now. Suffice to look at primarily dystopian and post-apocalyptic contemporary phantasies relating to the future, which permeate popular culture. Needless to say, they play a compensatory role, but they are first and foremost a collective symptom of uncertainty, or even of epistemological horror that lurks – to turn to Frederic Jameson's still highly relevant notion – in the "political unconscious."

Hence, what are we to do? The lesson taught by Marx seems as valid today as it ever was. From ideology, ever better recognized by enlightened cynical subjects, all the more important is history understood as history of truth, in contrast to the hysterical (in the literal sense) Nietzsche, who spoke of truth as the "history of a certain error." What is spoken of here is, of course, not logical or substantial truth, but the dialectical power of truth, which remains, just as absolute spirit or revolution do, an idea facilitating the search for and finding of truth – everywhere. It would be fitting, it seems, to return to the Marxist maxim, which states that arriving at truth is as important as the journey that leads to it. Though in this regard our methods of understanding and organizing time reveal with full force something more. History and time, consistent narrative and historical coherence of dates, halt our epistemological endeavors time and time again, only to lift – without shunning the present – in some, even very limited, extent the veil of Isis, which obscures our future.

There is one other consequence of this. The perspective offered, broadly speaking, by critical theory problematizes the notion of novelty as something that could

be equated with the future. Novelty is, so to speak, an as yet unresolved form of the future; that is, one untested by different modalities of time and one unfiltered by individual and collective conceptualizations of the world. It is noteworthy that in this dialectic perspective novelty is oftentimes the highest form of fetishism. Though not only of the mercantile, nor not even anthropological, but rather of the cultural kind, and, as it seems, today of mostly cognitive, mental, and digital variety. It is startling to what extent most distant fields of critical theory converge at this single point, and how even the staunchest enemies talk of the same thing, though from different positions, of course. Theodor W. Adorno in *Aesthetic Theory*, György Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness*, in a less polemical tone Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe with Judith Butler, who theorize the empty signifier as an organizing principle. In turn, Slavoj Žižek with Erik Santner reposition the discussion to the level of materialism of desire and logic of recognition, developed into social theory, reminiscent of Axel Honneth... Clearly, this robust, though certainly open list of filiations and reflections of the problem of fetishism leads into still another realm. Is it not so that fetishism, being a complex structure, finally remains a mere symptom, manufacturing subsequent phantasies and needs? In this sense novelty, understood chronologically, turns out to be merely a formula of subjective disenfranchisement in the world of production, on various levels, and the phantasmal subjugation of competition and rivalry. If it truly is so, then the dialectical path, spoken of by Marx, should save novelty from itself, but it also should awaken the players in the game of society to the fact that just as there is no source, no beginning beyond our biological finitude, so the world of our experience is available to us only in variously mediated forms.

It seems that reality is fundamentally conflicted or divided. We perceive it with varying intensity, and therefore no final goal exists, not so much in the philosophical but rather in the anthropological sense. In this light neither tradition, memory, and the past, nor novelty provide any solutions, at least not from the standpoint of theory or research, but also not in the existential key. All these ways of framing time lack explanatory power when it comes to problems of contemporary humanities, which are familiar to us as researchers or readers; that is, the state of alienation, oftentimes experienced in its acute, everyday form, as well as the reification of our work and the disruption of intersubjective relationship that this entails. Gramsci used a single, precise, and invariably timely notion to characterize these two formulas, namely, hegemony; and he placed it within the sphere of culture – it is where our desire is supposed to crystalize, which, by the way, is never straightforward, but also not necessarily doomed to a permanent struggle for its survival. Desire requires acknowledgement, not annihilation. "The old is not dead yet, the new is not yet born..." Gramsci turns to this spectral motif not without reason. What should therefore be done with that which is neither new nor old, with that which we cannot remember, and which does not take direct form as hope for change or the horizon of a better future alternative

reality? Dialectic reasoning is not a shortcut and, therefore, the stake in this line of thinking is not only the recognition of novelty as fetish, but the movement of thought, which occurs at an instant, in practice. The world changes already in our intellectual processes, which are not confined neither to naturalistically motivated positive science, nor can they be ascribed to successive, institutionally proclaimed, "studies on" or "turns." The stake in this game for our desires and recognition, understanding and emancipation, is exactly the recognition of the hegemony of novelty.

## II

This problem can be approached from the direction of desire understood in the literal sense, that is associated with the libidinal economy. Alongside critical theory, psychoanalysis is one of the better examples of reflection on the issue of novelty, this time, though, not in the theoretical key (or maybe to a certain extent), but primarily in the anthropological and ontological perspectives. Through the famous, and extensively discussed in the field of humanities, case of the patient nicknamed "Wolf Man," Sigmund Freud shows how he unwraps, step by step, the thickened and initially obscure elements of a dream. The patient suffers from depression, which is seemingly induced by dreams of wolfs sitting upon a tree that he experiences. In the course of a detailed analysis, Freud performs a rather classical symbolic interpretation, in fact overlooking the morphological and formal aspects of dream riddles. Nonetheless, symbolic analysis ceases to work when the patient encounters a scene, which – as he assumes – he once inhabited. This senso-motoric, visual, and audial scene of parental intercourse, *coitus a tergo*, caused such horror because the patient, then in the infantile stage, equated sex with pure violence, aggression, and finally with uninhibited fear. Freud is faced here with a riddle of temporality and the possibility of therapeutic intervention. What is to be done with a trauma resulting from actual events and with trauma which returns in the present with the force of the ungraspable unconscious, leaving their mark through recurring psychopathological structures? Are we dealing here with a singular, intensified trauma, or maybe rather with its two forms, manifesting in two different timeframes? "Wolf Man" visited Freud in a state of severe anxious depression, which presented with nightmares and somatic symptoms such as insomnia. The session was therefore an unveiling of a traumatic scene in the case of an adult patient. Still, both Freud's theory and practice went much further, as if the father of psychoanalysis saw himself playing the part of an archaeologist in a psychological archive (this is also how Jacques Derrida saw him in *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*).

From a Freudian perspective the time of present trauma was as significant (but also structurally similar) as the time of the primary subjective configuration around the silent trauma. In this way a retrospective labeling arises (*après-coup*), a kind of interferential and dialectical logic of times, resembling the counterpoint in music

– a detailed analysis of symptoms leads to their source, though that space is governed – according to Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis – by three equitable orders: “of the primary phantasm, the phantasm of primacy, and the sources of phantasy.” Within the structure of the family romance characteristic for neurotic individuals, the situation seems quite clear – the libidinal tension of the patient stems from oedipal fixations. Nonetheless, the scene itself is of nearly hypnotic quality. Something occurs here, a universe arises where the ruling principles are ellipsis, abbreviation, augmentation; people are seen and heard, but it is impossible to determine what exactly is going on. If Freud points to a necessity of turning inside, towards the deepest layers of the psyche, the residues, and the phantasms laying at the base of repression, then psychoanalysis, as a paradigm of knowledge and as part of the medical sciences, not so much unveils as constructs a world wherein emancipation – which arises in the subject and not some external norm of a supposedly real life – can take place. In this sense psychoanalysis is not only a conversion of the anxious affect into a rugged, internally unresolved, and antithetical life, but it is a shift within the cultural and epistemic dominant: “the future of a certain illusion” is substituted with “the future of a certain life.”

This does not change the fact that during therapy the patient encounters a primary scene or, otherwise, an invisible scene, where the traumatic core of existence – unnamable and unhealable – is revealed. Freud, and afterwards Jacques Lacan with his political disciples of the Slovenian School, point out the need for differentiating certain intensities and structures of the traumatic experience. Therefore, as far as every subject is scarred at the outset, then not all types of trauma are equal, their symptoms are not similarly strong or weak, and, finally, not all of them conform with clinical classifications. In one of the early theoretical works on the subject of hysteria, which touched upon the scope, possibilities, and the future of psychoanalysis, Freud asserts that trauma – like the budding of life, the embryo of meaning forming the omphalos of dream, the entanglement of image and feeling – should safeguard the clinical and critical aspect of therapy and therefore alleviate misery, which means its ultimate transformation into common human unhappiness.<sup>2</sup> Little wonder then that the continuations of psychoanalysis in their radical versions, as, for example, those developed by Wilfried R. Bion or Jacques Lacan, have either led in the direction of diagnosing the most extreme cases of break with reality, namely psychoses, or in the direction of searching for the place of trauma in the topical or typological order of the psyche; a place that would not only be meaningful but also fundamental. Can Lacanian ethics of the Real, rooted in a certain fidelity to a greater cause, too great and weighty for any single person, truly provide sufficient grounds to ponder a new form of ethics – one more interactive and transgressive than

2 Cf. Joseph Breuer and Sigmund Freud, *Studies in Hysteria*, trans. and introd. A. A. Brill (New York: Nervous and Mental Disease Publishing Company, 1936), 230–232.

normative, more engaged and revolutionary than inter-subjectively negotiable? If contemporary humanities still require psychoanalysis (and as I see it, it is very much so), then its tripartite model of determination should be extolled, and therefore it ought to be framed as an anthropological, medical, and critical formula of a dynamic, economic, and topical life.

In this sense psychoanalysis can truly serve as the paradigm of the antinomic *modernitas*; it itself, in all of its complexity, constitutes the primal scene for what is yet to happen, of what will arrive not only as trauma, but also as the deliverance – if only momentary – from it. The future of psychoanalysis is not dependent upon the fetish of novelty, because, as Freud assumed, the path it marks out is winding and uncharted. The principle of the mind's cunningness is also at work here, causing us to recognize only in hindsight that today's novelty is merely a leftover of the things we have once done and spoken of. Freud has shown in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* that life is in fact possible only when we acquiesce to our own death, but also to the fact that death shatters our fantasies of a stable identity and of life led in accordance with established symbolic patterns. If it is so indeed, then individual existence, assenting to the reality principle, should always act in a similar fashion: it should strive to meet the end of its life on its own terms, and therefore... live according to its desires and libido, the two constants without which there is no mature subjectivity forgetful of the inborn human expression of narcissism. Love, desire, and death constitute the triad of that future where novelty is something that occurs serendipitously rather than being the overt purpose of human striving.

### III

If "new humanities" have, by definition, a critical and not descriptive or normative value, then the impulses flowing towards the humanities from ideational sciences – or, even more so, those coming from natural or, more broadly, experimental sciences – merit reconsideration. It is well known that previous encounters between these two worlds have never brought about satisfying results. Contemporary circumstances in certain respects resemble the olden, well-structured world, which ordered knowledge alongside the fault line between "literary culture" and "scientific culture." It might seem that almost everything has changed since, though – as I argue – unfortunately very little truly did. Firstly, and this might be seen as a minor thing but it is in no way inconsequential: literature no longer plays a paradigmatic role in the discourses that derive from it. Secondly, the economic-institutional rift between the abovementioned branches of knowledge already seems too vast to bridge in any satisfying way. Thirdly, mutual ignorance is a serious problem which – as is often the case in such situations – fuels narcissistically motivated arrogance. Fourthly, there was a fundamental split in the understanding of theory and epistemology, which has either faded as discourse in experimental sciences, or was

constricted to research methodology. In the case of new humanities, new critical methods, which are oftentimes highly advanced, vanish in the murky universe of subjective impressions or are subsumed within the application of some previously devised method.

This pessimistic outlook opens, paradoxically, the possibility of conceiving such a world where novelty will be the factor binding different practices of knowledge. A great example of such varying degrees of mutual influence is the revision of deconstruction performed by Catherine Malabou, as well as the return and critique of systematic thinking under the guise of speculative realism – perhaps the strongest program of the philosophy of new materialism. Nonetheless, we are confronted here with two novel theories rooted in a particular strand of knowledge. The first one (I will focus on it here) is about rethinking the teachings of deconstruction, which were centered on culture, mainly in its linguistic and textual dimension, and reframing it as something much more embodied and associated with material objects. The strategy adopted by Malabou is quite consistent in this regard. Her theory is built around the notion of plasticity, identified in Hegel's philosophical oeuvre, which was the subject of her first book. Taking into account the mediatory structure of reality, what changes is the very nature of mediation, which is no longer dependent upon ontological hierarchies, as Derrida argued, but on a morphologically pliable notion, which might not be solid but which also is not abstract. In fact, it is rather a discursive and actual disposition towards twisting and testing of that which can be said about reality through the application of different languages, images, and senses. Plasticity is therefore the movement of ideas in a very Hegelian manner, but it is also something that restitutes the possibility of conceiving dialectic categories as sensual phenomenology, as something close to every each and one of us, as a future-oriented experience of consciousness that is familiar and novel at the same time. Her book on the future of Hegel<sup>3</sup> presents the author of *The Science of Logic* as a truly grounded thinker, one focused as much on the system (what is evident) as on the peculiarities of our everyday, sensual experience and on our relations with others, wherein our struggle for recognition strives against the sensuality of desire.

From this point forward, Malabou guides us in another direction. The philosopher turns her study towards neuroscience and the medical research of trauma, memory, neurological dysfunctions and possibilities of their clinical restoration, and epigenesis. This is a risky move and, in fact, Malabou finds it hard to deal equally well with all of the correlations present within these paradigms. Nonetheless, it is worth taking a closer look at the conclusions she arrives at when pondering the notion of deformation and the various forms of traces. The former term is problematic because it is not clear what kind of deformed matter is being talked about: is this

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3 Catherine Malabou, *The Future of Hegel. Plasticity, Temporality and Dialectic*, trans. Lisa-beth During (London: Routledge, 2005).



a naturalistically understood body, or body as a material object, or, finally, an object in the physical or even sub-atomic sense – an ontological approximation. Through the analysis of Oliver Sack's work – both as a neurologist and as himself: an organism afflicted with a chronic neurodegenerative disorder – Malabou brings to light the consequences of multi-directional plasticity which may, but in no way need to, be associated with a traumatic disturbance of the economy of life. Therefore, the philosopher speaks of epigenesis derived from Kantian critical philosophy, where the Enlightenment problem of a priori knowledge turns into the question of the material basis of subjectivity. Rationality no longer appears as something asserted by a system of speculative deduction, but it materializes through the fundamental – for us as living communities – ability of transforming both the biological and the intellectual domains. Biological and evolutionary sentience is not something detached from the intellectual order, though they are comparable not on the level of substance or epistemic procedures but rather on that neutral field where our knowledge of bodies and objects is shaped. Hence, the object of experience and the way we experience it precede any work of conceptualization – akin to some pliable deformation, like a traumatic explosion leaving behind wounds and scars – creating a map of connections and fractures that are not only neuronal and imaginative, in the strong sense of the term, but also encompassing the ability of creating images of the world and experience. In this framework Malabou proposes a third element, which unquestionably is a theoretical novelty, namely, a new kind of medium within contemporary dialectics of naturalism and constructivism. Her thinking touches at the same time upon reflection on "new wounds" in contemporary, post-traumatic times and on the critical state the world finds itself in "on the cusp of tomorrow," and – last but not least – it reveals itself as intentional speculation on the future of thinking, contained in dialectical tension, existential and political freedom.

Traces are another thing altogether. Derrida conceived of them as spanning from traces of memory that are remnants of dreams or daily experience (in line with Freud's early thinking), to their post-teleological, messianic understanding as something that is yet to materialize – as debris and textual remains from which a weak expression of the inevitable future could be gleaned, of some new world or even New International, where certain aspects of a better individual life would correspond with a more just world of egalitarian emancipation. Malabou, unlike most of the more or less subtle critics of Derrida, abandons the latter formulation in order to broaden the understanding of the former. Similarly to Martin Hägglund, she treats the trace as morphologically pliable matter. It is the same with notions and language. They cease to perform transcendental and metaphorical functions (being neither things in themselves, nor relations between differences within linguistic systems), building instead uncountable configurations and tensions in the space of our tangled, mostly unresolved identifications. A trace is not merely a sign – it is proof of the concreteness of a "particular" life.

**IV**

It might be that all three traditions within the humanities – critical theory, psychoanalysis, and deconstructive speculation – speak of roughly the same thing. Ultimately, this finite world in which we are forced to live in requires certain literalness. This literalness is not some tautological absurdity, but rather it manifests as critical work that allows us to see the thing that is otherwise obscured by discourses that reign as if they were political hegemonies. Though this thing seems infinitely distant and unreachable, it is actually situated “close by.” Both the specter and the trace are capable of holding these two modalities of being within them, because they are two of the many manifestations of contemporary hylomorphism. Traces are reminiscent of fossils in the sense that they are no longer ours, though their discovery and dating is possible through science (which, for now, remains superhuman), and the specters though they seem like cultural metaphors, constitute the immanent order of our sensitivities and brittle ontologies. And if it is so, then novelty is not only objective but also realistic, not merely non-linguistic but also speculative. The capability of confronting these properties is a challenge to our anthropologies, but it also is a recipe for liberation not so much from the hegemony of the old discourses, but from the old hegemony of discourse. And it might as well be the only way of imaginative thinking that is still available to us.

*Translated by Rafał Pawluk*

## **Abstract**

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*The Hegemony of Novelty*

An introduction to the new (2023) special issue of “Teksty Drugie” on New Humanities.

## **Keywords**

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