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## PRESENTISM?

*A Reply to T. J. Clark*

**I**N 'FOR A Left with No Future', published above, T. J. Clark sets out a series of challenges for a new radical opposition. His starting-point is the existing left's failure to produce a programmatic alternative to the ruling order in the West, despite the onset of a deep financial crisis. The re-emergence of street protest across the stricken regions, he argues, has not generated the fundamental re-thinking that this point in history requires: a perspective that will fathom, morally and socially, the depths of humanity's impasse, given that the 20th century's attempts at socialist revolution led to a dead-end, with many of the worst defeats self-inflicted. Clark's contribution to the necessary renewal draws upon the image-world of Bruegel, the private correspondence of 17th-century English revolutionaries, the passionate disaffection of Hazlitt, the tragic theory of the Edwardian age and the mythicized prophecies of late Nietzsche—not to speak of the proud punk nihilism of 'No Future's' title. The lessons the left needs to learn from the 1914–89 century of catastrophe, Clark thinks, concern the innate human propensity to violence and the corrosive effects of modernity upon social relations. They demand a politics of 'small steps', to promote sustainable economic development and curb the scourge of war, within a perspective fixed firmly on the present, banishing all thoughts of a future non-capitalist order.

Clark's world outlook, as an art historian and a revolutionary, was forged in the furnace of the Situationist International, concurrent with deep research into the 1848 Revolution and its art in Paris, in the 1960s. His loyalty to the principles of Situationism was admirably unshaken by excommunication in 1966 from Debord's SI. If there were differences

of emphasis between them—Debord’s loftier view of the Soviet bureaucracy, compared to Clark’s fierce hatred of Bolshevism, for example—both would continue to affirm that, as Clark summarized, ‘the realm of the image was increasingly the social location in which and against which a possible future “politics” would have to be framed’.<sup>1</sup> Clark’s art writings have been proof in themselves of Situationism’s explanatory power and intellectual vitality. Historically, the culture of the left, from Marx to Trotsky, Lukács to Sartre, focused overwhelmingly on literature, with far less to say about the visual arts, let alone painting. Clark has brought to it a body of work to match anything in the literary tradition.

*The Absolute Bourgeois* and *Image of the People*, both published in 1973, are superlative historical interpretations, reconstructing the patterns of experience that informed the artistic strategies of Delacroix, Daumier, Millet, Meissonier and Courbet, in face of the popular upheavals of their time. *The Painting of Modern Life* (1985) extended the enquiry into the Second Empire, analysing representations of Haussmann’s Paris in the work of Manet and his followers. *Farewell to an Idea* (1999) examined the practices of a strategically selected set of artists—Pissarro, Cézanne, the Cubists, El Lissitzky, Pollock—as they tested the limits of what painting could do. Integral to these investigations is the act of writing itself, as a process of articulated thought. The mode is generally interrogative, pressing painted marks to yield their social or—especially in the more recent work, *The Sight of Death* (2006) and *LRB* essays—their formal meanings. The characteristic tense is the present continuous, with its rhetorical insistency; the conjugation is first person: ‘I’ or ‘we’. The drive—the polemical energy—is ethical and political as much as aesthetic: ‘it *matters*’, Clark repeatedly writes.

Side by side with these works of art history, Clark has authored or co-authored a series of fiery political statements, part polemic, part manifesto, which have appeared every seven years or so. In 1990, a pamphlet put out with Iain Boal and others addressed the meaning of the West’s Cold War victory under the title, ‘All Quiet on the Eastern Front’. In 1997, ‘Why Art Can’t Kill the Situationist International’, published in *October*, was an impassioned defence of the theoretical practice of the late SI as a basis for art, largely framed as an anathematization of the non-Situationist left. In 2004, ‘Afflicted Powers’ ran in *NLR* 27, and was expanded into a Verso book the following year. Co-written

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Origins of the Present Crisis’, *NLR* 2, March–April 2000, p. 89.

with the Retort collective, the text mobilized Debordian concepts—the society of the spectacle, the colonization of everyday life—to grapple with the meaning of the Twin Towers attack, the better to equip the anti-war movement.

It is in the context of these political writings that ‘No Future’ needs to be set. Any response will firstly have to register the originality of its form: a multi-layered counter-manifesto that mobilizes ideas and images across cultures and centuries, to stage an intricate interplay of themes—ferocity, tragedy, moderacy, temporality. ‘No Future’ opens with the Mussoliniera Mezzogiorno, an English Pre-Raphaelite, the wry metaphor of a discordant orchestra; it ends with police action on our city streets. Pre-modern worlds are strikingly present here: the rituals of the Arrernte and Warumungu peoples, Bruegel’s dreamers, the Puritan Kingdom of the Saints. Ned Ludd and Platonov, Rimbaud, Morris and Jean Charles de Menezes are among the many who people its pages. Rather than retrace Clark’s vaulting arguments step by step, however, what follows will explore ‘No Future’s’ explanations for the current impasse of the left; discuss the resources it would draw upon and the rhetorical strategies it deploys, before suggesting some alternatives. This is a preliminary and personal reply; no doubt there will be many others.

### I. THE ‘CENTURY OF CATASTROPHE’

‘This is the past that our politics has as its matrix’, Clark notes, rightly insisting that an understanding of socialism’s fortunes in the 20th century should be fundamental for its perspectives in the 21st. ‘No Future’ offers three overlapping interpretations of what went wrong. In the first, the years from 1914 to 1989 are seen as an inexplicable catastrophe, without shape or logic, ‘unfolding pell-mell from Sarajevo on’. In the second, they are the outcome of an innate human propensity to violence, to ‘blood-soaked conformity’. In the third, ‘modernity’ has produced a new kind of isolate, obedient individual, no longer fit material for a society. The causal or structuring relations between the three explanations are not spelled out in ‘No Future’, so it may be simplest to discuss each in turn.

To begin, then, with the notion of the ‘century of catastrophe’ as ‘come suddenly from nowhere’, an ‘unstoppable, unmappable’ chaos. In this

reading, Clark would seem to be installing irrationalism *tout court* as his presiding epistemological system and perhaps recommending it for a left to come. Irrationalism is a bad starting-point for any political perspective; for one that aims to leave catastrophe and salvation behind, it would be perverse. Not only are the origins of the First World War amenable to rational investigation and analysis, but these are imposed as an intellectual duty by the history that followed. The Great War and its settlement provided the preconditions for the Nazi ascendancy, the Second World War and the Hitlerian extermination programme, as well as setting the stage for the Bolshevik Revolution and helping to shape its course. Patently, the conflict that erupted in 1914 did not ‘come out of nowhere’. It was inscribed in the disparity between the existing allocation of empires, favouring first-comers Britain and France, and the greater economic and military dynamism of the late-comers, Germany, Japan, the US, once the world had been fully partitioned between a handful of great powers. From the late 1890s, clashes between the rival imperialisms over monopoly access to raw materials, markets and capital-investment projects in the semi-sovereign states—China, Turkey, Persia—and re-apportioning of colonial possessions started to overspill the bounds of 19th-century diplomacy. Imperialist coalitions began to destabilize the European alliance system; international crises were increasingly settled by brinkmanship; military and naval expansion kept step with economic growth; Berlin’s decision to back Vienna against Serbia in June 1914 was taken with an eye to St Petersburg’s re-armament programme. The only force that could have stopped the conflagration at that point was determined anti-war action from below.

The role played in this history by Eduard Bernstein’s ‘noblest form of social reformism’, as Clark calls it, hardly needs recalling here. Bernstein first gave his support to an expansionary colonial policy in 1896, nearly twenty years before the SPD Reichstag deputies’ vote for war credits in August 1914. His self-styled ‘revisionist’ intervention of 1898—the goal of socialism was nothing, the movement was all—argued that to oppose Rhodes’s brutal suppression of the Matabele uprising was to stand against ‘the spread of civilization and the widening of world markets’. As socialism was approached ‘piecemeal’, through the steady extension of state regulation of the economy, the enfranchised working class would itself acquire an interest in the expansion of colonial markets. ‘If there is nothing wrong with enjoying the produce of tropical plantations, there can be nothing wrong with cultivating such plantations ourselves’, he

wrote the following year, in *Preconditions of Socialism*. And in 1900: ‘the higher culture always has the greater right on its side over the lower; if necessary it has the historical right, yea, the duty, to subjugate it’—‘every strong race and every strong economy strives for expansion’. Social Democracy could approve the Reich’s invasion of Kiaochow with a clear conscience, as the German people needed a decisive say in determining the Celestial Empire’s trade policy. Nor should socialists overlook the question of race, the competition between civilized peoples and ‘the Mongol peril’.<sup>2</sup> The historic capitulation of 1914 was the logical outcome of a consistent social-imperialist strategy, learnt from the Fabians; its epigones are to be found in NATO’s centre lefts, as they shoulder the white man’s burden.

### *Man as wolf to man*

Clark’s second explanation for the ‘century of catastrophe’ lies in man’s innate ferocity; equally evident, he suggests, in the shouts of spear-carrying Aborigines and the eyes of aproned peasants. A natural propensity could not, of course, account for the periodization, 1914–89—for why then did the catastrophe not begin with the industrial-scale arms production of the 1860s; and how could it have come to an end, 75 years later, with the Revolution in Military Affairs still in full swing? Instead, Clark wants to advance two rather different arguments. The first concerns human nature, man’s ‘infinite’ capacity for bad; the second, violence as the driving force in history. Claims for perpetual evil in human nature have long been matched by counter-claims—Stephen Pinker’s *Better Angels of Our Nature* is only the latest, in a line stretching back to Condorcet—that humanity is getting continually nicer. By contrast, the Marxian tradition has advanced a conception of human nature as a combination of needs and capacities, none of which is ‘infinite’, and as ontologically social, moral, reproductive.<sup>3</sup> This approach has the advantage of theorizing plurality within commonality, as an acceptable account of human nature surely must.

The incidence of warfare has varied widely in human history; economic and ecological pressures offer more plausible explanations for

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<sup>2</sup> Eduard Bernstein, ‘Zusammenbruchstheorie und Colonialpolitik’, *Neue Zeit*, 19 January 1898; *Preconditions of Socialism* (1899), Cambridge 1993, p. 169; ‘Der Sozialismus und die Colonialfrage’, *Sozialistische Monatshefte*, 4, 1900.

<sup>3</sup> Norman Geras, *Marx and Human Nature*, London 1983.

its eruption than a timeless urge. The archaeological evidence suggests that pre-historic massacres can nearly always be correlated with environmental disaster, usually droughts or floods. Thus the earliest example of 'pre-historic genocide', a Late Paleolithic site in the Nile Valley, occurred during a period of catastrophic flooding in the region. The mid 14th-century Crow Creek massacre in the northern Great Plains took place during a major drought; water shortages are thought to explain the spike in osteological evidence for violent death in native graveyards at that time. By contrast, 'warfare' in pre-colonial Sub-Saharan Africa was often driven by labour shortages and conducted for the sake of captives, not corpses. Similarly, many Native American groups sought hostages as demographic replacements after the disastrous epidemics of the 16th and early 17th centuries. Within more developed socio-economic orders, successive phases of *pax imperialis* have broadly achieved the goal of restricting warfare to (brutal enough) policing operations on the periphery, down to the present day.

Clark subscribes to the old story of war as the motor of civilization; in its banalized version, the History of Kings and Queens. The creation of professional armies, 'No Future' argues, produced the invention of coinage. But monetized exchange had had a millennia-long pre-history in external trade, using goods such as skins or metals that combined use-value and exchange-value. Its preconditions included the development of agriculture, high-level handicraft industry and written records. Trade networks preceded the proto-state's extension of military and political power. The stamped bronze or silver bars that operated as quasi-coinage in the Near East between 1100 and 600 BC depended on the forging of iron tools that could cut and stamp other metals with precision. They signalled the existence of a state capable of a high degree of prior accumulation, through taxes and tribute. Their disbursement to commanders on the frontiers presupposed the existence of traders there who would accept the stamped metal in exchange for rations, footwear, cloaks and belts.

Such would seem to have been the case when coins first appeared, in the 7th-century BC Lydian kingdom, on the borders of the Persian empire. In 575 BC when Athens, a city-state answerable to its farmer-soldiers, became the first fully monetized economy, with small coins as well as high-value pieces, it was responding to the inter-related needs of a rich agricultural hinterland and thriving maritime trade, as well as its hoplite contingents. It is not to downplay the *use* of military force to say that its

role in historical development is secondary; at most a precipitate, acting in the context of broader economic determinants. Gunships may open the way for trade; but what did it take to build the gunships in the first place? Another way to pose this would be to ask what the women were doing, while Clark and the Australian photographer Baldwin Spencer are watching the men shake their spears.<sup>4</sup>

### *Ach, modernity*

The third explanation for the catastrophic matrix that has disabled the left falls under the capacious heading, ‘modernity’. The term did not figure in the original editions of Clark’s great works on 19th-century French painting; it makes its first appearance in his *Farewell to an Idea*, in the late 1990s. This was around the time when Third Way sociologists were updating the notion to describe the culture best adapted to the globalized free market and endowing it with a strongly positive valence. A few years later, as Chinese and Indian growth rates soared, the notion of ‘alternate modernities’ was coined, to signal that, as Fredric Jameson put it, ‘whatever you don’t like about the hegemonic Anglo-Saxon model, including the subaltern position it leaves you in, can be effaced by the reassuring notion that you can fashion your own modernity’: there could be a Latin American, Indian, African, even a Confucian kind.<sup>5</sup> Sociologists and cultural critics have famously fallen into two camps in their attitudes to the life-worlds and artistic possibilities of capitalist society. For one line, from Weber to Eliot to Adorno, the vision is unremittingly bleak: an iron cage, a wasteland; for another,

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<sup>4</sup> Baldwin Spencer’s notes on the Arrernte people are in stark contrast to the conclusions Clark would draw from his photographs. Spencer explained the fact that no tribe had ever attempted to encroach upon another’s territory by reference to the Arrernte’s belief that a man must stay in the region where the spirits of his ancestors dwelled. Not only was that country ‘indubitably his by right of inheritance’, but ‘it would be of no use to anyone else, nor would any other people’s country be good for him.’ The ‘quarrel’ with the visiting group, used by Clark to illustrate primordial human violence, was highly ritualized: there was much shouting and ‘brandishing of boomerangs’, but no one got killed. In Spencer’s view, the greatest risk to the Arrernte was tuberculosis, caught from cast-off European clothing. *Photographs of Baldwin Spencer*, Philip Batty et al., eds, Carlton, VIC 2005, pp. 5, 56, 44.

<sup>5</sup> Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, London 2002, p. 12. Jameson proposes a series of delimitations that would help to define a more modest yet substantial concept. In the meantime, he suggests the therapeutic exercise of substituting the term ‘capitalism’ wherever ‘modernity’ appears—just to see what happens.

from Marinetti to Hall to Giddens, it represents new opportunities for self-making. (A third approach, it has been argued, attempts to capture both aspects at once.<sup>6</sup>)

To Clark's credit, he has had no truck with the celebratory effusions; modernity in his work is endowed with truly Weberian grimness—which is not to say that it has acquired conceptual coherence. Lacking any satisfactory definition, or agreement over its sphere of application (culture, ethos, social order), causes (Protestantism, capitalism, consumerism) or periodization (end of feudalism, Enlightenment, 1850, 1905), modernity has come to function as a pseudo-concept, a placeholder that averts the need for deeper enquiry; or a way of speaking about capitalism without mentioning the term. Presenting the notion for the first time in *Farewell*, Clark explains that 'the word "modernity" will be used in a free and easy way, in hopes that most readers will know it when they see it'. Yet the disparate 'cluster of features' by which he identifies it—reiterated and expanded in 'No Future': 'an ethos, a habitus, a way of being human'—only renders 'modernity' more diffuse. The result is an unstable amalgam of incompatible Weberian and Marxian approaches. From Weber, Clark retains the ideas of rationalization and disenchantment, the loss of a vaguely indicated (pre-Reformation?) prior world of shared values and understandings. From Marx, he wants to argue that the 'cluster of features' which constitutes modernity is 'propelled by one central process: the accumulation of capital'.<sup>7</sup>

But for Weber, rationalization was a slow process of sedimentation, its origins traceable to mediaeval monasteries' timetables, fully crystallized in the organization of the firm and the bureaucracy. The determining instance was ethical: the Protestant spirit propelled the accumulation of capital. Marxism, for its part, has never posited a uniform social experience of capitalism, uninflected by class, generation or gender; for Marx himself, the development of each capitalist economy was uniquely overdetermined by national cultural and environmental coordinates. Since his day, the processes of capitalist accumulation have driven the mode of production through successive phases, punctuated by wars, crises and depressions: monopoly capitalism, the second industrial revolution and the emergence of Fordism; the welfare-state capitalism of the Cold War, and the developmentalisms, both import-substitute and

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<sup>6</sup> Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*, New York 1982, pp. 15–18.

<sup>7</sup> Clark, *Farewell to an Idea*, p. 7.



export-led, of the periphery; the era of finance capital, neoliberal globalization and the rise of China as workshop of the world; and the next stage, to which we are now unmistakably in the process of transition. No uniform ethos, habitus or particular way of being human is discernible across this varied landscape.

Indeed Clark himself seems to be tiring of modernity now, introducing it only to hammer home the lesson of its fatal fixation on the future. Several rather different arguments are being advanced here. One is that, under capitalism (or rather, ‘modernity’) the future serves only to dupe ‘isolate obedient individuals’ with the ‘fiction of a full existence to come’. Secondly, modernity stands in for a *modernism*—perpetually focused, according to its 1950s New York theorists, on the new. Clark’s juxtaposition of Nimrod’s tower and the monument to the Third International suggests that Tatlin’s model should be struck down by a wrathful Jehovah. But Tatlin and the Constructivists are really a proxy for any visions of transformation, or ‘stagings of transfiguration’, which in Clark’s view are what has led ‘to the present debacle’. Again, it is not easy to untwine the arguments. Is Clark referring to the left’s failure to mount a coherent alternative to the Geithner and Bernanke ‘solution’? If so, wouldn’t such an alternative necessarily involve at least some vision of transformation? Or is he speaking more world-historically, echoing the message of Radio Liberty: socialism = messianism = gulag?

All of the above, no doubt; and Clark will have anticipated many of the objections. Ontologically, the idea of a politics without a future would seem a non-starter, if we accept that futurity is a constitutive dimension of human experience, as our habits of procreation—indeed all cultural creation—suggest we should; while any effective action embodies in itself a difference between ‘then’ and ‘now’. The present itself, as a political moment, can only be grasped through periodization; a process of differentiation that necessarily posits a future as well as a past. Sociologically, the ‘Great Look Forward’ was not a matter of messianic belief but a rational response to the experience of accelerating social and economic change. Analytically, the history of capitalism teaches us that this will continue; conditions will alter, even if relations remain the same. Ideologically, however—and this is what makes Clark’s iconoclastic stance puzzling—‘no future’ would already appear to be established as the postmodern order of the day: a changeless now, from horizon to

horizon, and a presentist politics reduced to the mindless repetition of the words, 'Yes, we can'.

## 2. RESOURCES

What of the fragments that Clark would shore against our ruins—Bruegel's *Land of Cockaigne*, Wall's economic programme, Hazlitt's 'On the Pleasure of Hating', Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy*, Nietzsche's *Will to Power*, Benjamin's notes for 'The Concept of History'? The roll-call criss-crosses times and disciplines, from the Habsburg Netherlands to the Nazi Occupation of Paris. To assess the contributions they might make to a new perspective for the left, it may be useful to resituate these voices and visions in their contexts, to help clarify what they were saying about utopias, economic development, human nature, tragic theory, political strategy and time.

### *A Flemish materialist*

*The Land of Cockaigne* pulls us up short, as Bruegel always does; even in NLR's black-and-white reproduction (page 69, above), a negative reminder of how important colour was in Bruegel's work: the pink silk trousers and fox-fur cloak of the proto state intellectual; the dark-brown tree trunk, turning itself into a table, casting an ominous autumnal shadow over the brow of the hill; the silvery gleam of the sea; the russets and tans of the puddings that tile the lean-to roof in the top-left corner, from which a famished Habsburg soldier peers out at the sprawling trio. The viewer, too, seems to be gazing down from a mound of buckwheat; Bruegel places us in a position to which we must have eaten our way through. For the present purpose, the painting's possible relation to a renewed left perspective, the world outside the Brussels workshop needs to be borne in mind. *Cockaigne* was painted in 1567, when Habsburg forces under the Duke of Alba were terrorizing the Netherlands' towns, re-imposing the writ of the Inquisition during a period of economic crisis, after the iconoclastic riots of the year before. There were mass executions in the Grand Place, thousands of arrests; rebels' lands were seized. The seeds were being planted for the landing of the Sea Beggars and eruption of the Great Revolt, which would establish the Dutch Republic, a beacon for the 17th-century enlightenment, after Bruegel's death. His *Massacre of the Innocents* (1568) appears

to be a direct reflection on Alba's terror: a snow-covered Flemish village, women pleading with red-tabarded officers to spare the children's lives, menacing black-armoured troops observing the scene. *Cockaigne* is the negation of that. Without knowing who commissioned it—some of Bruegel's patrons were high-ups in the Habsburg administration—its motives remain mysterious. Clark offers a compelling interpretation of the painting as an earthly satire of other-worldliness, one which insists that every vision of bliss is 'heavy and ordinary and present-centred'. But in the context of those bitter times, might it not equally be read as damning criticism of the illusion of an endless present, oblivious to historical developments taking place outside?

### *A Leveller conscience*

Written nearly a century later, the letter that Clark cites from Moses Wall to Milton is a haunting historical document: a voice of striking sobriety and intelligence, from whom nothing else survives. The text itself exists only in a later copy; Milton's letters to Wall—he may have sent him the *Treatise of Civil Power in Ecclesiastical Causes*—have vanished. The only other trace of Moses Wall is as a student at Cambridge between 1627 and 1635 (Milton was there from 1625 to 1632). Wall writes from Caversham, Surrey, in late May 1659. The dual-power deadlock between the Army Command and the City and gentry's interests was fracturing, in the latter's favour. Monck's army would soon be marching on London to restore a royalist Parliament.

Clark commends Wall's letter for its 'most modest, most moderate, of materialisms', but the economic proposals it contains need to be treated with care. This is a Leveller, not a Digger, programme. Wall's most radical demands are for the abolition of tithes—the 10 per cent tax levied on parishioners to support the Church of England clergy—and secure tenure for small farmers, as opposed to 'copyhold' tenancies 'under a Lord (or rather Tyrant) of a Manor', which held them 'far more enslaved to the Lord of the Manor than the rest of the nation is to a King or supreme Magistrate!'<sup>8</sup> But Wall's second suggestion, improving 'fens, forests and commons', generally involved enclosures, fiercely opposed by the landless rural labourers who depended on the remaining open lands for grazing and trapping, who gathered firewood in the

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<sup>8</sup> *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, New Haven and London 1980, vol. VII, 1659–1660, pp. 510–13.

forests or fished in the undrained fens, as their only supplement to the pennies that could be earned by wage labour. Forests provided a refuge for homeless wanderers, the Diggers' leader Gerrard Winstanley argued, 'out of sight or out of slavery'.<sup>9</sup> Wall's other recommendations, meanwhile—improving manufactures, fishery and English trade at sea—had been at the heart of government economic policy under both Commonwealth and Protectorate. Manufacturers benefited from the lifting of monopoly restrictions and slackening of apprenticeship rules. Secretary Thurloe's Post Office and the highway-building programme improved communications. Rapid expansion of the Navy under Cromwell, funded by expropriated Irish lands, helped to force concessions from the Netherlands, Sweden and Portugal, to the benefit of English trade; Jamaica was seized from Spain and its slave labour force dramatically expanded; the Navy also brought protection from piracy and safeguarded the English fishing fleets. This was the early-capitalist modernization project for which Parliament, the City of London and the Atlantic merchants had fought the Civil War. Clark rightly insists that the formulation of adequate economic demands, whether maximalist or transitional, is a central issue for a renewed left; but the various elements of the Leveller programme need to be examined on their own terms.

What was Wall's strategic perspective for it? 'We have waited for Liberty, but it must be God's work and not man's', he wrote to Milton. 'God will carry on that blessed work in spite of all opposites, and to their ruin if they persist therein.' Clark suggests that we can brush aside the theological assumptions of the Puritan revolutionaries, their perception of their situation in terms of the Fall and the Kingdom of the Saints. But as Christopher Hill noted, this religious grounding proved particularly disabling when it came to dealing with reversals: for those who believed they had been fighting for God's cause, the total defeat that the Restoration implied was a 'shattering blow'—'those who had been the instruments of the omnipotent God in 1648–49 were now revealed as impotent mortals.' After 1660, God presided over the new court of Charles II. Unlike the secular philosophies of the Enlightenment, religion can be made to serve any social purpose, Hill argued, thanks to the ambiguity of its basic texts.<sup>10</sup> The advance represented by bringing secular political reason and

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<sup>9</sup> Christopher Hill, *The Century of Revolution*, London 1961, rev. edn 1980, p. 41.

<sup>10</sup> Christopher Hill, 'God and the English Revolution', *History Workshop Journal*, Spring 1984.

popular practice into correspondence with each other should be registered as a vital legacy of the left, not dismissed.

### *A Restoration radical*

William Hazlitt was writing nearly 170 years later, in the shadow of another historic defeat. Hazlitt can be read as an English equivalent of those other great haters of the French Restoration era, Pushkin, Heine and Stendhal; he and Beyle were acquainted, and freely plundered from each other's works. Operating under less severe censorship, Hazlitt was the most directly political of the four (though his virtual silence over the Peterloo massacre has been attributed to government gagging orders). From a more modest background, he taught himself to write to earn his keep; the wild growth of the English periodical press in the early 1800s allowed him to range across art, literature, the theatre, political thought; and to lambast the renegacies of Southey, Coleridge and Wordsworth. Clark wants to enlist him as a witness for the innate human propensity to violence, arguing that he has much to tell us about 'Homs and Abbottabad'—entirely distinct situations, neither of which can be explained by ancient bloodlusts. Plucking a paragraph from its context in 'On the Pleasure of Hating'—written in 1823, a disastrous period in Hazlitt's personal life, when he nevertheless had to sparkle on the page to pay the rent—Clark misses the essay's ironies. Hazlitt is not aiming at anthropological insight but cultural and existential critique. He starts with a reflection about being too squeamish to kill a spider and concludes: 'We hate old friends; we hate old books; we hate old opinions; and at the last we come to hate ourselves.' His friend Leigh Hunt, reviewing the essay when it was published in *The Plain Speaker*, wished that Hazlitt had 'showed himself as unbribable by his own spleen and impatience, as he is by what made his Lake friends apostates.'<sup>11</sup>

The relation between passion and reason was a central theme for Hazlitt, explored from many different angles; as with Stendhal, at top speed his prose can begin to generate ideas by free association and it is possible to cite him taking a number of different positions. But Hazlitt never reduced human passions to the propensity for violence. Writing on the

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<sup>11</sup> William Hazlitt, 'On the Pleasure of Hating', in *The Fight and Other Writings*, London 2000, p. 438; James Leigh Hunt, writing in the *Companion*, March 1828, cited in Duncan Wu, ed., *Selected Writings of William Hazlitt: Volume 8*, London 1998, p. xv.

relation between feeling and intellect in politics, in 'What is the People?', he argued that the people's will was guided 'first, by popular feeling, as arising out of the immediate wants and wishes of the great mass of the people', and second, 'by public opinion, as arising out of the impartial reason and enlightened intellect of the community'; there could be no better criterion of national grievances, or the proper remedies for them. If the left is to take lessons from Hazlitt on hating, it would be preferable for them to be political ones:

To be a good Jacobin, a man must be a good hater, but this is the most difficult and least amiable of all the virtues: the most trying and thankless of all tasks . . . The true Jacobin hates the enemies of liberty as they hate liberty, with all his strength and with all his might. His memory is as long, and his will as strong as theirs, though his hands are shorter. He never forgets or forgives an injury done to the people, for tyrants never forget or forgive one done to themselves.<sup>12</sup>

### *An Edwardian tragedist*

Eighty years on, at the start of the 20th century, A. C. Bradley was operating in another medium again: lectures on Shakespeare's tragedies to Oxford undergraduates, published in what would become a primer for generations of English students. Clark wants to conjoin Bradley's view of tragedy to his own, as a theory of 'the constant presence of violence in human affairs'. But this was not Bradley's position. He was a Hegelian and adhered to the theory of tragedy laid out in the *Lectures on Aesthetics*. For Bradley, as for Hegel, tragedy arises not from violence or suffering itself, nor the fear and pity this may evoke; the essence of the tragic conflict is 'the war of good with good':

The family claims what the state refuses, love requires what honour forbids. The competing forces are both in themselves rightful, and the claim of each is equally justified; but the right of each is pushed into a wrong, because it ignores the right of the other, and demands that absolute sway which belongs to neither alone, but to the whole of which each is but a part.<sup>13</sup>

In this view, tragedy ends with a resolution of the conflict, even if the action of reconciliation must proceed through the catastrophe of the hero's death: the ethical substance of the rightful powers is affirmed;

<sup>12</sup> 'What is the People?' in Hazlitt, *The Fight and Other Writings*, pp. 373–4; 361.

<sup>13</sup> Bradley, 'Hegel's Theory of Tragedy', *Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (1909), London 1965, pp. 71–2.

what is negated is the exclusive assertion of their right. Bradley differed from Hegel principally on the question of whether modern tragedy—Calderón, Schiller, Shakespeare—in which the conflict is characteristically internal to the hero, represented a decline from the canon of Classical Greece. Distancing himself from Hegel's 'hostility to the individualism and the un-political character of Christian morality' in the *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Bradley attempted to 'strengthen' Hegel's theory by demonstrating that tragic conflict in Shakespeare, too, could be read as the war of good with good. He illustrated his thesis by the 'hard case' of Macbeth, in whom he found courage, imagination, a vivid conscience and determination to press forward, even when earth and heaven and hell are leagued against him: 'Are not these things in themselves good, and gloriously good?' The Hegel–Bradley theory of tragedy cannot therefore be applied to the terrible 'human smoke' of the Nazi extermination camps, for that would be to impute some good to the perpetrators, some 'ethical substance' to their deeds. Auschwitz was not Thebes.

Clark's second reason for turning to Bradley's view of tragedy is that he is 'more political than all the great theorists' that followed. What were Bradley's politics? Born in Cheltenham in 1851, he was the youngest son of the evangelical preacher Charles Bradley (1789–1871), who was said to have had twenty-two children and bullied them all. In reaction, perhaps, the younger Bradley was drawn to revolutionary Romanticism: Shelley in poetry, Mazzini in politics. Much later he would describe to his close friend Gilbert Murray, the Australian-born classicist and canonical translator of Aeschylus and Sophocles, how, as a student at Balliol in 1872, he had sat in tears half the night after learning of Mazzini's death. An ardent Idealist, he exulted at Germany's unification. Come August 1914, this liberal internationalism foundered. Bradley wrote to Murray that he was glad England had declared war—'I was in mortal terror that we might stand aside.'<sup>14</sup> He contributed a respectful preface to a book of lectures, *Germany and England*, by his friend J. A. Cramb, which expounded on the glories of both imperialisms, while deeming conflict between them inevitable.<sup>15</sup> In keeping with this, Bradley argued in a 1915 lecture on 'International Morality' that the war might justly be

<sup>14</sup> Letters to Gilbert Murray of 27 February 1913 and August 1914, in Katharine Cooke, *A. C. Bradley and his Influence in Twentieth-Century Shakespeare Criticism*, Oxford 1972, pp. 25, 44.

<sup>15</sup> J. A. Cramb, *Germany and England*, London 1914.

compared with tragedy: 'If the disappearance of either meant the disappearance, or even a lowering, of those noble and glorious energies of the soul which appear in both, the life of perpetual peace would be a poor thing—superficially less terrible perhaps than the present life, but much less great and good.'<sup>16</sup>

### *A prophet of irrationalism*

Had he lived to see it, Nietzsche no less than Bradley would have welcomed the Great War. 'You say it is the good cause that hallows even war? I tell you: it is the good war that hallows any cause', he wrote in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*; a specially printed waterproof edition of the book, in a run of 150,000, was distributed to the 'more literate' German soldiers as they left for the Front.<sup>17</sup> Nietzsche and Bradley were near contemporaries, the former born just six years earlier. But while Bradley was writing, in the early 1900s, from the middle ranks of an intelligentsia solidly entrenched in an imperial order which held sway over much of the world, Nietzsche was operating in a more febrile situation: a more ambitious philosophical tradition, forced to grapple with the sudden advent of the Reich's great-power status and the simultaneous challenge of a powerful working-class movement. In his penetrating characterization, Lukács suggested that Nietzsche's greatest gift was his 'anticipatory sensitivity' for what the disaffected intelligentsia of the imperial era would require; his dazzling aphorisms and wide cultural range would 'satisfy its frustrated, sometimes rebellious instincts with gestures that appeared fascinating and hyper-revolutionary'. The social function of Nietzsche's writing was to rescue dissatisfied intellectuals who might be drawn to the alternative of the workers' movement; on the basis of his philosophy, 'one could go on as before—with fewer inhibitions and a clearer conscience—and feel oneself to be much more revolutionary than the socialists'. Though Nietzsche rejected the idea of a system, Lukács argued with notable cogency that hostility to equality, democracy and socialism were the organizing principles of his entire oeuvre: 'to make the idea of human equality intellectually contemptible and to wipe it out: that was his basic aim throughout his career'.<sup>18</sup> Nietzsche's

<sup>16</sup> Bradley, 'International Morality', *The International Crisis in its Ethical and Psychological Aspects*, London 1915, pp. 64–5.

<sup>17</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, Cambridge 2006, pp. 33, x.

<sup>18</sup> Georg Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason* (1962), London 1980, pp. 315–7, 358, 366.



anti-Christian polemics were aimed not at the princes of the Church, but at an ideology of succour for the lowliest.

From a very different standpoint, the problems of equality, and therefore of value, are also central to Malcolm Bull's *Anti-Nietzsche*. As distinct both from those who would select and interpret Nietzsche's writing, in the fashion of a host of post-war admirers, Deleuze and Foucault at their head, and those who would simply take him at his word as a messianic elitist, as right-wing fans and left-wing critics have done, Bull's project is to conceive what the full—moral, aesthetic, social, ecological—anti-Nietzsche case would be. In a style of calm limpidity that is the antithesis of Nietzschean pyrotechnics, and with unflinching courtesy towards the concepts of others, Bull traces the unfolding logics of value's negation and equality's expansion, in a discussion that sets the history of ideas in conversation with the history of societies, practices and beliefs. The upshot, radical as it is, would so far seem to be unanswerable.<sup>19</sup>

Clark has been a late convert to Nietzsche. 'Socialism should have realized from the start that sources like these were poisoned' he wrote, in 1999:

There was an idea abroad in the early 1890s that Nietzsche and all other prophets of irrationalism could simply be plundered and used for their hatred of positivism. The movement of the future would take care of their other, more deeply embedded, hatred of the masses . . . If only it had proved true.<sup>20</sup>

Eight years later, Clark was describing himself as a 'left-Nietzschean'.<sup>21</sup> 'No Future' sheds no light on his change of mind, and plainly neither 1989 nor 2008 can account for this radical reversal. Yet Nietzsche's influence within the text goes beyond the three passages it cites. The first, from the 1872 fragment 'Homer on Competition', is used to establish Clark's view of human nature as exulting in pain and violence. Nietzsche, though, spent a good deal more time lamenting his contemporaries' weakness and physical degeneracy, and his point in this text is about cultures, not human nature: if only we could be as keen on

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<sup>19</sup> Malcolm Bull, *Anti-Nietzsche*, London and New York 2011.

<sup>20</sup> Clark, *Farewell to an Idea*, pp. 95–6.

<sup>21</sup> Clark, 'My Unknown Friends: A Response to Malcolm Bull', paper given in December 2007 at the Townsend Center, UC Berkeley; published in *Nietzsche's Negative Ecologies*, Townsend Papers in the Humanities, no. 1, 2009.

combat and competition as the Hellenes. The second passage—‘we are not material for a society’—may be more central for Clark. Nietzsche’s vehemence in *The Gay Science* was directed, of course, against the socialists: ‘one reads their slogan for the future “free society” on all tables and walls’, despite the Reich’s draconian Anti-Socialist Law. The aphorism contrasts the era of mediaeval guilds and prescribed professions, which produced the ‘broad-based social pyramids’ of the Middle Ages, with the new, ‘American’ belief that the individual is ‘up to playing any role’, and everyone improvises and experiments with himself; what is dying out is ‘the basic faith that man has worth and sense only in so far as he is *a stone in a great edifice*’.<sup>22</sup> Yet far from being extra-social, the self-made men he deplores are exactly the bourgeois types that constitute, and are constituted by, a fast-expanding capitalist society. As it stands, Clark’s thesis that ‘we are not material for a society’ remains an unfounded assertion. Empirically, human nature has produced, and reproduced itself within, a staggeringly wide range of social forms; the historical record does not suggest that a more equitable system of ownership and distribution is beyond the species’ capability. Sociologically, the claim founders on ‘No Future’s’ ambiguity as to whether we are, in fact, insatiable warriors or ‘isolate, obedient individuals’, who have repressed or done away with our inner tigers.

The third passage, on ‘moderacy’, is perhaps the most important for ‘No Future’. Clark prudently bowdlerizes the unacceptable elements from the 10 June 1887 *Will to Power* fragment, leaving his citation of it a mass of dots. Restored to its full meaning and context, it is clear that Nietzsche was speaking about the moderacy of the *victors*, as they emerge from the purifying crisis that ‘brings to light the weaker and less secure’ and ‘thus promotes an order of rank according to strength, from the point of view of health: those who command are recognized as those who command, those who obey as those who obey.’ It is in this context that *die Mässigsten*, the most moderate—‘men who are sure of their power and represent the attained strength of man with conscious pride’—will prove *die Stärksten*, the strongest ones.<sup>23</sup> More generally, Nietzsche’s usage of

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<sup>22</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Cambridge 2001, 356; emphasis in the original. Citations from Nietzsche’s works are by section number unless otherwise specified.

<sup>23</sup> In an earlier version, Clark mused about a left-Nietzschean reading of ‘rank’ as ‘leadership’, understood as ‘having to do with mastery of specific skills’: ‘I presume we would agree that the left has suffered centrally from the lack of a theory and a political practice of leadership so conceived.’ ‘My Unknown Friends’, p. 87.

the term *mässig* and its cognates seems to be either in an openly counter-revolutionary spirit, or to denote everything that the *Übermensch* rightly despises and rages against. An example of the first is the aphorism, 'A delusion in the doctrine of revolution', in *Human, All Too Human*, commending Voltaire's 'moderate' (*maassvolle*) nature the better to denounce Rousseau's 'passionate follies and half-lies that have roused the optimistic spirit of revolution, against which I cry, *Ecrasez l'infâme!*' The aphorism that follows, 'Moderation', warns against 'the uselessness and danger of all sudden changes'.<sup>24</sup> A representative sample of the second usage is Nietzsche's paean in *Beyond Good and Evil* to 'the beast of prey and the man of prey (for instance, Cesare Borgia)', as 'the healthiest of all tropical monsters', held up against 'men of moderation', therefore of 'mediocrity'. Later in the same work Nietzsche writes: '*Das Maass ist uns fremd*'—'Moderacy is alien to us, let us confess it to ourselves; our itching is really the itching for the infinite, the immeasurable. Like the rider on his forward panting horse', etc.<sup>25</sup>

Nietzsche's presence in 'No Future' is perhaps more pervasive than this. It would be possible to read the other thinkers on whom Clark draws as cladding for those places where Nietzsche's thought must be omitted or adapted to meet present needs. Nietzschean tragic theory is too positive and interventionist for Clark's purposes—'It is the heroic spirits who say Yes to themselves in tragic cruelty'<sup>26</sup>—while Bradley's can provide a negative valence for the inner tiger, to which the author of 'Homer on Competition' allocated a more creative role. Via Hazlitt and Spencer, the eternal human propensity to violence is pressed into service, in lieu of Nietzsche's implacable division of humanity into rulers and ruled. In the cadences of Clark's insistence on the unchanging present—there will be no future without war, poverty, etc., because *there will be no future*—one can almost hear Zarathustra: 'existence just as it is, without meaning or goal, but inevitably returning into nothingness without a finale: *eternal recurrence*.'

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<sup>24</sup> *Human, All Too Human*, 463, 464.

<sup>25</sup> *Beyond Good and Evil*, 197, 224. For the moderacy of Nietzsche's personal politics, see the notes of 1888 anticipating the publication of his *Antichrist*: 'One would do well to found associations everywhere, to secure for me, at the proper moment in time, several million followers. I foremost value having the officer corps and the Jewish bankers on my side.' Cited in Mazzino Montinari, *Reading Nietzsche*, Urbana, IL 2003, p. 121.

<sup>26</sup> *Will to Power*, 852.

Benjamin saw things differently. ‘Eternal recurrence is the punishment of being held back in school, projected onto the cosmic sphere: humanity has to copy out its text in endless repetitions’, he wrote in 1940, alluding to Eluard. When Nietzsche took up the idea, he became ‘the bearer of mythic doom’.<sup>27</sup> The dynamic concept of now-time that Benjamin evoked in the beautiful lines from Turgot which Clark cites—‘politics is obliged to foresee the present’—runs wholly counter to the logic of eternal return. As Benjamin put it: ‘The existence of the classless society cannot be thought at the same time that the struggle for it is thought. But the concept of the present, in its binding sense for the historian, is necessarily defined by these two temporal orders.’<sup>28</sup> The attempt to graft the two thinkers together will not take.

### 3. ON STYLE

‘No Future’ promises ‘a rhetoric, a tonality, an imagery’; what does this involve? Clark is one of the left’s most gifted writers, a master of the resources of prose, of affect and meaning. Yet the reader here may sometimes feel coerced as much as persuaded. One form this takes is asyndeton, lists in which (for example) Franco, Pol Pot, Ayman al-Zawahiri are made to march in step, without so much as a conjunction between them; making one wonder whether Clark thinks historical causality has any role to play. Elsewhere, confident claims are made that would seem, at face value, flatly to contradict established facts. ‘Socialism became National Socialism’—in fact, it mainly became social democracy. ‘The Greek left has been silent’—on the contrary, debate has raged there about the different forms of default. ‘Marx’, ‘Luxemburg’, ‘Gramsci’ were ‘unwilling to dwell on the experience of defeat’—yet the two central subjects of Marx’s political writings were the advent of the Second Empire and the crushing of the Paris Commune; Gramsci was the theorist of restoration as passive revolution; it was Luxemburg who wrote, in the spring of 1915, ‘And in the midst of this orgy a world tragedy has occurred: the capitulation of the Social Democracy.’ Of course, Clark knows this; so he must be using the words to mean something else—perhaps to indicate that he does not wish to dwell on social democracy,

<sup>27</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘Paralipomena to “On the Concept of History”’, *Selected Works*, vol. 4, Cambridge, MA 2003, pp. 403–4.

<sup>28</sup> Benjamin, ‘Paralipomena to “On the Concept of History”’, p. 407.

Greece or historical materialism's discussions of defeat. But in that case, why not say so?

The European left, to which 'No Future' is addressed, is an early casualty of this rhetorical *force majeure*: ruthlessly caricatured as exulting in its marginality, fixated by catastrophe and salvation. No doubt there are those to whom one or other of Clark's labels might apply, and perhaps even some poor demented soul, trapped in a nightmare flashback to Kiel or Barcelona, who answers to them all. But as a collective portrait of the small, scattered forces of today's intellectual and activist lefts, it is unconvincing. It is striking that 'No Future' offers no real analysis of what these forces are—the journals (say, *Le Monde diplomatique*, *Il Manifesto*, *Das Argument*) and publishing houses; the fragile electoral formations, anti-war and anti-austerity, garnering between 3 and 10 per cent of the vote; the overlapping generations of (partial and inadequate) political forms: left breakaways from social democracy and euro-communism, vestiges of the Marxist groups, tamed trade unions, untamed environmentalists, horizontalist protests reborn after 2008, following their first appearance in the alter-globalization movements. In *Afflicted Powers*, Clark and his co-authors offered a more measured evaluation of a left that 'speaks from a moment of historical defeat', that 'knows its own powerlessness'.<sup>29</sup> This seems more accurate. As late as 2000, the insistence by an NLR editor on a lucid registration of a political—not a moral or intellectual—defeat, was met by outrage; today it is largely common sense.<sup>30</sup>

#### 4. ALTERNATIVES

Moderacy of the victors; a peace-keeping programme that would weaken or disarm territorial state sovereignty; is this where 'For a Left with No Future' is tending? There are grounds for thinking not. Clark's avowed reformism does not aim to endorse or prettify the US–UN order. His challenge to think through the project of the left to a depth of 'seven levels' is welcome and timely. One can admire the imaginative intensity of the perspective he explores while still registering the limitations of

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<sup>29</sup> Retort, *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War*, London and New York 2005, p. 14.

<sup>30</sup> Perry Anderson, 'Renewals', NLR 1, Jan–Feb 2000.

the thinkers he draws upon for a left that, *contra* Bradley and Nietzsche, would oppose the logic of imperialism and base itself on principles of social equality and philosophical reason. To what alternative resources might it turn?

### *Action and disorder*

Where tragedy is concerned, the broader historical-materialist tradition might be the best place to start. In his *Modern Tragedy*, Raymond Williams outlined a positive perspective that would overcome 'the usual separation of social thinking and tragic thinking'. The son of a railwayman, Williams's aim was to understand how the limits of successive tragic theories had been formulated, such that the shattering life experiences of the mass of the people were systematically excluded from them. Moving between conceptions derived from drama and patterns of social praxis, he argued that, while bourgeois culture had extended the scope of tragic experience—the tragedy of a citizen could be as real as the tragedy of a prince—it had at the same time drastically limited the nature of tragic experience. In earlier forms, the fall of the tragic protagonist was of social consequence, entailing the fall of his house or kingdom; by contrast, bourgeois tragedy was concerned with the fate of the individual, generally pitted against an unmoved public. At the same time, human suffering that was social in origin—a mining disaster, say—was defined as non-tragic, 'in the proper sense of the word': lacking in general meaning; 'accidental'.<sup>31</sup>

Williams accepted that a distinction needed to be formulated between 'tragic' and 'accidental' suffering. He retained from Hegel and Bradley the defining notions of human agency, ethical substance—the relation of the characters' trajectories to general meanings—order and disorder, as constituted by the tragic action. But the 'aristocratic' Hegel–Bradley theory entailed the exclusion of a whole class of human suffering: it was bankrupt, Williams argued, to say that the sufferings caused by work, famine, poverty were devoid of ethical substance, human agency or connection to general meanings. A new conception was needed, 'substantial enough to be embodied in action', to connect with actual contemporary suffering. Williams grounded his contribution towards this in distinctive conceptions of death—as a widely varied experience, not necessarily

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<sup>31</sup> Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy* (1966), rev. edn, London 1979, pp. 63ff.

solitary—and of evil. He was prepared to accept that particular actions or situations could be described as ‘evil’, perhaps on the basis of his own experiences as a tank commander in World War Two,<sup>32</sup> while adamantly opposing the abstraction of evil as an absolute condition.

But if the social had been excluded from tragic thinking, tragedy had equally been kept out of social thought. Within left traditions that stressed man’s ability to change his situation, the tragic vision was seen as defeatist: social transformation could put an end to the suffering, which tragedy seemed ideologically to ratify. Williams was sharply critical of attempts to downplay the degree of ‘violence, dislocation and extended suffering’ that was the lived reality of revolutionary upheaval, however ‘epic’ it might be made to appear in retrospect. Equally misleading was the inevitable partisanship in face of an ongoing revolutionary situation: suffering was projected as the responsibility of one party or the other, until its very description became a revolutionary or counter-revolutionary act. Reduced to an abstraction, the ‘misery of millions’ could be seen as mere raw material; such a reduction suppressed the decisive connection between present and future, means and ends, resulting—Williams had the Soviet Union in mind—in a revolutionary regime that had turned to arrest the revolution itself. ‘The more general and abstract the process of human liberation is conceived to be, the less any actual suffering really counts, until even death is a paper currency’.<sup>33</sup>

Yet the same was true on an even greater scale of the vast disorder that constituted international capitalism: the fear, degradation and brutalization of billions—waiting interminably to be ‘lifted out of poverty’, in the unctuous-contemptuous jargon of today—was reduced by that system to mere statistics. The institutions that embodied and systematized that disorder could appear settled and innocent, a bulwark against which the very protests of the injured and oppressed could seem the source of disturbance. The 20th century had induced in post-war Europe ‘a kind of inert pacifism, too often self-regarding and dangerous’: upheavals elsewhere were seen as a threat to peace, to be suppressed by ‘police action’ or smothered by ‘peacemaking’, through which the underlying disorder was simply reproduced. For Williams, the aim was to resolve the underlying tragic disorder, not to cover it up. Resolution would entail a society’s incorporation of all its people, as whole human beings—therefore ‘with

<sup>32</sup> See Williams, *Politics and Letters: Interviews with NLR*, London 1979, pp. 57–8.

<sup>33</sup> *Modern Tragedy*, pp. 64–5, 75.

the capacity to direct the society by active mutual responsibility and co-operation, on a basis of full social equality'.<sup>34</sup>

In a 1979 Afterword, Williams noted that a further 'tragic dimension' had appeared since the 1960s: the widespread sense of a loss of the future. He was writing at a time when 'the capitalist economic order is in the process of defaulting on its most recent contract: to provide full employment, extended credit and high social expenditure as conditions for political support', and when the coming costs of that default were clear: 'millions will be thrown out of work; lives built in the old areas of industrial exploitation will be left exposed and helpless, as capital and calculation move away; the stresses of forced competitive routines are likely to increase.' But this was not the first time that a foreseen future had been falsified; defeat did not cancel the validity of the impulse to struggle, nor diminish the value of the fight. A properly social, properly tragic perspective would need to face, at the necessary depth, all the forces, conditions and contradictions that blocked the way to other, practicable futures; to do so would involve, once again, conceiving tragic action as a whole.<sup>35</sup> Objections can be raised to Williams's account; the key term, 'action', may not transpose so easily from drama to the complexities of social praxis. Yet if the left requires a tragic perspective that comprehends both the human cost of the prevailing order and the difficulty—the impossibility, perhaps, from where we stand—of resolving it, Williams's seems more adequate for its purposes than Bradley's, not least because it takes social equality as non-negotiable.

### *Temporalities*

The components of the perspective Clark proposes in 'For a Left with No Future'—a rhetoric, a tonality, an imagery, an argument, a temporality—comprise, respectively, three parts art, one part politics, one part philosophy. For this journal, the sources of an alternative perspective would be political-economic analysis—there is no avoiding the laws of motion of contemporary capitalism; philosophy—a self-critical rationalism and a balanced materialism; and political strategy—aiming to grasp the operations of the enemy, its strengths and weaknesses. Such a perspective would begin by re-admitting all that 'No Future' explicitly excluded from its view: the young generation, the Arab revolutions, the

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<sup>34</sup> *Modern Tragedy*, pp. 64, 80–1, 76–7.

<sup>35</sup> *Modern Tragedy*, pp. 208, 210, 218–9; and Williams, *Politics and Letters*, p. 63.



remaking of China, the recession-struck superpower, the world beyond the Eurozone or Anglophone left. To do so would be to recognize not a flat, homogeneous present but a range of uneven temporalities at work within the same chronological time: the PRC, still in the early decades of capitalist expansion; Arab republics, only now beginning to dismantle Soviet-era states; Brazil, eternal land of the future, pioneering a post-modern credit bubble in the tin-roofed *favelas*; the US, adjusting its engines mid-flight for another half-century of global hegemony, faced with a fractious population bereft of the American dream. Such a world requires a perspective that is internationalist, but also irreducibly pluralist: not one tonality, but many. Aristotle was right to recognize, however grudgingly, the place of comedy alongside tragedy, with its contrary values: multiplicity as well as tragic unity; coupling and procreation as well as death; what his *Poetics* called ‘the inferior people’, always so numerous, and their mockery of rulers, in place of pity and awe.

For all his insistence on present-centredness, Clark has little to say about our times. He is impatient that no more coherent left opposition has emerged, nearly four years into the Great Recession. But one thing Bernstein got right was that economic crisis does not automatically lead to the collapse of capitalism and an uprising from below. The Wall Street–Treasury–Federal Reserve strategy of multi-trillion-dollar bailouts and money-printing has shored up the indebted banking sector, so it can now lend money back to the indebted governments it borrowed it from. Massive intervention has staunched the global contraction at around 4 per cent, though China could deepen it further. The world economy has entered an era of uncertainty—further recession, crises, crashes, faltering recoveries—characteristic of a transitional phase. What underlying pressures are shaping its course?

About bourgeois society’s ending, Clark rightly notes, Marxism was notoriously wrong. The revolution of *Capital* was derailed in 1914. Engels had thought the German workers would rather turn their guns on their officers than on their comrades in the International; tragically, they did not. The ‘revolutions against *Capital*’ on the periphery of the world economy were accompanied by a historic expansion of the petty-bourgeois and white-collar middle classes at its core. By the 1970s—the neutralization of the 1974 Portuguese Revolution, largely at the hands of German social democracy, was a turning point—a ‘universal’ middle class seemed to offer perpetual support for bourgeois rule. But at more

or less the same moment, advancing industrialization was starting to produce the over-supply of manufacturing capacity and labour-power, and relative deficiency of demand, that would assume crisis proportions with the entry of the former Communist world into the global economy. Since the 1970s, median wages in the core have been stagnant; only successive credit bubbles have produced a wealth effect. The question now posed is of a long-term reversal, a half-century re-immiseration of the median layers, which has already advanced several steps in the course of the current crisis. This would bring not a return to early 20th-century conditions, but the emergence of new class configurations and social inequalities. The empire's seers have been asking whether representative democracy will be able to survive without a functionally articulated middle class.<sup>36</sup> This is not to underestimate capital's creative powers: its limits cannot have been reached when hundreds of millions of peasants remain outside the nets of the world market; ever-vaster credit bubbles may dominate the decades ahead.

In these conditions, to jettison the intellectual legacy of historical materialism would be no advance. Rather, it needs to be critically and historically updated and developed; its rationalism renewed, not scanted. Insights gleaned from dreamworlds and intuitions may be precious, but a politics led by them would be heading for disaster. The balance of power remains overwhelmingly with the ruling order. Obama's Homeland Security could shut down the 2011 occupations in the blink of an eye. But no one, Homeland Security included, thinks that the protests against the new impoverishment are over. Defeats and victories are in any case complex processes, as the Arab revolutions have shown. We contribute as best we can, in the conditions in which we find ourselves, and attempt to explain the reasons for our actions *an die Nachgeborenen*, to those who will follow. If Clark, meanwhile, is applying to Nietzsche for a revolutionary passport that will take him across the border into Bernsteinian moderation, the journey will be a long one; and many hands will be tugging at his coat, slowing his way.

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<sup>36</sup> Francis Fukuyama, 'The Future of History: Can Liberal Democracy Survive the Decline of the Middle Class?'; *Foreign Affairs*, Jan–Feb 2012.