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Anti-Bourgeois Theory

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Abstract

In his celebrated 2009 memoir *Returning to Reims*, the Parisian intellectual and theorist Didier Eribon travels home for the first time in thirty years following the death of his father. There he tries to account for the change in politics of his working class family over the period he has been away: from supporting the Communist Party to voting for the National Front. But Eribon also discusses the transition he himself has undergone as a result of having escaped his working class culture and environment through education, and how this has left him unsure whom it is he is actually writing *for*. He may be addressing the question of what it means to grow up poor and gay, however he is aware few working class people are ever likely to read his book.

At the same time, Eribon emphasizes that his non-conforming identity has left him with a sense of just how important it is to display a ‘lack of respect for the rules’ of bourgeois liberal humanist ‘decorum that reign in university circles’, and that insist ‘people follow established norms regarding “intellectual debate” when what is at stake clearly has to do with political struggle’. Together with his friend Édouard Louis and partner Geoffroy de Lagasnerie, Eribon wants to ‘rethink’ the antihumanist theoretical tradition of Foucault, Derrida, Cixous *et al.* to produce a theory ‘in which something is at stake’: a theory that speaks about ‘class, exploitation, violence, repression, domination, intersectionality’, and yet has the potential to generate the same kind of power and excitement as ‘a Kendrick Lamar concert’.

With ‘Anti-Bourgeois Theory’, I likewise want to reinvent what it means to theorise by showing a certain lack of respect for the rules of bourgeois decorum the university hardly ever questions. I want do so, however, by also breaking with those bourgeois liberal humanist conventions of intellectual debate that – for all his emphasis on rebelling ‘in and through’ the technologies of knowledge production – continue to govern the antihumanist theoretical tradition Eribon and his collaborators are associated with. Included in these conventions are culturally normative ideas of the human subject, the proprietorial author, the codex print book, critical reflection, linear thought, the long-form argument, self-expression, originality, creativity, fixity and copyright. I will argue that even the current landfill of theoretical literature on the posthuman and the

Anthropocene is merely a form of bourgeois liberal humanism that is padded with nonhuman stuffing – technologies, objects, animals, insects, plants, fungi, compost, microbes, stones, geological formations – to make it *appear* different. Can we not do better than this?

Keywords

Class, culture, environment, climate crisis, Anthropocene, liberalism, humanism, posthuman, inhuman

“I have no social class, marginalized as I am. The upper class considers me a weird monster, the middle class worries I might unsettle them, the lower class never comes to me.”

Clarice Lispector, *The Hour of the Star*

I. Class in Elitist Britain

During the summer of 2018, I attended an event to mark the publication in English of *Returning to Reims* by Didier Eribon (2018) and *History of Violence* by Édouard Louis (2018). In Eribon’s powerful memoir, the Parisian sociologist travels home for the first time in thirty years following the death of his father (Eribon, 2013: 33).¹ There he tries to account for the shift in politics of his working class family while he has been away: from supporting the Communist Party to voting for the National Front. *Returning to Reims* was a significant influence on Louis, inspiring him to write his bestselling first novel, *The End of Eddy*, which he dedicated to Eribon (Louis, 2017). Like the latter’s memoir, *History of Violence* and *The End of Eddy* both in their different ways tell the story of how the author, having grown up gay and poor in post-industrial northern France, was eventually able to escape his working class environment through study and education.

As is customary on these occasions, the authors read from their books and discussed their work and lives, followed by a Q&A session with the audience. During this latter part of the evening they spoke about the transition they had made from the social realm of the working class to that of the middle class, with its very different gestures, knowledges and manners of speech. Recognising they now had a foot in both camps,

each said the process of reinventing themselves had nonetheless left them feeling they truly belonged to neither. Arriving in Paris at the age of twenty, for instance, Eribon found it much easier to come out of the sexual closet and assert his homosexuality to his new cosmopolitan friends than to come out of the class closet.

Both authors also described how, as a consequence, they were unsure for whom they were actually writing. They may be addressing the question of what it means to grow up in a working class environment in *Returning to Reims* and *History of Violence*: the profound racism, sexism and homophobia they found there; the violent modes of domination and subjectivation; the social impoverishment; the lack of possibilities that are imaginable, to say nothing of those that are actually realisable. However, they were aware few people from that social class were ever likely to read their books, so can hardly say they were writing *for* them.

What really captured my attention, though, was the moment Eribon and Louis stressed that what they were trying to do with their writing was ‘reinvent theory’: to produce a theory in which ‘something is at stake’. (Together with Eribon’s partner Geoffroy de Lagasnerie, they have described this elsewhere as a theory that speaks about ‘class, exploitation, violence, repression, domination, intersectionality’ and yet has the potential to generate the excitement of ‘a Kendrick Lamar concert’) [de Lagasnerie and Louis, 2015; de Lagasnerie, 2018]. Eribon is of course the author of a well-known biography of the philosopher Michel Foucault. Nevertheless this statement struck me: partly because theory is one of the areas I work in; but mainly because it’s difficult to imagine many English literary writers of similar stature engaging with the kind of radical thought Foucault and his contemporaries are associated with, let alone expressing a desire to reinvent it. Since it undermines the idea of the self-identical human subject, that theoretical tradition is often described as antihumanist – or as posthumanist in some of its more recent manifestations. By contrast, English literary culture (and I’m saying *English* rather than *British* literary culture quite deliberately here) is predominantly humanist and liberal, seeing education in general, and the reading and writing of literature in particular, as a means of freeing the mind of a rational human individual whose identity is more or less fixed and unchanging.

One explanation given for this difference is that, historically, writers in England have been more closely associated with the ruling elite: with public schools, Oxbridge

colleges and the tradition of the gentleman as amateur scholar. It's an association that contrasts sharply with the cafes, streets and factory shop floors of the more political French *intellectual*. Suspicious as much of English culture is of radical and abstract ideas, epitomized by the emphasis in France on the universal values of freedom, justice and liberty since at least the revolution of 1879, 'the intellectual' is often viewed negatively: as someone who is conceited, egotistical and superior. To be treated positively as an intellectual in England it's best not to be *extremely* intellectual. So authors such as Mary Beard and Timothy Garton Ash are considered acceptable and taken seriously, as they can write clearly in 'plain English' and communicate with a wider public, even attain the holy grail of a popular readership. Theorists such as Catherine Malabou and Bruno Latour are not, as, ironically enough, England's elitist culture regards their philosophy and use of language as being too complex for most 'real' people to understand.

This constant policing of the parameters of acceptability explains why the literary novel in England today is so unashamedly humanist. Scottish journalist Stuart Kelly even goes so far as to compare it unfavourably to the 'posthuman novel' that is the TV series *Westworld*. (I'm drawing on newspaper commentary here to show mainstream culture in the U.K. is not *entirely* dominated by uncritical liberal humanist thought.) For Kelly, the modern literary novel and its understanding of life is 'outdated', still constrained by its 18th century origins. Nowhere is this more evident than with its 'unquestioned foundations', based as they are on the idea of the autonomous human subject as protagonist, someone who has an 'intact self', 'cogent agency', 'memories they trust – and can trust – and desires they understand' (Kelly, 2016).

In *Whatever Happened To Modernism?*, Gabriel Josipovici characterises the novel of the Julian Barnes/Martin Amis generation as the product of a non-modernistic literary culture that is determinedly realist, preferring sentimental humanism and readability to the kind of ground-breaking experimentation he associates with previous eras of the European novel (Josipovici, 2001). That may be, but the cure for English culture's addiction to the world-view of prosperous, middle-class white men – or fear of revolution, the underclass and the other, depending on how you look at it – is not simply *more modernism*. As Isabel Waidner emphasizes in their anthology of innovative writing (Waidner's preferred pronouns are they/them/their), even experimental literature in England is predominantly white, bourgeois and patriarchal, very much to

the exclusion of (non-Oxbridge) BAME, LGBTQIAP+, working class and other nonconforming identities (Waidner, 2018). Nor is this particularly surprising. After all, 7% of the UK population attend private school (that's over 600,000 pupils, double the number of the 1970s), and approximately 1% graduate from Oxford or Cambridge. Yet it was reported in 2018 that 'of the poets and novelists included in *Who's Who* ... half went to private schools; and 44% went to Oxbridge.'² One result of this systematic bias is that non-white British authors published fewer than 100 titles in 2016 (Shaffi, 2016).

I began by referring to social realms that contain a lack of possibilities that are even imaginable, let alone achievable. It's worth noting in this context that, of the 9,115 children's books published in the U.K. in 2017, only 4% featured BAME characters. Just 1% had a BAME lead character, 96% having no BAME characters whatsoever (Centre for Literacy in Primary Education, 2018). Nor is it only literary culture that's affected by what Eribon describes as the 'terrible injustice' of the 'unequal distribution of prospects and possibilities' (52). Comparable statistics can be provided for the arts, drama, music, business, politics, the law, medicine, the military, the civil service, the media and journalism. 54% of the U.K.'s 'top' news journalists were educated in private schools, for example; while of the 81% who attended university, more than a half were educated at Oxbridge, with a third attending just one institution, Oxford (Sutton Trust, 2006).³ Moreover, 94% of all journalists in the U.K. are white and as few as 0.2% black (Thurman, 2016).

In a modest bid to counter such inequality of opportunity and stalling of social mobility, the BBC Radio 6 presenter Cerys Matthews has said she wants to program less music on her show by artists who've been given a leg up by virtue of attending private school, and more music by people from all walks of life, including women and those with a working-class upbringing (Paine, 2018). Which makes me wonder: if *we* do want to foster culture in England that's *not* so liberal and humanist, if we do want to develop an understanding of life, agency and subjectivity that *is* more complex – or at least not quite so *outdated and elitist* – should we adopt a similar stance? Instead of setting up prizes like the Goldsmiths in order to reward literature that is *daring* and *inventive*, should we publish (and perhaps read and cite) fewer texts by people who went to private school or Oxbridge, and more by writers from other backgrounds? In

keeping with the ‘Abolish Eton’ motion passed at September’s Labour party conference, which demands the introduction of legislation to ensure limits are placed on the number of private school pupils entering Oxbridge, should we even have quotas? ⁴

II. Bourgeois Theory

If one result of English culture’s systematic bias is an inequality of opportunity, another is its long history of anti-intellectualism. As Alex Renton remarks in *Stiff Upper Lip*, by the close of the nineteenth century most public schools were ‘determinedly anti-intellectual, for reasons chiefly of snobbery – gentlemen should not be taught the skills of tradesmen’ (Renton, 2017: 131). Renton goes on to note how these institutions largely taught classics. In 1861 the Clarendon Commission quizzed Oxford undergraduates who had gone to the nine great schools (Eton, Charterhouse, Harrow, Rugby, Shrewsbury, Westminster, Winchester, St Paul’s and Merchant Taylors), and discovered they ‘knew very little of geography, history or science, and had “great deficiencies” even in reading and spelling in English’ (132). It’s a state of affairs far from confined to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. ‘Education at the public schools – and many of the grammar schools that aped them – remained primarily a matter of learning Latin and Greek until the 1950s’, Renton observes. ‘It was still important in getting scholarships until the 1980s’ (27). (Hence the enthusiasm of Eton College King’s Scholar Boris Johnson for quoting Roman and Greek historians – although doing so also acts as a marker of his membership of the ruling elite, of course.) Renton makes a direct connection between the anti-intellectualism of these establishments and that of English public life more generally. So, too, does the author and publisher Leonard Woolf. In his autobiography, published in 1960, Woolf sums up the situation as follows:

England for considerably more than one hundred years has been the most philistine of all European countries. This, I suspect, is largely due to the public schools, which during the period gradually established a dominating influence on public life and imposed upon the whole nation their prejudices, habits, morals, and standards of value. The public school was

the nursery of British philistinism. To work, to use the mind, to be a ‘swot’, as it was called in my school days, was to become an untouchable (except for the purposes of bullying) in the hierarchy of the public-school caste system... Use of the mind, intellectual curiosity, mental originality, interest in ‘work’, enjoyment of books or anything connected with the arts, all such things, if detected, were violently condemned and persecuted ... this attitude was not confined to the boys; it was shared and encouraged by nearly all the masters. The intellectual was, and he [sic] still is today, disliked and despised (Woolf, 1960: 96-97).

Instead of developing the intellect, the emphasis was very much on the body and sports. Football, cricket and rugby were all used ‘to define physical and psychological character’, as well as to exhaust and otherwise ‘distract boys from exploring homosexual relationships’, writes Robert Verkaik in *Posh Boys*. It’s an ethos the legacy of which survives to this day. In ‘2012 and 2016 half the British Olympic teams came from private schools’, he notes (Verkaik, 2018: 36).

I realise making such arguments can come across as strident, blunt or even rude. However, I am guided here by another refreshing aspect of the approach of Eribon and Louis to reinventing theory: their willingness to be disrespectful. Eribon encapsulates it best in *Returning to Reims*. Praising the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre for having insulted the liberal sociologist Raymond Aron in 1968 for being a ‘defender of the bourgeois establishment’, Eribon stresses the importance of ‘daring to break with the conventions of polite academic “discussion” – which always works in favour of “orthodoxy”, and its reliance on “common sense” and what seems “self-evident” in its opposition to heterodoxy and critical thought’ (101).

In drawing attention to the fact that so many writers in the U.K. attended private schools and Oxbridge, I’m therefore not just making a crude and somewhat ill-mannered point about class inequality, a point that’s already quite familiar by now in any case. I’m also trying to explain why so much of the culture in England remains doggedly liberal humanist, middle class and anti-intellectual. At the same time, I believe theory can help us to understand this situation and to think it through. For example, is the idea we should avoid difficult ‘jargon’ in order to communicate better with so-called ordinary people *really* so self-evident? Is it not rather an instance of what,

following Antonio Gramsci, we can call society's manufactured 'common sense', the ideology used to maintain the status quo – and more and more today to eliminate reasonable dissent? Is this one of the reasons we're experiencing an ongoing backlash against theory, not just in journalism and the media but in academia too? The reason theory is important and shouldn't be dismissed, no matter how abstract its ideas and how challenging its rhetorical style (and no matter how badly some 'star' theorists have behaved on a professional or personal level), is because it enables us to understand our modes of being and doing in the world, and conceive of them differently and so change them.

That said, it's not my intention to suggest we should all simply read more French theory: that we'd all now be posthumanists in England if only Napoleon had won at Waterloo. Like Eribon and Louis, I want to promote *heterodoxy* and *critical thought*, and I want to do so to the extent of daring to break even with the conventions of theory and what *it's* currently considered to be. For this tradition of critical thought has its own blindspots that lead it to accept certain assumptions as common sense as well.

Many of these blindspots relate to how neoliberalism and its technical systems (e.g. social media such as Twitter and YouTube, professional social networks such as Academia.edu, online research portals and disciplinary repositories such as Elsevier's PURE and SSRN) *have* found ways to incorporate those theorists McKenzie Wark calls 'general intellects' in her book of the same name, and who are today typically employed as academics as opposed to the public intellectuals of the past such as Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir (Wark, 2017a). My point is not that contemporary intellectual labourers are merely constituent elements of the general intellect or 'social brain', whose only purpose 'is to keep commodification going and profits flowing'. I don't deny such *commercially-oriented* theorists are, as Wark says, also trying to 'find ways to write and think and even act in and against this very system of commodification that has now found ways to incorporate even them'. My argument is that their efforts to do so contain a number of blindspots – or, perhaps better, datum points – which limit their 'ability to grasp the general situation'.⁵ This is especially the case as far as the bourgeois liberal humanist categories and frameworks with which they continue to operate are concerned. For them, too, datum points such as the unique human author, originality, creativity, immutability and copyright are *in practice* held as self-evidently

providing the basis for well-mannered debate. Far from theory enabling individuals and groups to think differently about what they are and what they do, the taking-for-granted of such categories and frameworks leads many intellectual labourers today to likewise work *in favour of orthodoxy* and the perpetuation of the established order. I want to stress that I am adopting Wark's own methodology here: that of reading such texts 'against themselves, bringing some of the same critical tactics to bear' on the writings of these general intellects, including Wark herself, in order 'to find their limitations.' After all, does Wark not acknowledge that the general intellects she focuses on in her book 'remain rather bourgeois thinkers' in some respects?

This is why I'm interested in experimenting with ways of being a theorist I'm aware a lot of people might find counter-intuitive and difficult to grasp – and perhaps even to take seriously. Through my involvement with projects such as Pirate Philosophy (see Hall, 2009) and the [Radical Open Access Collective](#), I'm exploring what forms our work can take if, in its performance, it doesn't simply go along with the pressure the neoliberal university places on us to deliver more ever quicker, and the accompanying spread of managerial technologies of measurement and commodification such as rankings, citation indexes and other metrics.⁶ But I'm also exploring what forms our work can take if it likewise avoids falling into the trap of trying to counter the politics of the accelerated academy and its technological systems by resorting to a form of liberal humanism by default – evident in demands to “slow down” or go back even, or the 'assertion of the intrinsic value/unquantifiable character of scholarship'.⁷

This last part is undoubtedly tricky. There's no *easy* way for us to avoid adhering to liberal humanist ways of being and doing as authors and academics – no matter how posthuman the content of our theory may be. The reason is because of the strong link that exists between our copyright laws and the production of liberal humanist subjectivity and agency. (As Mark Rose [1993: 142]) shows: 'Copyright is not a transcendent moral idea, but a specifically modern formation [of property rights] produced by printing technology, marketplace economics and the classical liberal culture of possessive individualism'.) This link in turn means there are no non-liberal and non-humanist alternatives to publishing and sharing our work on a copyright all rights reserved basis that *are* legally and professionally recognised. And this is the case even with regard to those instances in which a writer identifies as having a fluid, non-

binary identity that is neither male nor female, and adopts personal pronouns such as they/them/their.

In large part this lack of alternatives is due to the fact that, although the U.K., U.S. and Europe have different requirements for copyrightability, in all of them copyright is dependent on the figure of the singular human author. From this standpoint, our current copyright laws have a threefold function: 1) They protect the author's economic and moral rights, as is generally understood. Yet – and this is something that is less frequently appreciated – they also participate in: 2) creating and shaping the author as a *sovereign, liberal, human subject*; and 3) making it difficult for the author to adopt other forms – forms that *are* capable of acknowledging and *assuming* (rather than ignoring or repressing) the implications of texts coming into being through the various multiple and messy *intra*-actions of an extended assemblage of both humans and nonhumans.

Do the restrictions imposed on us by our laws of intellectual property explain why most radical philosophers today work in a surprisingly conservative (i.e. liberal) fashion? Even political theorists who are known for engaging directly with *new* forms of subjectivity and social relations, such as those associated with the horizontalist, self-organizing, leaderless mobilizations of the Occupy, Black Lives Matter, Dakota Standing Rock Sioux, *gilets jaunes* and Extinction Rebellion protests are no exception. I'm thinking here of Alain Badiou, Judith Butler, Jodi Dean, David Graeber, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Chantal Mouffe, Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, Slavoj Žižek... the list is a long one. By working in a conservative fashion I mean texts such as *Assembly*, *Podemos* and *Crowds and Party* are all written as if they were the absolutely authentic creative expressions of the minds of unique sovereign individuals who are quite entitled to claim the moral and legal right to be identified as their singular *human* authors (Hardt and Negri, 2017; Errejón and Mouffe, 2016; Dean, 2016). They are then made available on this basis for economic exploitation by a publisher as commodities, in the form of books that can be bought and sold according to a system of property exchange that is governed by the logic of capital and its competitive, individualistic ethos.

The situation is not helped by the fact that, when radical thinkers *do* turn their attention to how scholars operate nowadays, their concern is predominantly with the neoliberal

subjects we are supposedly transitioning *into* with the help of digital information technologies. They are not quite so concerned about the particular configurations of subjectivity and the related information technologies (i.e., commercially copyrighted, printed-paper codex books and journal articles) we are changing *from*. The point I'm making here is that it's of fundamental importance to pay close critical attention to the latter, too. This is because in practice it has typically been a *liberal, humanist* subjectivity. When it comes to the *actual creation, publication and communication of research especially*, this model of subjectivity has occupied a position of hegemonic dominance within the profession – and, in many respects, still does. The reason is simple: liberal humanism is built into the very system of the university.⁸ As Christopher Newfield explains with regard to higher education in the U.S., 'a consensus version of university humanism has long consisted of "five interwoven concepts: the free self, experiential knowledge, self-development, autonomous agency, and enjoyment."' What's more, 'university philosophers and administrators did not simply espouse these concepts as ideals but institutionalised them' (Newfield, 2016: 329; quoting Newfield, 2003: 56).⁹

If liberalism, in a nutshell, is concerned with the human individual's right to life, liberty and property, together with the political conditions and institutions that secure these rights (e.g., constitutional government and the rule of law), what's *really* being condemned in many accounts of the corporatisation of the academy is the manner in which a version of liberalism is being intensified and transformed into another, specifically *neoliberal* interpretation of what, among those rights, are deemed most important: the unassailable rights of property and extension of the values of the free market and its metrics to all areas of life.¹⁰ Yet, as I say, the focus of critical attention has too often been on the *process of change*, and especially on *what we are changing to* (capitalist entrepreneurs, including entrepreneurs of our own selves and lives), and not on *what we are changing from*. What is a predominantly liberal, humanist mode of academic personhood is, in effect, held up as some kind of solution, or at least preferable alternative, to the shift toward the constantly self-disciplining, self-governing, self-exploitative subject of neoliberalism *by default*. (It's an attitude on the part of internet scholars that's encapsulated perfectly, albeit unwittingly, by a remark of Shoshana Zuboff's [in Naughton and Zuboff, 2019: 21] on surveillance capitalism: 'Once I was mine. Now I am theirs'.)

In other words, a form of liberal humanism, along with the attendant concepts of the self-identical autonomous subject, the individual proprietorial author, linear thought, the long-form argument, the single-voiced narrative, the fixed and finished object, originality, creativity and copyright, acts as something of a datum point in a lot of established theory. The writing of peer-reviewed, sequentially-ordered, bound and printed-paper codex books and journal articles is a professional practice that is perceived as transcending the age in which it is employed, which means continuity in these matters tends to be valued more highly than transformation, let alone revolution. It's a manner of operating that is taken for granted as fixed and enduring (although in actual fact the activities and concepts it involves are constantly changing and being renegotiated over time), and that constitutes a pre-programmed mode of performance that many academics adopt more or less passively in order to construct theoretical frameworks and draw conclusions. Hence the lack of care shown by even the most politically radical of thinkers for the materiality of their own ways of working and thinking.

It can even be argued that the failure to denaturalize and destabilize what, for the sake of economy, I have referred to as the liberal humanist model of subjectivity – *to confront and rigorously think through* liberal concepts of human rights, freedom and property as they apply to us *as theorists* (although we understand *philosophically* that critical theory's questioning of liberal thought must involve questioning these concepts too) – is one of the reasons it's been relatively easy for the commodifying, measuring, monitoring logic of *neoliberalism* to reinterpret *our* ways of being too. With the wider historical tradition of liberalism having provided the discursive framework of modern capitalism, neoliberal logic is not necessarily always going *against* the liberal rights and values that many of us continue to adhere to in practice. It is rather, as I say, that under this logic aspects of our liberal ways of being and doing have been intensified and transformed into another, specifically *neoliberal* interpretation of what, among those rights and values, are deemed to be most significant.

It's a set of circumstances that has left many of us in a state of melancholy, of unresolved mourning, for what we have lost: unresolved, because the liberal manner of performing as academics and theorists is not fully acknowledged as something we *are* attached to, so it's not something we *can* work through when we do experience it

as a loss. In turn this unresolved mourning can be said to have led to a state of political disorientation and paralysis. Since it's a loss we find difficult to fully acknowledge, we are unable to achieve an adequate understanding of how the process of *corporatising the academy* can be productively reinflected, or of what kind of institution we should be endeavouring to replace the neoliberal university with.

Still, the problem is not *just* that the political rationalities of neoliberalism find it relatively easy to shape and control any efforts to counter the becoming business of Higher Education by acting as liberals (even radical ones) and calling for a return to the rights and values of the public university (i.e., of academic freedom and trust; of fundamental as opposed to applied research; of individualised rather than mass teaching; and of the relatively autonomous institution, the primary function of which is to help build and maintain our democracies through the education of their citizens, and so contribute to public value in that fashion rather than through the generation of financial profit). It's also that such calls have a tendency to moralistically discipline and reproach, if not indeed close down, attempts to question their own, often ahistorical, liberal premises, and to search for different means of being and doing as scholars that are *neither* simply liberal *nor* neoliberal. We could go so far as to say that, far from part of the solution, calls for a restoration of the importance of the liberal values of the public university and the traditional humanities, although they may have their hearts in the right place, are actually part of the problem.

III. The Obsolescence of Bourgeois Theory in the Anthropocene

Making critical remarks about erstwhile radical political theorists continuing to claim the legal right to be identified as the proprietorial authors of their books is often dismissed as a vulgar thing to do. Drawing attention to the fact such theorists are making their work available for commercial exploitation on this basis, according to a system of commodity exchange that is governed by the logic of capital, is considered something of a cheap shot. And there may be some truth in this. Still, do such dismissals not risk serving as an alibi for the widespread failure to take on board the implications of *not* thinking through liberal concepts of human rights, freedom and

property as they apply to us *as theorists*? Liberalism may mean we are free to make rational choices about almost every aspect of life. But it also means we are free to choose *only within certain limits*. What we are certainly *not* legally and professionally free to choose is an authorial identity that operates in a manner consistent with a more *inhuman* form of theory. I'm referring to an identity which functions in terms neither of the human nor the nonhuman. Instead, inhuman theory as I see it involves a form of communicating that endeavours to take *account of* and *assume* (rather than ignore or otherwise deny) an intra-active relation with the supposedly nonhuman, be it animal, plant life, technology, the planet or the cosmos.

Why inhuman? And why am I now switching to this term, rather than continuing with the posthuman?

My use of 'inhuman' relates to ways the human can't simply be opposed to the nonhuman. There is no such thing *as* the nonhuman – nor the human for that matter. Not in any simple sense. Each is born out of its relation to the other. The nonhuman is therefore already *in* the human – in(the)human – and vice versa. Based as it is on the performance of a non-unified, non-essentialist, polymorphous subject (rather than the sovereign, self-identical individual of both liberal and neoliberal humanism), it follows that inhuman theory can also be understood as an instance of the *inhumanities*. For if the inhuman equals the human intertwined with the nonhuman, then a humanities with this intra-active inhuman figure at their heart must become the inhumanities.

Admittedly, such an understanding of subjectivity and authorship could be gathered under the sign of the posthuman. Approaches to the posthuman, however, have been dominated by the 'posthuman humanities' of Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti, Cary Wolfe and others.¹¹ Like the radical political philosophers I referred to earlier, these theorists of the posthuman continue to work in quite conventional, liberal humanist ways. My proposal is that the above transformative conception of the human and the humanities can therefore on occasion be more productively articulated in terms of the inhuman. The idea is that such a rhetorical and conceptual shift might enable us to better challenge the humanist subject that serves as a datum point to so many theories – not just of the humanities, but of the posthuman and posthumanities too. Building on the argument McKenzie Wark develops in 'On the Obsolescence of the Bourgeois Novel in the Anthropocene', could we go so far as to characterise the apparent inability

of radical theory to operate according to a more *inhuman* mode of philosophy as a sign of *its* obsolescence?¹²

Wark's text on the bourgeois novel was published on the blog of Verso Books as an addition to the collection of critical appreciations she provides in *General Intellects: Twenty-One Thinkers for the Twenty-First* (Wark, 2017a). While the chapters in that book offer succinct analyses of individual thinkers such as Isabelle Stengers, Hiroki Azuma and Paul B. Prédiado, Wark's focus in 'On the Obsolescence of the Bourgeois Novel' is *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* by the writer and novelist Amitav Ghosh (2016). In this non-fiction book, Ghosh contemplates the environmental crisis and global warming from a literary perspective that has its origins in the Indian subcontinent. As far as he is concerned, climate change is not just about ecological problems, or even capitalism and its carbon-based political economy. Climate change is about empire, it's about imperialism; above all it's about *climate justice*. Providing an account of Ghosh's influential lectures on *the great derangement* thus enables Wark to conceive of a *geo-humanities* project that brings earth science into contact with 'post-colonial voices that have pushed back against imperial mappings of the world.' In doing so she acknowledges that approaching climate change in terms of social justice brings with it a conceptual challenge. 'One has to avoid excluding the diversity of human voices,' Wark writes, quoting from *The Great Derangement*, 'and yet at the same time avoid excluding the non-human world and rendering it a mere background, or "environment."' One has to voice "the urgent proximity of nonhuman presences" (Wark, 2017b; quoting Ghosh, 2016: 5).

Ghosh approaches this conceptual challenge as a literary problem. The difficulty, however, is that climate change (or climate crisis or climate breakdown as many are now terming it in attempt to describe the environmental emergency we are now facing more accurately) goes far beyond what can be expressed in the form of the bourgeois novel. The issue is summed up for Wark by the fact that 'fiction that takes climate change seriously is not taken seriously as fiction'. Hence some of the best responses to the Anthropocene have for her been provided by science-fiction. Hence, too, Ghosh's concern that we are now 'entering into a *great derangement*'. Wark describes this as 'a time when art and literature concealed rather than articulated the nature of the times and the time of nature.' In place of dealing with the Anthropocene, novels

become choked with what, following Franco Moretti, can be thought of as ‘filler, the everyday life of bourgeois society, its objects, decors, styles and habits’ (Wark, 2013).

The reason the bourgeois novel is obsolete, then, is because it has not ‘adapted to *new probabilities*.’ Instead, Wark characterises the bourgeois novel as ‘a genre of fantasy fiction smeared with naturalistic details – filler – to make it appear otherwise. It excludes the totality so that bourgeois subjects can keep prattling on about their precious “inner lives.”’ Yet, as we’ve seen, critical theory has not adapted in the Anthropocene either. In fact, to include it seriously in the argument Wark makes about literature and art only serves to place further emphasis on the idea that we are arriving at ‘a *great derangement*’, a period when no element remains in its original place. For ours is a time when established theory too can be said to obscure rather than express the changing nature of the times and the time of nature. As with the bourgeois novel, it’s a derangement that works through formal limitations. In the case of theory, these limitations involve the named individualistic author, the immutable object, intellectual property and so forth. As with the modern novel, the screening out of this scaffolding ‘continues to be essential’ to the functioning of what we might now rather teasingly refer to as *bourgeois theory* (Wark, 2017b; quoting Ghosh, 2016: 23). To further paraphrase Ghosh by way of Wark, here then is the great irony of theory in the Anthropocene: ‘the very gestures with which it conjures up’ nonhuman actors, objects and elements ‘are actually a concealment’ of them (Wark, 2017b; quoting Ghosh, 2016: 23).

The performance of serious theory today is thus as formally limited to bourgeois liberal humanism as the novel. This means it’s extremely difficult, if not impossible, for even the most radical of political theories to do anything *other* than exclude the diversity of human and nonhuman presences. To sample and remix Wark’s text on the novel in the Anthropocene in order to further undercut notions of the author as self-identical human individual: anything that would actually impact on the concealment of theory’s established scaffolding, how it’s created, published and disseminated, is regarded as not proper, eccentric, odd, and risks banishment. ‘But from what? Polite bourgeois society?’ The for-profit world of Verso books and Routledge journals where *proper* theory is to be found?¹³

In this way theory eliminates the ‘improbable’ – including non-humanist, non-liberal modes of being and doing – ‘from serious consideration’. We could perhaps cite as examples designed to provoke further speculation the fact that an orang-utan in Argentina called Sandra has been declared by the courts there to be a ‘nonhuman person’ with legal rights; that the Whanganui river in New Zealand has been given the same rights *as a human person*; and that the Amazon has recently been declared a ‘subject of rights’ by Colombia’s supreme court in a bid to protect it from further deforestation (Chapel, 2014; Roy, 2017; Margil, 2018). If nonhuman things *can* now have rights and be the party of interest in administrative proceedings – just as they have at various times and places in the past¹⁴ – can we envisage reaching a point in the future where a work of critical theory can be legally and professionally recognised as having been co-authored by an ape, a river, a forest, an ecosystem, even by nature in general? If so, what would the consequences be for our notions of the author, creativity and copyright?¹⁵ Does even asking such improbable questions not involve us in imposing legal and professional strictures that are designed for humans *onto nature*? Certainly, from the perspective of bourgeois theory, that which is outside its inherited frame in this respect can only appear as ‘strange’, ‘weird’, ‘freaky’. Any such ‘strangeness’ emanating from an actual engagement with the implications of the Anthropocene can thus be kept in the ‘background’, the unmarked environment in which theory takes place, or moved into it. As is the case with the bourgeois novel, such theory – with rare exceptions – ‘draws a sharp distinction between the human and the nonhuman’, not to mention the ‘collective and collaborative’. Here, too, the actions of individual human agents are treated as ‘discontinuous with other agents’, elements and energies (including ‘the masses, peoples, movements’), even though “the earth of the Anthropocene is precisely a world of insistent, inescapable continuities...” (Wark, 2017b; quoting Ghosh, 2016: 62).

We can therefore see that bourgeois theory clearly ‘isn’t working’. The nonhuman, climate breakdown, the Anthropocene in general, all exceed what the form of *proper* theory can currently express. Like the novel, it has not adapted to the new reality ushered in by the Anthropocene, including all those laws and legal decisions that are starting to pile up around the question of the rights of nature. Instead, theory ‘imposes itself on a nature it cannot really perceive or value’. Just as ‘serious fiction, like bourgeois culture, now seems rather unserious, indeed frivolous’, so too does *serious*

theory. The nonhuman may be what a lot of contemporary critical theory studies and writes about, but it cannot take seriously the implications of the nonhuman *for theory*. As a result, the current landfill of theoretical literature on the Anthropocene is merely a form of bourgeois liberal humanism *smear*ed with nonhuman *filler* – objects, materials, technologies, animals, insects, plants, fungi, compost, microbes, stones, geological formations – *to make it appear otherwise*.

IV. Weird, Unsettling Monsters

To be fair, the situation I've described creates problems for my *own* ways of being a theorist, too. After all, if what I'm doing is placing a question mark against both our neoliberal *and* liberal humanist models of subjectivity, it'd be naïve to expect there's going to be a large, pre-existing audience out there I can appeal to. (Much like Eribon and Louis, then, I'm not sure whom it is I'm writing for here.) It could even be said that, in denaturalising and destabilising notions of the virtuoso human author, creativity and copyright, my work is designed to *challenge* many of the common-sense values and practices that could otherwise be used to gather an audience around it. Consequently, riffing on Gilles Deleuze's (1997) concept of 'missing people' and Derrida's (2005) 'democracy to come', I sometimes think of the potential readership for my work in terms of a *community to come*, even a *missing community*.

This is another reason I'm interested in experimenting with ways of being a theorist that a lot of people may find difficult to understand. It's about doing something that is indeed strange, weird, awkward, confusing, surprising; something that's not so easy to approach unconsciously, in a default setting, as if it's already known and understood in advance. I'm certainly not interested in making myself appear more *human* in my work. I *don't* want to think these issues through the lens of memoir in the manner Eribon and Louis do. For me, the biographical human subject is more of a symptom than a cure. So I provide very little in the way of autobiographical information as a means of peaking people's interest and holding their attention: next to nothing about my life, background, class, sexuality, personal vices or virtues. I don't use either words or pictures to share what it feels like to be me or tell the story of the struggles I've overcome to get where I am, and how that process has *changed* me. Nor do I create

opportunities to form interpersonal relationships with me by using Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter et al. In fact, I try to avoid anything that might have the effect of obviously *humanizing* me.

Since it's clearly leading me to break many of the rules about how to attract a 21st century audience, I realize this risks coming across as my being wilfully difficult, if not self-defeating. (And all the more so in an era of intersectionality, when people are conceived as being the sum total of their class, race, gender and other identities. It is an era when, as a number of commentators have pointed out, individuals 'not only bear the entire history of these identities; they "own" them. A person who is not defined by them cannot tell the world what it is like to be a person who is' [Menand, 2018]. A backstory can be useful in such circumstances in making one appear more authentic.) But if I'm interested in transforming the dominant discourse network and its manufactured common sense about how (posthuman) knowledges are to be created, published and circulated today, then it's a risk I have to take.

Having said that, if we want to avoid falling passive victim to ways of acting already established in advance, we need to be careful not to merely substitute one set of rules for another: those associated with the production of long-form books of antihumanist or posthumanist theory, say. It's for this reason that my work does not necessarily adhere to predefined ideas concerning what forms a theoretical text can take¹⁶. As I say, I'm experimenting with new ways of being a theorist that are neither simply neoliberal *nor* liberal humanist; and I'm doing so because, rather than endeavouring to speak *on behalf of* a pre-existing community or otherwise represent them (as we saw Eribon and Louis trying to do with the working class), it seems to me we have to actively invent the context, the culture, in which such a missing community – replete with new notions of the subject, agency, the human and so on – can emerge. What's more, we have to do so without any assurances or certainty on our part that this will actually happen. We know from Derrida that the future is monstrous. "A future that would not be monstrous would not be a future" (Derrida in Weber, 1995: 386-7). As theorists, we need to open ourselves to a future in which we *do not* simply adhere to the proper, accepted systems for creating, disseminating and storing our work, replete with their pre-programmed ideas regarding the singular human author, originality and copyright. Rather, we need to display what Eribon describes as a "lack of respect" for

those rules of bourgeois liberal humanist decorum that insist “people follow established norms regarding ‘intellectual debate’ when what is at stake clearly has to do with a political struggle” (161). In short, we need to be weird, unsettling monsters.

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Notes

- ¹ Unless indicated otherwise, all further references in the text are to this book – the U.S. version, which I bought shortly after it came out in 2013.
- ² See Solomon (2018), referring to research undertaken by Aaron Reeves and Sam Friedman (2017).
- ³ Related figures have recently been provided for important broadcasters and editors in news media ('43% having been privately educated and 36% graduating from Oxbridge') and newspaper columnists (44% attending either Oxford or Cambridge, with 44% also attending independent school, with a third coming through the 'independent school to Oxbridge "pipeline" alone') – see The Sutton Trust (2019). It is also worth noting that I use the term 'private school' to refer to any secondary school that is fee-paying. They are private in the sense anyone can open one. This distinguishes them from state schools, which are subject to different rules and regulations. As it is used here, 'private school' thus encompasses those fee-paying institutions known as 'public schools' – public because they were established by statute and acknowledged in law. Strictly speaking, however, only those 'leading' private secondary schools that are members of the self-selecting Headmasters and Headmistresses Conference are 'public schools'.
- ⁴ After the 2011 jury for the Man Booker prize stated that they were going to privilege writing that was 'readable', the Goldsmith's Prize was established in 2013 – with Josipovici as one of the judges - to explicitly encourage experiments designed to open 'up new possibilities for the novel form.'
- ⁵ The word 'datum' means a proposition that is assumed, given or taken for granted, upon which a theoretical framework can be constructed or a conclusion drawn as a result of reasoning or calculation. In engineering the datum point is the place from which measurements are taken. The datum point itself, however, is not checked or questioned. As the position from which measurements are made it is precisely *a given*. See Hall, 2016: 47.
- ⁶ Pirate Philosophy 1.0 and 2.0 investigates some of the implications of so-called internet piracy for the humanities, particularly the latter's ideas of authorship, content creation and copyright. The project explores such ideas philosophically and legally through the creation of an actual 'pirate' text using peer-to-peer BitTorrent networks.
- The Radical Open Access Collective is a community of non-profit presses, journals and other projects. Formed in 2015, and now consisting of over 60 members, the collective seeks to build a progressive alternative ecosystem for open publishing in the humanities and social sciences, based on experimenting with a diversity of non-profit, independent and scholar-led approaches. For more details about these and other projects, see my Media Gifts: <http://garyhall.squarespace.com/about/>.
- ⁷ See the Post-H(uman) Index? Politics, Metrics, and Agency in the Accelerated Academy conference, held at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, November 30, 2018, where I first

presented a version of this material. <https://cpgjcam.net/2018/08/30/cfp-post-human-index-politics-metrics-and-agency-in-the-accelerated-academy/>

- ⁸ Duncan Bell is just one of many political theorists to have developed an argument to this effect. In ‘What is Liberalism?’, a history of how liberalism has been variously understood as a category of political analysis, he insists: “‘Thomas Nagel is surely right to proclaim that “... most political argument in the Western world now goes on between different branches of [the liberal] tradition.” ... Most inhabitants of the West are now conscripts of liberalism: the scope of the tradition has expanded to encompass the vast majority of political positions regarded as legitimate ... and most who identify themselves as socialists, conservatives, social democrats, republicans, greens, feminists, and anarchists have been ideologically incorporated, whether they like it or not’ (Bell, 2014: 689; citing Nagel, 2003: 62). Of course, Bell was writing in 2014: so before the 2016 presidential election victory of Trump in the U.S., but not before the rise to prominence of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey, Viktor Orbán in Hungary and Jarosław Kaczyński in Poland.
- ⁹ Newfield emphasises that ‘humanism has always seen the liberal arts and sciences as central to higher education. They are “liberal” because all of their disciplines, from linguistics to history to sociology to biology to astrophysics, focus simultaneously on subject expertise and the formation of the self that is acquiring the expertise. Vocational training cannot be separated from self-development. The training is only as good as the self that grasps it. Every liberal arts and sciences course in a university is in principle about intellectual development and self-development at the same time’ (Newfield, 2016: 328-329).
- ¹⁰ This is coupled to an emphasis on privatisation (e.g., of the public realm by for-profit businesses), on deregulation, on low taxes for the rich and for private interests, on a weakening of the power of the trade unions, and on a reduction to a minimum of the role played by the state, the public sector and welfare, not least with regard to health, education, employment, food and housing.
- ¹¹ For more on the posthuman humanities, see Braidotti, 2013: 157; and ‘What are the Digital Posthumanities?’ in Hall, 2016. For an earlier rehearsal of some of these ideas concerning the inhuman, see Hall, 2017.
- ¹² I should mention that my understanding of the inhuman is somewhat different from that of McKenzie Wark. For Wark, the *inhuman* is ‘an apparatus of labor and technology. Indeed, the inhuman is the zone where the partition between the human and nonhuman is negotiated, at the expense of rendering the inhuman labor in between invisible. There is no such thing as a “history of ideas,” only of the labor and technics of producing them’ (Wark, 2017b: <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3356-on-the-obsolescence-of-the-bourgeois-novel-in-the-anthropocene>).
- ¹³ Like *General Intellects*, Wark’s 2015 book on the Anthropocene, *Molecular Red*, was published by Verso.
- ¹⁴ See the Tree That Owns Itself, the original of which is thought to date back to somewhere between the mid-16th and late 18th century: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tree_That_Owns_Itself. My thanks to Jurij Smrke for this reference.
- ¹⁵ For a variation on such questions, see those raised by the artist Marija Bozinovska Jones in ‘Treebour’ (see <https://we-make-money-not-art.com/treebour-do-we-pay-trees-fairly-for-the-immaterial-labour-they-perform-for-us/>), her contribution to ‘Playbour – Work, Pleasure, Survival’ (see <https://www.furtherfield.org/playbour-work-pleasure-survival/>), a 2018 exhibition at Furtherfield gallery in London. They include should we pay trees for the immaterial labour they perform for us?
- ¹⁶ Let me provide as one last example a special 2016 issue of the *Journal of Electronic Publishing*, co-edited by Janneke Adema and myself. ‘Disrupting the Humanities: Towards Posthumanities’ (Adema and Hall, 2016) constitutes a selection of heavily annotated video-presentations/articles cum performances that endeavours to break down the divisions between research and presentation, the ‘real time’ and online or ‘virtual’ audience. It has its basis in ‘Disrupting the Humanities’, a series of seminars that explored research and scholarship in a ‘posthumanities’ context, organised by the Centre for Disruptive Media at Coventry University. This seminar series critically engaged the humanist legacy of the humanities, and creatively explored alternative and affirmative possible futures for the humanities. The series was accompanied by a wiki that is still available here: <http://disruptivemedia.org.uk/wiki/>.

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