

# Critique in the 21st century

## Political economy still, and religion again

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We gather once again to examine the question of 'critique'.<sup>1</sup> We do so not just after Kant, Marx, Nietzsche and their respective descendants, but also after the innovations of the Frankfurt School (which only came to receive serious attention in France after some delay) and the critique of the foundations of psychology, to evoke George Politzer's title, which, albeit with a number of adjustments and reversals, runs through the whole French epistemological tradition, both during and after the 'structuralist moment'.<sup>2</sup> Needless to say, we don't embark on this examination from an abstract or timeless perspective, but caught up in the middle of a conjuncture that we are all trying to understand. What are its tendencies and conflictual stakes? What alternatives does it present? From the place where we find ourselves, we try to assess the characteristic features of this conjuncture – *the signs of the times* – in order to reformulate the meaning and fields of critique and perhaps also to refound it. As unrepentant 'moderns', we believe that critique has not ceased to designate philosophy's most characteristic gesture, and we seek more than ever to understand how the current situation must change critique itself, conceived as an analysis of 'what we are', as Foucault used to say – which in reality means an analysis of what we are becoming, or turning into, one that cannot prescribe its culmination in advance. Through an essential circularity, we need to recast critique in order to provide a diagnosis of the present, but we can only orient this recasting by following certain paths derived from the way we already presuppose, if not prejudge, a diagnosis of the present.

### Crisis and critique

As a supplementary determination to these general points, I shall borrow from the famous title of Koselleck's 1959 book *Critique and Crisis* (poorly translated into French as *Le Règne de la critique*). Beyond

the book's contents (essential reading for any discussion of the origins of the Enlightenment programme), Koselleck's title trades on an idea that, for one reason or another, we have never quite managed to escape: namely, that 'critique' is essentially related to 'crisis', or to the manifestation, through certain signs, of a time as a time of crisis. The crisis renders the contradictions visible, and in so doing brings to the fore the internal structure of the world (particularly the political world, the social world) that is to be the object of the critique. Or, inversely: crisis *summons critique* to produce the instruments, the elements of intelligibility, which would allow for an analysis and resolution. And as it happens, we are at this moment and in this place besieged by signs of crisis and by interpretations of its nature, which start with ways of naming it. Maybe that should put us on our guard, because, in a certain way, the crisis-critique correlation works a little too well. But how to elude it?

There are two remarks I would like to make on this score. The first is that the couple crisis-critique has determined the programme of the social sciences from the start of the nineteenth century up until today. More generally, it has determined the programme of the 'social philosophies' (to which Marxism belongs) that have sought to define the objectives and practical functions of these sciences, because critique is rooted, on the one hand, in the manifestation of phenomena of conflict, contradiction, alienation, anomie or pathology (all of which form the reverse, or the repressed, of the regularity of social relations, and hence hold the hidden truth of that regularity); and on the other, in the manifestation of phenomena of interruption (provisional or definitive) of their regulation, or of their *reproduction*, which convey that combination of contingency and necessity – in a word, historicity – upon which 'societies' and 'social formations' rest. Hence the privilege enjoyed by the idea of revolution, even under the form

of an unfinished or suppressed revolution.<sup>3</sup> One of the terminologies available to us to express this dialectic is the antithesis of *organic* phases and formations and *critical* phases and formations (meaning crisis formations). In the prevailing representation – elaborated by the Saint-Simonians at the start of the nineteenth century and rediscovered by Gramsci in the middle of the twentieth – these phases or formations succeed one another periodically, though they can also be understood as ‘instances’ [*instances*] imbricated in one another, with fluctuating relations of dominance.<sup>4</sup> The underlying idea is that critique, as a mode of thought that proceeds from critical phenomena, must in the end *return* to those phenomena if it wants to elucidate or transform them.

Here, though, I must make another remark. That we are, here and now, in Europe and elsewhere, knee-deep in a ‘critical phase’, or a phase in which the ‘pathologies’ of social life, of the mode of economic development, of collective identities, are all coming to the fore, is a widely shared sentiment and an intensive object of study for sociologists, psychologists, political commentators, and so on. More and more, however, these judgements are overdetermined by *eschatological* connotations. This is especially the case with the insistence on the notion of ‘world’, which is called forth by the reference to globalization as the site and origin of the crisis, but whose evocation is filtered through the multiple registers of the social world considered in the totality of its extension and determinations, as ‘world-system’ for some, as ‘civilization’ for others (Immanuel Wallerstein, Jean-Luc Nancy).<sup>5</sup> What is in crisis is a ‘world on a world scale’ (or on a planetary scale). Linking these two gives rise to an issue that impacts, to a whole new degree, the circularity in the formulation of our critical tasks and objectives. It is by no means a given that the antithesis – organic/critical, normal/pathological, regular/state of exception, constitution/dissolution – remains an applicable tool of investigation in the context of the ‘global crisis’ or, to parody Marx, of the ‘developed totality’ (*The German Ideology*). Or it could be that the antithesis of two stages and two phases – which, if we think about it, is constitutive of the very idea of *society* or *social relation* – is what has to become the very object of critical reflection, or, if you prefer, of its deconstruction: it is what deterritorializes critique by depriving it of the possibility of positioning itself either from the perspective of normality (so as to identify the exceptions and pathologies) or from the perspective of pathologies (so as to discuss the value of norms and the degree

of organicity of social forms). If that is the case, then the legitimacy and orientation of critique no longer stem from a foundational antithesis, but rather, and only, from its exercise, from the way it criticizes itself, and that is perilous...

*And yet.* And yet, it is my plan today to stick to that old schema, and to give it a formulation that may, I hope, echo the concerns of many of us gathered here. It seems to me that the source of the calls for a renewal, maybe even a displacement, of critique, is the fact that the crisis affects, and globally so, the *possibility of politics* as a collective activity, and hence as a privileged form of the articulation between institutions and modes of subjectivation that allow human communities to represent themselves as agents in their own history – a form of self-consciousness for which the West, at least, has developed and universalized a number of names; *citizenship* chief among them, both in the privileged case of the nation-state, and in the forms of protest that have always accompanied it. Citizenship, under siege and reduced to impotence, has been devalued or deprived of meaning – as have, indeed, other categories closely associated with it, such as conflict, representation, militant activity, participation in public affairs. A particularly acute manifestation of this, as we know, is the fact that democratic institutions have degenerated and been emptied of their content in that part of the world where they were erected as a dominant value, while at the same time remaining conspicuous by their absence in other parts of the world, where they are perceived, at best, as an artificial foreign graft and, at worst, as a masked form of domination and alienation.<sup>6</sup>

There are exceptions to this, of course, and thankfully so. But their viability and mutual compatibility have still to be demonstrated. One hypothesis we can formulate, adhering closely to a certain Marxist logic while turning it against some of its postulates about the philosophy of history, is that we are *only now* entering *capitalist society* (and, as always, we are only noticing this after the fact, when it is *late*, perhaps even *too late*) – or, if you prefer, we’re only now entering ‘pure’ capitalism, which does not have to deal constantly with heterogeneous social forces that it must either incorporate or repress, or with which it must strike some sort of compromise. ‘Pure’ capitalism is free to deal only with the effects of its own logic of accumulation and with those things necessary for its own reproduction.<sup>7</sup>

Now, it could be, regardless of what Marx thought about this, that modern forms of politics, and in

particular the forms of this ‘great politics’ whose stakes are the antithesis and the varied combinations of the relation to the nation (hence to the state, to the law and legal subjects, to *laïcité*, education, war), as well as the relation to class and class differences (hence to social inequalities and social policies, to reforms and revolutions), are characteristic not of capitalism as such, but of the *transition to capitalism*. This would be a very long drawn out transition, certainly, and we are only now realizing that it needed nearly four centuries to run its course – assuming, that is, that we situate the beginnings of this transition to capitalism in mercantilism, manufacture, the ‘discovery’ of a world to colonize, the proletarianization of farmers, and the emergence of constitutional states that ‘monopolized’ legitimate violence and the power to judge. As it happens, that is where Koselleck situates the origin of the articulation between critique and crisis. But what is an ‘end’, exactly? What are the determinations of this ‘end’, and, more specifically, what is it that, with it, *starts to exist* and to *dominate*, in the Marxian sense of *herrschend* (*herrschende Klasse*, *herrschende Ideologie*)? These questions are as much epistemological as political, and they are among the most urgent tasks facing the efforts to renew critique, or give it a new foundation.<sup>8</sup>

### **Economy and theology: the *chassé-croisé* of violence**

Let us venture a step further. I would say that what seems to characterize the world-scale dimensions [*la mondialité*] of the ‘crisis’ – which is at once local and global, and is not foreign to the eschatological connotations it takes on in our discourses and conscience – is the superposition of two ‘phenomena’ that seem at first sight heterogeneous, but that we can try to relate to one another in a quasi-analytical, or perhaps pseudo-analytical, schema. The first is the *emergence of an economy of generalized violence* that cuts across borders and combines endemic wars with other forms of exterminating violence – indeed, eliminating violence, since what is involved is not death in the strict sense, even if there are at this moment many deaths, under different modalities.<sup>9</sup> Exclusion, for example, or, perhaps even better, to use the category that Saskia Sassen recently deployed with impressive force and scope, the *generalized expulsion* of individuals and groups from their ‘place’ in the world, in any world whatever.<sup>10</sup> No one doubts that violence is immemorial, that it assumes myriad forms and has myriad causes, or that it is an anthropological characteristic of the human being as such.

But the violence that seems able to cut across any and every border, and indeed to use borders themselves as the instruments of its own generalization, is in a way a new phenomenon whose novelty rests on the fact that every person may in time be potentially confronted by it.<sup>11</sup> The second phenomenon I have in mind is the superposition or, better yet, the *chassé-croisé* of *political economy* and *political theology*, or *the theologico-political*. We are now approaching the question that we need to ask. To convey what seems to be a widely held view today (and I don’t believe this view is exclusively French, even if it undoubtedly owes a fair share of its evidence to a certain ‘French’ way of thinking the autonomy of politics), I would propose the following formulation: *we no longer have enough political economy (or politics in economics), but we have too much political theology (or too much theology in politics)*.

In what we commonly refer to as the ‘return of the religious’, I include certain ways of asserting or imposing *laïcité*, as themselves deeply religious forms of reacting to what is perceived as a ‘re-theologization’ of social conflicts or their modalities of self-consciousness. (But how to separate social conflicts from their self-consciousness, since the latter is precisely what renders them ‘conflictual’ in the first place?) There is no need here to try to retrace and survey the entire field of fundamentalisms – Islamic, but also Hindu, Jewish and Christian (Christian above all, in a significant number of countries in the West and the South) – in the face of which one would also have to describe the no less impressive range of practices of non- or anti-violence that find their inspiration, language, and the models of conduct they want to put in place and share with others, in religious traditions, which they have reinterpreted to a greater or lesser degree. Hence Derrida’s question (thinking primarily, about the Middle East):

Wars and military ‘interventions’, led by the Judeo-Christian West in the name of the best causes ... are they not also, from a certain side, wars of religion? To determine a war of religion *as such*, one would have to be certain that one can delimit the religious. One would have to be sure that one can distinguish all the predicates of the religious.<sup>12</sup>

For my part, I would say that the phenomenological criterion at work in current analyses is that the religious emerges where the economy ceases to be thought and practised as a *political* institution, in keeping with its old denomination as *political economy*, a perspective which was gradually abandoned as the

power of states seemed more and more out of step with the autonomization of markets, and of financial markets in particular. In other words, the *chassé-croisé* is always already present within each of the two phenomena, neither of which is independent of the other.

Hence the two questions that preoccupy our contemporaries, not separately, but in tandem. How to rethink the theologico-political? And how to evaluate the degree of distance possible between the economy and its modes of political regulation? The term 'governance', thematized for the first time by the World Bank in the 1990s and now in general use, pinpoints the ambivalence of the second process, because it can designate, depending on the author, either a real *withdrawal of politics* – whose function is to support and manage social adaptations to the self-regulation of markets – or, conversely, the emergence of, or simply the demand for, a *new political practice*, reserved for new actors whose transnational legitimacy no longer depends on their authorization by a state.<sup>13</sup> As for the first question, about the meaning of the theologico-political complex, it continues to turn within the circle that was assigned to it by the two inventors of the formula, who are separated by nearly three centuries, at each extreme of modernity: Spinoza and Carl Schmitt.<sup>14</sup> That is to say, it is taken to indicate either that the 'theological' or the 'theocratic' is a specific political regime (or, more precisely, a *tendency* towards the sacralization of power, and likewise of any counter-power, at work in every other political regime), or that secular models of political authority (notably those founded on the *law* as a more or less complete subordination of the exception to the norm) derive their meaning and symbolic power from religious models. If this circle has started turning anew, is it not because the reference of the political (and of political action) to the state – whether as its necessary framework or as the system of power that it tries to overflow, or from which it wants to free itself (and, by the same token, to which it risks being eternally dependent) – is a reality that is less and less consistent, or, at any rate, less autonomous?

To Derrida's question regarding the 'predicates of the religious', we cannot but add at least two more questions, about the predicates of the political and the economic. The economy of generalized violence manifests both the phenomenon of the *withdrawal of politics into economics* (that is to say, the disappearance of the political for the benefit of the economic, and the absorption of the political by a 'pure' economic logic even when the latter can be described

in its own way as a *new politics* that functions on the mode of denegation) and that of the *vacillation of the theologico-political* between a politicization of the theological and a theologization of politics. Nevertheless, the economy of generalized violence can be described as a double crisis: of the historical *affiliations* and *memberships* of individuals (which means also a hierarchization of these memberships for the benefit of a sovereign political order), and of the established modalities, gradually institutionalized, of social *conflictuality* – or, if we prefer, of the 'struggles' among 'parties'.<sup>15</sup>

In this conflictuality, the class struggle represented, for two centuries, both in Europe and elsewhere, a limit form, or a form of radicalization that situates itself on the 'shores' of politics (to evoke Jacques Rancière) or, more precisely, on the shifting border that separates and articulates *civilized* modalities of the 'social war' (also called 'civil war' by antiphrasis). And it does so while opening up the possibilities for transcommunitarian and, in particular, transnational memberships that could be called *nomadic* in relation to instituted and territorialized political communities.

You can already see the position I am heading towards. On the one hand, we must take seriously the hypothesis that the 'return of the religious' – under the form of a growing affirmation of collective identities of the religious sort (for all manner of mutually antithetical ends), to the detriment of identities assigned or recognized by the state, in competition with them, or seizing them from within – is a consequence of the decline of 'collective subjectivations' that were elicited by earlier forms of political conflictuality or civil conflict. (Rancière suggested this in a recent interview.)<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, this hypothesis can be no more than a starting point, a provisional formulation, since we are not in a position to tell whether the religious that 'returns' is actually *the same* as the one that had – only more or less, in reality – 'departed', like a return of the repressed. That is to say, we don't know, deep down, *what the 'religious' is*, or indeed *whether there is such a thing at all*, and under what perspective it can be unified, or even compared. Likewise, we don't know how economic governance, which subordinates states to the imperatives of the market, a process that is tempting to explain in terms of an entrance into 'pure capitalism', is articulated with the affirmations of religious identity in order to engender the new field in which societies are confronted with inconvertible violence.<sup>17</sup>

## A detour through Marx

At this point I shall take a detour through Marx, or at least through certain moments of his thought, because a lot is being said today about how Marx contributed to obscuring the importance of the theologico-political problem, and more generally the problem of the religious factor in history, because he trained his attention exclusively on the social causes and economic contradictions of capitalism, arguing that, 'in the last resort', these are the determining factors of the historical processes whose manifestations we find in our present.<sup>18</sup> This is both true and false. In this instance, though, the modality is more significant than the overall thesis, or rather it helps to determine its meaning.

We can, once again, start from the famous formulations that open (and close) 'A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction', which appeared in 1844 in the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*:

the *critique of religion* is essentially completed; and the critique of religion is the prerequisite of every critique. ... The foundation of irreligious criticism is this: *man makes religion*; religion does not make man. ... But *man* is not an abstract being squatting outside the world. Man is *the world of man* [*der Mensch, das ist die Welt des Menschen*] – the state, society. ... Thus, the critique of religion is the *critique in embryo of the vale of tears* of which religion is the *halo*. ... Thus the critique of heaven is transformed into the critique of the earth, the *critique of religion* into the *critique of law* [*Recht*], and the *critique of theology* into the *critique of politics*.<sup>19</sup>

I don't believe Marx ever revisited this formulation, and even if it is important to mark the difference separating the critique of right and politics from the critique of political economy – regardless of whether we call it a 'break' – the idea that the critique of religion has been *completed* remains a presupposition of his entire critical enterprise. Indeed, we can even say that it becomes more than that when the critique of the 'vale of tears' became 'earthly' or, at least, more tightly bound to the study of the conditions of production and reproduction of the material conditions of existence in human societies.

What is immediately striking, upon rereading this text, is the extent to which it appears indissociable from Marx's insistence on the anthropological question. 'Materialist' anthropology against 'spiritualist' anthropology. First, it's the social human being who makes religion, rather than having been 'made' by it; anthropology itself, in other words, *determines*

the modalities of the constitution of the religious imagination and the functions it can fulfil in history, whether this be to consolidate modes of domination or to 'protest' against them. Second, this is an anthropology of the relation or 'link' [*rapport*], and not an anthropology of the essence or 'genre'.<sup>20</sup> I think we can see in a text like this (and in others from the same period that complete it, particularly the 'Theses on Feuerbach') the foundation of a Marxian *philosophical anthropology*.<sup>21</sup> 'It is the human being who makes religion' is, by definition, a humanist thesis; we might even say – in the context of a *critical* enterprise – that it is the humanist thesis par excellence. But the fact of calling it into question, particularly by adopting a materialist approach to the question of what precisely 'the human world' means, does not *ipso facto* eliminate the anthropological question. Quite the contrary: it is a way of reformulating and giving a different orientation to that question.

We can see this clearly if we just focus our attention on how the two *reductions* that Marx needs to operate in order to interpret 'the human world' are connected. There is, on the one hand, the reduction of being or of the human essence to a 'set of social relations'. I am myself tempted to call this an *expansive* reduction, paradoxical as the expression may seem, because it shines a light on a generalized intersubjectivity or transindividuality, of which the construction of religious communities is a part, as are the construction of imaginary communities and 'civil societies'. There is, on the other hand, the reduction of the set of social relations to the form of labour or the status of a labour-product that is in the final analysis derived from productive or reproductive activity itself, both 'manual' and 'intellectual' (*The German Ideology*). Nor can we forget or overlook the fact that what human beings 'make', they can likewise 'transform' (*verändern*) or 'remake' differently. In sum, we cannot forget that the reality human beings 'make' is a 'transformable' (*veränderbar*) reality.<sup>22</sup> That is why Marx will say later that mankind 'inevitably only sets itself such tasks as it is able to solve'.<sup>23</sup> Here, once again, we notice a bifurcation, though not between (humanist) anthropology and (materialist) ontology, but within anthropology itself, even though the latter implies an ontology.

What conclusions, then, are we to draw from this observation, which is in some ways a critique of Marx, or a redoubled application to Marx himself of the critical instrument? We need to proceed slowly here, or, rather, with a certain sense of discernment. On the one hand, we can say that Marx shares the

thesis that the movement of history in the modern period is that of a gradual *secularization*, though there is something original in his formulation of it. For Marx, the principle of the transformation of societies is the restoration or the becoming visible of the material causality that, from their 'origins', would have engendered all the modalities under which societies 'make' or 'produce' their own social relations, as well as the *phenomenal form* (*Erscheinungsform*) under which these must appear to their subjects or bearers. This, incidentally, goes hand in hand with a fundamental evolutionism, one that is not original to Marx in the nineteenth century, though he did elaborate an original variant of it, more contradictory than other versions, but ultimately more unstable as well. On the other hand, the *radicality* of his thesis – that the source of religious alienation is to be found solely in the anthropological function of labour and in the relations of production that give it its historical expression – is the very thing that opens the way for the analysis of the economy as an 'anti-religion'; or, if you like, for the analysis of the *economic representations* of the 'world' constructed by the economy in the capitalist epoch. But in *Capital* Marx will show that the economy *does not exist* without the 'representations' or 'appearances' that render its own 'economic laws' operational. In speaking about 'anti-religion', I intentionally use the prefix 'anti' in its double logical sense: anti-religion is what opposes itself to religion so as to destroy it, to 'profane' it, as Marx says in *The Communist Manifesto*, and it is also what *faces* religion and reproduces – as if in a mirror, mimetically – its imaginary functioning, particularly the effects of belief and subjection. Thus a reflection on Marx and a rereading of his work do not render impossible and unthinkable those critical gestures aimed at reintroducing the theologico-political question as a fundamentally political question in the wake of the question about political economy, as a question lodged in its heart and always intertwined with it. On the contrary, such reflection and such rereading are one of the conditions of possibility of this reintroduction.

What we must retain from Marx is that there is something of the theological (for example, in money) in societies 'secularized' by the always increasingly totalitarian grip of the economy, and even of the religious, under the forms of the rituals of daily life that are guided by the fetishism of exchange value, and by the hallucinatory perception of the 'bodies' of merchandise as the 'incarnation' or embodiment of their value, even if these rituals take place outside

the traditional space of 'religion' in the historical sense of the term; that is, an institutional space that enjoys legal and political sanction. If we do not take anti-religion into account, in the sense above, then perhaps the entire question of the *metamorphoses of the religious* in the capitalist epoch (including here the 'returns of the religious' in the moment of its crisis) will remain inaccessible to critical analysis. That said, we must also, tirelessly, raise the question of the blinding consequences that his opening postulate operates across his work: 'the critique of religion is complete', particularly in the form of a *persistent denegation* of the fact that, in the anthropological thesis that reduces the essence of the human being to the idea of the *producer* (which contains the connotation of *creator*), there is an anti-religious signification that can always be turned into a religious one.

### **The regime of the constitution of bodies**

There is no need to insist too much here on the way in which, at the end of the same text from 1844 (*A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction*), the messianic figure of the proletariat appears as the redeemer of humanity: the producer radically dispossessed of his or her own creation, a figure that becomes even more emphatic in the later 'expropriation of the expropriators', and in the way this messianism was later 'routinized' by the secular religions of historical or so-called 'actually existing' socialism. That's too well known to detain us.<sup>24</sup> It seems more interesting to try to identify a *sensitive point* where a new critique of political economy – one that extends and deepens while also rectifying Marx's – can be articulated with a critique of religion, and this in the double sense of understanding its signification, and resisting religion's pretensions to an exclusive universality. I am tempted to use for that the expression 'point of heresy', in the etymological sense of choice or theoretical bifurcation, even if, in this instance, the aim is not to describe a divergence starting from a common 'epistemological' ground (as in Foucault's *archaeology of knowledge*), but rather to arrive at a virtual convergence, one that cannot, for all that, issue in any real reunification.<sup>25</sup> It seems to me that we can identify this point of heresy in the way in which a critique of political economy and of political theory (or of the religious) must treat the status and function of bodies, and consequently describe the anthropological differences that are inseparable from the way human beings use their bodies. *L'uso dei corpi*, Agamben would say. They are also inseparable from the way 'human societies'

humanize themselves (and do so by dehumanizing themselves) by prescribing to the individuals that compose them a certain use of differences linked to the body – particularly the difference between the manual and intellectual aspects of labour, and sexual difference. This, of course, opens the way for different forms of ‘embodied’ resistance and emancipation.<sup>26</sup>

I would like to advance two hypotheses that strive to distance themselves somewhat from the discourses currently in the air about ‘biopolitics’, while nevertheless intersecting with them on several points.

The first concerns the idea that the point around which collective cultural practices and a symbolic architecture of the religious type are articulated is a prescription that concerns the body, and in particular the manifestation of the difference of sexualized bodies (be they two or more).<sup>27</sup> As we know, cultural practices can be very diverse and mutually contradictory, not just because they develop over long periods of time in very different contexts and civilizations, but because they combine different forms of ‘invention’ and ‘respect’ for the tradition, with contradictory tendencies about how to adapt to, or resist, modernization and commodification. In religious discourse (particularly that of revealed, monotheistic religions), rituals and beliefs are tightly superposed and intertwined. And so, too, as Derrida suggests in his rearticulation of the idea of ‘the two sources of religion’, are the hope of salvation, of deliverance from evil, of immunity, and the reference to the name [*au nom*], to the law that forges the communal link (ideal or institutional) among believers and the faithful. This name can be equivocal; it can be ‘instrumentalized’ by forces, ideologies and powers, though it must first be *inscribed* in a form

of sacredness or prohibition. That is what makes the difference between the religious, strictly speaking, and the simply cultural what determines that which, in religion, is always *in excess* in relation to the cultural, but eventually returns to mark and guide it. Let’s say, then, that *the difference between religious discourses and their point of mutual untranslatability resides, in particular, maybe even specifically, not in the difference between dogmas, or in their narratives of origin (even if these are always strictly linked to the*

*institution of anthropological differences), but in the different regimes, incompatible among themselves, that prescribe and prohibit the uses of bodies, or institute the visibility of bodies and their accessibility.*<sup>28</sup> So that these *concrete universals*, or these *practical universalities*, which is what religious discourses are, particularly the discourses of ‘revealed’ religions, are not in contradiction or in conflict with one another when they announce general truths, salvific beliefs, and prescriptions for a universalizable morality as the object of a predication – on this point, ecumenism or ‘interreligious dialogue’ is always at least virtually possible. But they do contradict each other and fight over the extent to which the sexualized body must be seen as the very site where signs of purity, election, obedience, sacrifice, asceticism and alliance are to be made manifest.

That is no doubt why all the studies of the religious character of humanity are comparative. But this comparison lacks *an external point of view*, since there is no human perspective sufficiently ‘distant’ from the body to see from outside it the *difference of differences* inscribed on the body.<sup>29</sup> Hence the violence



of the conflicts that have flared up, here and elsewhere, around the question of the Islamic veil and the regime of *manifest invisibility* it imposes on sexual difference. Far be it for me to deny that the Islamic veil has something to do with the reproduction of a hierarchical relation between the sexes, one that can nevertheless be modulated or negotiated (or, as Butler puts it, ‘resignified’) in different ways. But in the phobic reactions it provokes in a French-like space of *laïcité* – and especially when these reactions

are institutionalized and prescribed as rules for the functioning of public institutions – we see quite clearly that what emerges is a religious conflict. It's a conflict of *religious universalisms* concentrated around the singularity of the bodily regime that lies at the core of each of these universalisms. The question remains open, incidentally, whether this is an *old* conflict, for example between the two dominant versions of institutionalized Western monotheism (I'm not sure that it is), or a *new*, or at least relatively new, conflict: one that entails, in equal measure, a work of interpretation and the repetition of theological archetypes. This is as such a religious way of reacting to the violence of other social conflicts, especially since they are not regulated by a classical form of the state, with its 'organic' or 'hegemonic' social system, or taken in charge by revolutionary hopes and movements. I leave this question open.

The second hypothesis is intended to converge with the first without joining it, or to form with it a disjunctive theoretical machine (as Deleuze might have said) that allows us to 'read' certain aspects of the generalized violence that characterizes the current crisis. This time I align myself with a reprise of the critique of political economy. The critique Marx levelled at classical economic theorists produced a contradictory effect. It brought to the light of day an irreducible conflict lodged at the heart of the definition of capital, in so far as the latter imposes on 'living labour' the law or measure (and the violence) of accumulated 'dead labour'. In doing so, however, Marx's critique also helped to obscure from view some ideological postulates of these same classical economic theories, notably the ones linked to the definition of the 'substance of value' as labour (or abstract or generic labour), and those that tend to subordinate the crises of capitalism (notably its financial crises) to a finality, to a pre-established harmony ('the invisible hand') founded on a distribution, by society, of the labour forces available to it (and so, in the final analysis, of *productive bodies*) as a function of the needs it must satisfy to perpetuate itself. All of that could be summed up in the idea that *the political economy of labour, which is also a political economy of labourers (and of their organized political 'movement'), stands opposite and against the political economy of capital, as its internal reversal and as the manifestation of its hidden principle.*<sup>30</sup>

There is nothing simple about this. All the best commentators on Marx have shown, albeit through different paths, that Marx never appropriates a concept from classical economics without transforming it.

This is particularly true of 'labour', or 'social labour', which in Marx becomes inseparable from *surplus-labour*, the producer of *surplus-value*: what matters, then, and this is the very bedrock of the critique, is not so much the ability to invoke labour ideally, in its abstract 'measure', in order to account for the commensurability of commodities on the market, but the fact that it must be simplified, timed, prolonged and intensified so as to make it possible for it to be *added to itself* by creating a differential of accumulation. Marx's postulate, upon which rests the entire argumentation of his 'critique', or upon which an analysis of objective categories and a phenomenology of lived experience are combined and complete each other, is that the articulation of *surplus-labour* with *surplus-value* (with the antagonism it engenders) must be thinkable at once on the level of the society as a whole (of the *Gesamtkapital* 'organically' composed of a certain relation between dead and living labour) and at the level of the smallest unit of exploitation; that is, each instant of a labourer's life, inasmuch as that is the life of an exploited producer, or an alienated productive life. But in this vast critical task, which brings to the fore the antagonism and exploitation at the heart of the 'contradictions' of the economy, Marx nevertheless adopts, *uncritically*, certain fundamental ideas of political economy that allow him to represent to himself both society and the economy as balanced 'machines' and 'processes', self-regulating and self-productive, even if at the price of certain inequalities, crises or class struggles, all of which will persist at least as long as capitalism has not reached its 'historical limit'. And the most fundamental of these ideas is precisely the idea of *reproduction*, as a moment separate from production but necessary to its perpetuity, without which there is neither society nor the accumulation of capital. Naturally, this is the place to recall that the notion of 'reproduction' immediately produced schisms within Marxism – the most famous being the one that pits Lenin's interpretation against Rosa Luxemburg's – and these are still with us today. Moreover, the notion involves, whether consciously or not, a play on words, given its double – economic and biological – meaning.<sup>31</sup>

To say this does not take away the admiration we might have for the way, in Volume 2 of *Capital*, Marx constructs 'reproduction schemas' that lend themselves to various readings. But it does lead us to try to lay bare the latent presuppositions that inform the crucial distinction between 'productive labour' and 'unproductive labour', among which fall a variety of 'services', notably social and educational services,



as well as the service of women, which render the consumption of labourers possible. I have come to think that, behind this aporia, there are not only sexist prejudices, or the inability to see exploitation in certain places and moments where it is nevertheless even more violent, as a whole body of feminist literature has shown, but also a *political* condition that is linked to my hypothesis regarding the transition towards a 'pure' capitalism (or the entry into a regime of 'absolute capital') and the transformations that transition imposes on the conditions of resistance – that is, on the very possibility of the class struggle. Because this resistance – from the Industrial Revolution and, most of all, from the first social legislations to those of the welfare state and of what Robert Castel and others call the 'wage-earning society' – was also made possible by the fact that the life of producers was split into *two moments* by means of a major anthropological rupture or difference between the moment of labour and that of reproduction, each of which entailed different forms of socialization.<sup>32</sup> But this is no longer the case, at least tendentially, in 'pure' capitalism, where reproduction – by means of the transformation of consumption, of health, of leisure, and, tendentially, of education into fields that capital invests in (fields called, precisely, 'human capital') – is completely incorporated into production itself.<sup>33</sup> What that also means, again tendentially, is that sexual difference no longer has a 'functional' need from the point of view of capital (which is of course not to say that it has disappeared, even as a difference in social status, because it has other functions and historical foundations). We should even ask if 'intellectual difference' – between educated and uneducated workers – retains the same functions and content, since I suspect that there is an extraordinary mystification in what we call the 'intellectualization of work'.<sup>34</sup> The great and essentially floating division, which achieved a sort of projection in the instance that Marx called the 'reserve industrial army', is the division between the precariously employed and the precariously unemployed. And we know that this difference, overdetermined by other factors of inequality with global reach, is potentially deadly.<sup>35</sup> It is a new regime of the production, the distribution and the uses of bodies in capitalism, and it affects, without distinction, the 'manual' and 'mental' faculties, both of which have been profoundly dispersed and recomposed by information technology and a 'post-Taylorist' organization of labour.<sup>36</sup>

\*

As you can see, my efforts have not resulted in a theory, or even in a critical problematic, in the style of a theory of reification, of one-dimensional man, or of territorialization–deterritorialization, or even of a post-Foucauldian 'biopolitics' – though I have tried to appropriate some of their questions. What I have tried to do is designate a 'site', which is itself abstract, in order to analyse the overlapping effects of religious determinations and the economic determinations of the atypical, indeed exceptional, crisis we find ourselves in, a crisis characterized by its global reach and the deadly intensification of acts of violence (which, it goes without saying, also have all sorts of other causes). This site would be the 'body', which is immediately split anew by a tension between two aspects at once inseparable and distinct, and whose unity is the enigma of anthropological discourse: the 'symbolic (or signifying) body', and the 'productive (or utilitarian) body', towards which converge, without being confused, a new post-Marxian critique of political economy and a critique of religion that does not yet presume itself to be 'completed'.

Translated by Emiliano Battista

## Notes

1. This article originates in a paper presented at the conference 'Misère de la critique/Das Elend der Kritik', at the École Normale Supérieure, Paris, on 5 February 2016. The conference was organized as part of the research project ANR-DFG 'CActuS' (The Actuality of Critique, Social Theory, and Critical Sociology in France and Germany), directed by Gérard Raulet (Université Paris–Sorbonne) and Axel Honneth (Goethe-Universität Frankfurt). For the present publication, I have introduced the necessary bibliographical references for the texts I cite or evoke, but I have not changed the character of the talk, or its oral presentation. I would like to extend my gratitude to the editors of *Radical Philosophy* for inviting me to publish, in this anniversary, what is essentially a sketch of a work in progress.
2. Georges Politzer, *Critique of the Foundations of Psychology: The Psychology of Psychoanalysis* (1928), trans. Maurice Apprey, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh PA, 1994.
3. In a collection of essays from 1979 entitled *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* Kosselleck devotes a fundamental essay to the modern concept of 'revolution' ('Historical Criteria and the Modern Concept of Revolution'), an idea that he sees as emblematic of what he calls 'futures past'.
4. It was the Saint-Simonians who articulated this distinction, particularly in the fundamental work from 1829, *Exposition de la doctrine saint-simonienne. Première année*, by A. Bazard and O. Rodrigues, a critical edition of which, by Maurice Halbwachs and Marcel Rivière, appeared in Paris in 1924. Antonio Gramsci makes it a central category of his analyses of hegemony in the *Prison Notebooks*. But it is in effect common to the entire 'sociological tradition'. See Robert Nisbet, *The Sociological Tradition*, Basic Books, New York, 1966.
5. Among other recent interventions by these authors, see: Immanuel Wallerstein, 'Structural Crisis, or Why Capitalists May No Longer Find Capitalism Rewarding?'

- in Immanuel Wallerstein et al., *Does Capitalism Have a Future*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 2013; Jean-Luc Nancy and Jean Manuel Garrido, 'Phraser la mutation: entretien avec Jean-Luc Nancy', <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/juan-manuel-garrido-wainer/blog/131015/phraser-la-mutation-entretien-avec-jean-luc-nancy>.
6. See, for example, Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 2015.
  7. I retain the terminology of the emergence of a 'pure capitalism', associated with globalization and the integral financialization of the economy, but I also think it may be preferable, or at least useful, to employ the expression 'absolute capitalism' (as do, notably, Franco Berardi and Jacques Rancière), because it indicates more clearly the *self-referential* character of a system in which there is no longer any real exception to the 'production of commodities by means of commodities' (Piero Sraffa), and also because it can be pitted against 'historical capitalism', the capitalism that not only operated the *great transformation* between the beginnings of primitive accumulation and the dismantling of the 'social state', colonization and decolonization, but also provided the framework for the classic configuration of class struggle and the conflict among nations.
  8. Immanuel Wallerstein admirably designates this task in the title of his book, *Unthinking Social Science: The Limits of Nineteenth-Century Paradigms*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2001 (1991).
  9. For example, one might compare two devastating 'death zones': Syria and the Middle East more generally since the attacks of 9/11 and the American interventions, and West Africa (Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leone), contaminated by the Ebola virus and essentially abandoned to its own devices by the World Health Organization.
  10. See Saskia Sassen, *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA and London, 2014.
  11. See Étienne Balibar, *We, the People of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship*, trans. James Swenson, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 2003.
  12. Jacques Derrida, 'Faith and Knowledge: Two Sources of "Religion" at the Limits of Reason Alone' (1996), in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar, Routledge, London, 2002, p. 63.
  13. See the account on 'Governance' forthcoming in *Parole-chiave* 56, 2016.
  14. On the history and fluctuations of the notion of the 'theologico-political', see, in particular, Introduction to Jan Assmann's *Herrschaft und Heil. Politische Theologie in Altägypten, Israel und Europa*, Carl Hansel Verlag, Munich, 2000.
  15. On the crisis of the 'party form' that undergirds and overflows the crisis of the parliamentary system, see, in particular, Marco Revelli, *Finale di partito* Einaudi, Turin, 2013.
  16. Jacques Rancière, 'Comment sortir de la haine? Grand entretien avec Jacques Rancière', *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 7 February 2016.
  17. On the question of inconvertible violence, see my *Violence and Civility: On the Limits of Political Philosophy*, trans. G.M. Goshgarian, Columbia University Press, New York and Chichester, 2015.
  18. See, for example, Jean Birnbaum, *Un silence religieux. La gauche face au djihadisme*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 2016.
  19. Karl Marx, 'A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction', in *Marx: Early Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Joseph O'Malley, with Richard A. Davis, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994, pp. 57–8.
  20. From this perspective, there is a radical incompatibility between the Marxist tradition and the 'sociological tradition' that found its fullest articulation in Durkheim, for whom religion is always, in the last analysis, the source of what Althusser calls 'the society effect' – a function that in turn defines it. See Bruno Karsenti, *La société en personnes. Etudes durkheimiennes*, Economica, Paris, 2006.
  21. In this, my position runs against an amalgam that was practised by the school of reading and interpreting Marx out of which I came, and that I helped erect under Althusser's direction: the amalgam of 'humanist' philosophical positions and the anthropological question in general. For more on this, see my essay 'Anthropologie philosophique ou Ontologie de la relation? Que faire de la Sixième Thèse sur Feuerbach?' ['Philosophical Anthropology or Relational Ontology? What to Do with the Sixth Thesis on Feuerbach?'], in *La philosophie de Marx*, new and enlarged edn, La Découverte, Paris, 2014.
  22. This implication is something Ernst Bloch places particular emphasis on in his great commentary on the 'Theses on Feuerbach' from 1953, later incorporated into Volume 1 of *The Principle of Hope*, trans. Neville Plaice et al., MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1986, ch. 19, 'Changing the World or Marx's Eleven Theses on Feuerbach'.
  23. This formulation is to be found in the 'Preface' to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), a text that codified the principles of 'historical materialism' for a century and a half. I have on occasion said that it states precisely that which, in Marx, has become untenable for us. Deep down, though, this had already been suggested, albeit in different ways, by Benjamin in his 'Theses on the Concept of History', and by Althusser's posthumously published reflections on 'aleatory materialism'. That Marx himself did not stick to the *evolutionism* that informs this formulation is a well-known fact to those readers of his work who stress its permanent refounding and fundamental incompleteness.
  24. I think I may have been one of the first, if not the very first, to note that the famous formulation that concludes – or, rather, leaves unfinished – the first volume of *Capital* ('the expropriation of the expropriators' [*Die Expropriateurs werden expropriert*]), beyond its obviously 'French' revolutionary associations, contains as well a messianic reference drawn from the biblical formula: 'they will oppress their oppressors' (*Isaiah* 14:1–4 and 27: 7–9). On the 'messianic moment' in Marx in 1844, see my *Citizen Subject: Foundations for Philosophical Anthropology*, trans. Steven Miller, Fordham University Press, New York, forthcoming 2016. The expression 'secular religion', or 'political religion', refers, in particular, to the work of Eric Voegelin.
  25. See my study, 'Foucault's Point of Heresy: 'Quasi-Transcendentals' and the Transdisciplinary Function of the Episteme', *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 32, nos 5–6, September–November 2015), a special double issue on *Transdisciplinary Problematics*, eds P. Osborne, S. Sandford and E. Alliez, pp. 45–77. I also apply this category at length in *Citizen Subject*.
  26. Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, trans. Adam Kotsko, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 2014.
  27. This was suggested to me by the intensity of the controversies about the compatibility or incompatibility of Islam with the 'values', meaning the 'norms', of public and private behaviour that are more or less sacralized in the secular West of Christian origin. See Étienne Balibar, *Saeculum. Religion, culture, idéologie*, Galilée, Paris, 2012.
  28. This point is not self-evident, or something we can take for granted. In the Introduction to *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism*, Judith Butler takes me to task for postulating the untranslatability of certain discourses, and for identifying this limit with 'the religious', something that would make the latter, *ipso facto*, an obstacle to the common political action of those who profess it (or are labelled as such). I recognize that we have to explore this further. What I mean by 'untranslatability', in a Derridean spirit, is not an essential uncommunicability, but the historical impossibility confronting the infinite effort directed at

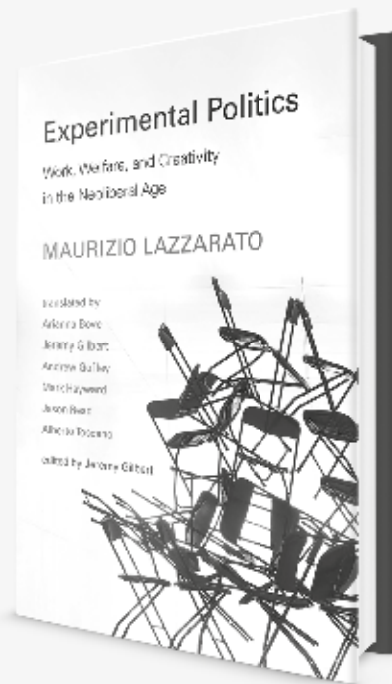
transforming or displacing the limit. It is true, however, that the *heterogeneity* of the two instances (culture and religion) in their intertwining (or permanent overdetermination) is the motivation for the position I am outlining.

29. I am transposing here, to the question of anthropological differences and their religious coding, what Kant says about the 'character of the species' in his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, where he suggests that one would have to place oneself in the perspective of an 'extra-terrestrial' to define the *specific difference*, the difference that defines the species. But, in practice, this aporia spills over into an endless conflict of interpretations. See Peter Szendy, *Kant in the Land of Extraterrestrials: Cosmopolitical Philosophical Fictions*, trans. Will Bishop, Fordham University Press, New York, 2013.
30. The idea of the 'critique of political economy' as the 'political economy of labour' that stands opposite and against the 'political economy of capital' was revindicated by Marx himself, particularly when he wanted to explain why, after the 'decomposition' of the classical school (crowned by Ricardo's work), there could no longer be another bourgeois economic theory other than a 'vulgar' or 'apologetic' one. There is an absolute opposition on this point between the Operaismo tradition in Italy – which, since Mario Tronti's *Workers and Capital* (1966), has continued to radicalize the identification of labour with the 'substance' of value and capital – and the position defended by the German school of *Wertkritik* (see, notably, Robert Kurz, *Geld ohne Wert. Grundrisse zu einer Transformation der Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie*, Horlemann Verlag, Berlin, 2012), or, in a different way, the position defended by Moishe Postone in *Time, Labor, and Social Denomination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993. Postone argues that the reduction of capital to labour (a typically 'bourgeois' category) is a compromise that the 'exoteric Marx' was prepared to make with the labour movements of his time, and their preoccupation with wage-oriented demands. From the philosophical standpoint, the fundamental reference for me on this issue remains Jean-Marie Vincent, *Critique du travail. Le Faire et l'agir*, PUF, Paris, 1987.
31. See Alys Eve Weinbaum, *Wayward Reproductions: Genealogies of Race and Nation in Transatlantic Modern Thought*, Duke University Press, Durham NC and London, 2004. See also my article 'Exploitation', in *Political Concepts: A Critical Lexicon*, available at: [www.politicalconcepts.org/balibar-exploitation](http://www.politicalconcepts.org/balibar-exploitation).
32. See Robert Castel, *From Manual Workers to Wage Labourers: Transformation of the Social Question* (1995), trans. and ed. Richard Boyd, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick and London, 2003.
33. For more on the 'real subsumption' of health under the operations of financial capital, see Kaushik Sunder Rajan, *Biocapital: The Constitution of Postgenomic Life*, Duke University Press, Durham NC and London, 2006. On the elaboration of the category of 'human capital' by Gary Becker and its interpretation by Foucault, see the critical presentation by Wendy Brown in *Undoing the Demos*.
34. Over the past few years, Negri, Hardt, Moulier-Boutang and others have devoted their energies to discussing the recession of manual labour for the profit of intellectual labour and the emergence of 'cognitive capitalism'. I don't deny that their analyses are interesting, but I do wonder whether – in the spirit of Marx's 'progressivism' or, even, 'futurism' – they have not mistaken one aspect of the 'division of labour' in the current economy for the very realization of the future of social development.
35. I refer the reader once again to Saskia Sassen's *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy*, as well as to the work of more 'orthodox' economists, like Pierre-Noël Giraud, *L'homme inutile*, Odile Jacob, Paris, 2015.
36. See, for example, Danièle Linhart, *La Comédie humaine du travail. De la déshumanisation taylorienne à la sur-humanisation managériale*, Érès, Paris, 2015.





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