

The Return of the Conjuncture

Vittorio Morfino and Peter D. Thomas (eds.), *The Government of Time: Theories of Multiple Temporality in the Marxist Tradition*, Brill: Leiden and Boston, MA. December 2017, 306 pp. €109.00 hb. ISBN: 9789004291195

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A sense of impending collapse is a fixture of the present. Signs abound of the limits of a worldview of infinite accumulation in a finite world. These contradictions are not only apparent in economic and epidemiological charts; they can be felt viscerally in quotidian life. In this illuminating volume, Vittorio Morfino and Peter D. Thomas bring together voices that explore temporality and the underappreciated prospect of its multiplicity. The chapters challenge the monolithic time of the neoliberal present and shed light on the fractures along its surface. *The Government of Time* deserves strong praise as a compendium of theories of multiple temporality, serving as an orderly primer as well as a series of provocative interventions that could rejuvenate historical materialist theory and politics. These interventions substantiate the ontological contemporaneity of times in the plural, precariously weaved together in a *conjuncture*, over and against a taken-for-granted static temporal background.

Historical materialism embodies the effort to develop a methodology of persuasively scientific and grounded social analysis. Marx and historical materialists after him have therefore refined the theoretical armoury of critical political economy in line with this aim. This could be a reason why, as Massimiliano Tomba observes, Marx did not draw up a 'passe-partout historical philosophical theory' at a level of abstraction, and devoted more attention to political economy. We can nevertheless observe intimations towards such a theory across Marx's invocations of the temporal rifts dotting the European social landscape. Following these reflections, we find a Marx that did not neglect temporal multiplicity. His explorations are scattered across political writings such as those on the social 'backwardness' and philosophical 'forwardness' of Germany, the reflections on the unfolding temporality of the collective subject in the French Revolution, along with his widely overlooked reflections on the Russian rural commune *mir*, the ancient communal unit of rural life that may take on a socialist hue in the event of a rupture. Apart from these local observations, Stefano Bracaletti presents a latticework of temporalities moving through *Capital*, showing how Marx attended to interweaving processes and transpositions of cause and effect in this work.

Such divergent explorations indicate the potentials of problematised temporality and its incorporation into critical theory and social science. In addition, these chapters serve as reminders that Marx was one historical materialist, an equal practitioner of a collective and international effort, rather than the founder of an ecumenical body of thought with inviolable laws. Contrarily, historical materialism is a constitutionally incomplete and expansive 'philosophy of praxis', and this openness allows it to reflexively revisit, refine and complement its categories (following Gramsci). Reading Marx with a pertinent yet underexplored notion such as temporality in mind helps to bring to life a thinker that periodically thought through his concepts and combed through various themes simultaneously, with innovative outcomes at every turn.

Aside from accounts of Marx's multiple temporalities, the volume leaves ample space for other historical materialists, covering wide reaches of Western Marxist thought. The contributions of Ernst Bloch, Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser are brought under particular scrutiny. These readings reveal, due partially to the multilingual literacy of the contributors, notions that have heretofore evaded sweeping accounts and translations of major works. Morfino invokes *multiversum*, Bloch's outline of a temporally and geographically diverse global history against a –Eurocentric– fundamental time, and an articulation of historical change that can avoid the twin threats of linear modernism and incredulous postmodernism. As Morfino recounts, Bloch reappropriates progress from its condescending and imperialist connotations, presenting a continual and multifocal unfolding captured in the metaphor of a 'chariot with many horses'. Non-European historical civilisations find respective places across a grand humanity without a particular *telos* or retroactive narrative of modernisation. Disposing of this delimited notion of progress allows for a deeper appreciation of the particular elements across a tapestry of the myriad contours of human civilisations. Over a topography of cosmopolitan steps towards the (re)foundation of a classless society and points of darkness, this 'expansion' of the conceptual content of history is at once heartening and humbling.

The imputation to history of a Hegelian endpoint, as we can deduce from Bloch's rich philosophical vocabulary, is a crude materialist reproduction of a monolithic and self-contained History. Any given present, from this perspective, is a self-referential culmination of a linear process, conceptually barring the non-contemporaneous from its substantial content. Hence, as Althusser states and Thomas underlines, it is not without reason that there has not been, nor can there be, a transformative politics of a Hegelian register; once an 'essential section' is taken as an immediate reflection of a historical essence, those elements that sit uneasily with its unifying temporal frame are glossed over.

In other words, there is nothing that can escape the essential determinations of this totalising backdrop. Thomas' highly informed chapter counterposes an interweaving of times that profoundly blurs the 'present'. In this light, the term has analytic utility as a shorthand for an otherwise irreducibly complex real temporality. An etymologically informed return to the notion of *conjuncture*, once prominent in post-war French theory, is a requisite for a cogent elaboration of multiple temporality. Following Althusser and Gramsci, two thinkers often superficially and wrongly seen as lying at opposite poles, Thomas argues that the apparent unity of the present is retrospectively imposed as 'accomplished fact', and hegemonically sustained as a flat, inevitable moment.

Thomas goes further than other conceptualisations of the present –including mine– that subject it to temporally diverse inflections. This treatment disputes the ontological and theoretical autonomy of the present from the multiple times that constitute it. Heterodox approaches to historical time can be organised under 'archaeological' and 'cartographical' approaches. According to the former, the present houses longitudinally diverse layers of temporality, at least some of which continue to permeate its texture. And according to the latter, its spatial undulations and heterogeneity are emphasised. Both of these conceptions, it needs to be said, are more sophisticated than a facile localisation of the present as a point on a straight line. This would amount to an uncritical espousal of *chronos*: time as a quantitative, uniform flow, over the rough and choppy temporality of *kairos*: the qualitatively distinct time in which, for Walter Benjamin, messianic and redemptive moments were manifested. In sum, the 'present' of the singular point on a line can be described as (x). Its archaeological and cartographical expansions facilitate a more robust appreciation of its depth and breadth, identified now as a set of coordinates (x, y, z). However, Thomas maintains that these perspectives -which he describes in a more sophisticated way than presented here- still maintain the 'essential section' of a self-same present, no matter how uneven. The present as *kampfplatz*, a terrain of political contestation, falls short of illuminating a revolutionary political line; it reproduces a 'structural spatialisation' of a given object –the present– and competing contemplative subjects, a notion which would raise the ire of Althusser, who had always protested against his structuralist characterisation.

For Thomas, Althusser and Gramsci have composed the groundwork for an alternative to the autonomous present. Social reproduction takes place along relatively discrete levels with 'times' of their own, and the assumption of an 'objective' reference time is a figment of ideological misrecognition. In its place, it is apt to take up these times within the 'articulation, displacement and torsion' that harmonizes them, at the *clinamen* where discrete elements conjoin for a precarious

moment - which, in the historical scale, may last decades or ages. Such articulations may take on a formidable stability, as a juridico-politically imposed temporal order can establish itself for long stretches of time. However, their unity in a present is always tied together as a *fait accompli*, and their *givenness* is in itself an ideological ruse wherein the powerful conjure up a self-image of their inevitable permanence. Taking this correspondence between the empirical social formation and conceptual models presupposes a structure, or in Thomas' terms, a 'totalised hierarchy of elements whose relation is fixed prior to their relation with the totality itself'.

The continual unwinding implicated in processes of articulation finds expression in the *conjuncture*, a term that comes up in both Althusser and Gramsci's works in remarkably similar ways. Referring to the fleeting yet forceful synchronisations of various temporalities, the conjuncture is the particular moment of the interweaving and conjoining of relational elements. As opposed to the objective *kampfplatz*, this relativisation of the present has significant political consequences. Political subjects with transitional goals are no longer only a side on the objective political chessboard. Temporal relationality also comes into focus. The task of transformative politics is not solely to promote an alternative 'present', but to radically engage in a defiant non-identitarianism with the dominant temporal order by relating to the conjuncture in ways that can unravel it while binding together novel articulations. In this way, revolutionary politics cuts through essential sections of all sorts, and tethers the struggles of the past to the becoming of future societies. This inquiry into the multiple temporalities of Althusser and Gramsci underlines their points of contact and possibilities of mutual translation in terms of strategy, as the political task described above can also be expressed in terms inspired by the conceptual repositories of both thinkers: multi-temporal hegemonic activity can bind together new lines of ruptural fusion.

Morfino explains how atemporal politics is far from a concern solely entertained by democratic thinkers: Friedrich Nietzsche, in fact, had proposed that the 'masses', or the 'mud and clay' strata of society, blindly lived in the present, and only the 'great individual' could experience, purvey and handle the untimely. This elitist perspective on the untimely, non-conformist attitude to the present is undoubtedly politically objectionable, but it could be observed today in the exaltation of neo-fascist figures and heads of government at the cost of the erosion of already battered liberal democratic norms. As neoliberalism has laid waste to our economic and cultural lives, and we continue to bear the burden of its decimation of social welfare systems, 'anti-establishment' sentiment is only likely to increase. Its appropriation by the right is neither acceptable nor inevitable, but requires a rejuvenated political imaginary. The fundamentals necessary for a radical non-identity with the *status quo* come

through in the interventions across *The Government of Time*. As the temporal cohesion of the present has lately been shattered, what better place to chart ways to overcome it than a radical critique of the conjuncture?