

# Stephen Tumino



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# A Class(ical) Preface

The triumphalist capitalism of the neoliberal period has ended in 'a miserable fit of the blues'. As in all mourning periods, it is mixed with melancholic recriminations that speak a desire for its return. It is mourned not as itself, but as a series of 'ends' — the end of democracy, the end of the middle-class, the end of unipolarity, the end of geo-political stability, the end of peace and security, the end of humans and the biosphere, the end of the future,... — which all express the secret hope for a new capitalism to-come, a capitalism beyond capitalism, with a renewed sense of justice and possibility. In the gap between the triumphalist 'idea' and its miserable 'reality', newer 'indirect apologetics' of capitalism are endlessly produced in the idioms of left theory, which, while focusing on 'the atrocities of capitalism', explains them as 'attributes not of capitalism but of all human existence and existence in general'.2 It is the task of these (post)humanist ontologies to spiritualize the existing class relations, and, in doing so, block explanations of the 'polycrisis' that uncover its cause in the social ontology of market relations. In this way, they seek to prevent any movement beyond the existing property relations in which the left apologists are recognized and rewarded for their service to capital.

Because the mystification of the materialist roots of the crises only defers coming to terms with what is required to change it, a host of 'morbid symptoms' (Gramsci) have emerged in left cultural theory that exhibit all the progressive stages of grief: from the 'elegiac' mourning of (post)marxism, which seeks a substitute for the revolutionary proletariat in 'cognitive workers' (Negri, Berardi), to the 'melancholic' resentment at the failure of (post)marxism to articulate a true Marxism beyond Marxism worthy of the name (Badiou, Zizek), and, finally, an 'endless' mourning that oscillates between 'remain[ing] faithful to a

<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, 'The Manifesto of the Communist Party', *Karl Marx/Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, 50 vols (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), 6, pp. 477–519 (p. 510).

<sup>2</sup> Georg Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason* (London: The Merlin Press, 1980), pp. 202–3.

certain spirit of Marxism', while making its peace with capitalism as a 'phantomatic mode of production' without the concept of 'social class' (Derrida, Butler). From Berardi's affirmation of 'depression' in place of the 'identification with socialism' as the 'positive possibility of changing social relations', to Žižek's missives on ontological 'despair' and calls for a 'modest realist left which has positive proposals of what to do' because it fundamentally accepts 'we cannot obviously step out of capitalism', and, Butler's embracing a 'politics of mourning' while bemoaning the 'resurgence of left orthodoxy' and a 'materialism based in an objective analysis of class', the transpatriotic left is busy manufacturing a timeless capitalism that is immune to critique so as to make their own allegiance to capital appear like a principled opposition.

The left's mourning politics are annotations of Derrida's late theory of 'general economy', which is itself a reiteration of Bataille, in which 'the work of mourning' is made a figure of 'work in general' and thus the basis of a new 'phantomatic mode of production' beyond capitalism.<sup>5</sup> The new 'phantomatic' capitalism, unlike the old terrestrial capitalism, is based not on the materialist appropriation of surplus-value from unpaid labor, but the 'exappropriation' of immaterial values by the 'spectral spiritualization that is at work in any *tekhnē*'.<sup>6</sup> In this technological determinism, Marx's concept of the capitalist mode of production is rejected for being a 'restricted economy' because, as it is centered on the 'destructive consuming' of surplus-value, it 'would only reorganize the world of work' and leave the 'sovereignty' of the concept of value as capital intact.<sup>7</sup> By contrast, what is truly

<sup>3</sup> Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci, ed. and trans. by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), p. 276; Jacques Derrida, Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International (London: Taylor and Francis, 2012), pp. 69, 95, 110, 120. On the 'elegaic', 'melancholic', and 'endless' as stages of Freud's mourning theory, see, Tammy Clewell, 'Mourning Beyond Melancholia: Freud's Psychoanalysis of Loss', Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association, 52.1 (2004), pp. 43–67.

<sup>4</sup> Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, 'Sabotage and Self-Organization', *Ill Will*, 6 May 2024; Charlie Nash, 'What I like about coronavirus by Slavoj Žižek'. *Spectator, USA* (2020); Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2020); 'Merely Cultural'. *New Left Review* (1998), pp. 33–44 (p. 36).

<sup>5</sup> Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, Zone, 1991. Derrida, *Specters*, pp. 120–21.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. pp. 120–21.

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Derrida, Writing and Difference, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), pp. 342, 439.

'revolutionary', according to Derrida, is the 'general economy' in which the 'exappropriation' of values by teletechnology makes possible the 'significative reappropriation of surplus value' in culture and in turn reveals how 'there is no sovereignty itself' in 'relation to the loss of meaning' in general.8 Because the decentering of 'sovereignty' by teletechnological exappropriation and its discursive reappropriation 'dissolves the values of meaning', sovereignty represents 'the impossible' that Derrida equates with an 'undeconstructible justice' to come. 9 The 'phantomatic' mode of production, in other words, 'is not capitalism anymore; it is something worse' — what Derrida calls 'teletechnology', and others call 'technofeudalism' — in comparison with which the normal capitalism of daily wage-slavery seems better because at least it affirms the sovereign value of 'free speech'. 10 Any critique-al opposition to capitalism based on the contradictory antagonism between capital and labor in production is dissolved in the left's mourning and melancholia over the loss of linguistic freedom in the market, so as to make their own brand of affirmative leftism for a more deregulated capitalism appear as a more 'revolutionary' Marxism beyond Marxism.

The left's mourning politics, which hypercynically oppose market domination while making peace with class exploitation, also replace the proletariat with the 'precariat' on the premise that 'the only thing worse than being exploited is not being exploited' (i.e., deprived of one's 'human rights'). Thus, for Butler, a truly radical politics 'begins

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., pp. 342, 439.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., pp. 342, 439; Derrida, Specters, p. 33.

Mackenzie Wark, Capital Is Dead: Is This Something Worse? (New York: Verso, 2019), p. 5; Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler, Echographies of Television: Filmed Interviews (Boston and New York: Polity Press/Blackwell Publishers, 2002). p. 37.

Resistance to 'technofeudalism', which is really a version of Baran and Sweezy's revisionist theory of 'monopoly capitalism' for the terminally online, has replaced the critique of capitalism on the North Atlantic left: see, Brenner, Dean, Hudson, Mazzucato, and Varoufakis. Technofeudalism is an example of 'phantomatic' economics in how it defines value as an outcome of the technological domination of the market to appropriate monopoly 'rent', rather than the exploitation of labor that produces surplus-value in production, which is the source of value that circulates in the market as wages, profits, and rent. Technology is not a posthuman source of value: it is 'dead labor' that transfers value, it does not create it (Karl Marx, Capital, A Critique of Political Economy, vol. I, Karl Marx/Frederick Engels: Collected Works, 50 vols [Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1983], 35, pp. 374–508 [p. 426]).

<sup>11</sup> Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011); Michael Denning, 'Wageless Life', *New Left Review*, 66.6 (2010),

with the precarious life of the Other', following Levinas' argument that the 'more persecuted' a people are 'than the proletariat itself, which is exploited but not persecuted, the more they represent 'a universality higher than that of a class exploited and struggling'. 12 According to Butler, the precariat, who have replaced the proletariat and made capitalism other than itself, are 'the collective for whom work is elusive, temporary, and debt has become unpayable'. 13 By saving farewell to the working class, Butler says goodbye to Mr. Socialism as well.14 They argue that more 'radical forms' of social organization beyond capitalism are by definition impossible because 'no final control can be secured' in a world in which 'my life [of First World privilege] depends [...] on anonymous others' who lack such privilege.<sup>15</sup> Communism, a class-less and therefore state-less society, 'cannot be an ultimate value', in other words, because as the State as such is necessarily constituted 'by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies', in a world in which one is constantly 'at risk of losing those attachments' due to 'larger global processes', 'no final control can be secured'.16 In this geospatial imaginary, Butler is effectively aligned with the evangelist in concluding that, 'you always have the poor with you' (Matthew 26:11). 17 While claiming 'not knowing how to theorize [...] the basis for global political community', Butler is clearly recycling the sociology of 'risk society' to divide the social according to 'bodies that matter' because they are 'protected' by State power from those that are vulnerable to the risks of the global market, so as to affirm the contradictions of capitalism as the ontological fate of the 'inoperative community'.18 And yet, despite 'not knowing' how to theorize the

pp. 79-97 (p. 79).

<sup>12</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. xviii; Emmanuel Lévinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. by Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019), pp. 98, 113.

<sup>13</sup> Judith Butler, 'The Inorganic Body in the Early Marx: A Limit-Concept of Anthropocentrism', *Radical Philosophy*, 2.06, Winter (2019), n. pag.

<sup>14</sup> André Gorz, Farewell to the Working Class: An Essay on Post-Industrial Socialism (London, Pluto Press, 1997); Antonio Negri, Raf Valvola Scelsi, and Peter Thomas, Goodbye Mr. Socialism (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2008).

<sup>15</sup> Precarious Life, pp. xii, 20.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., pp. xii, 20.

<sup>17</sup> Brettler, Marc Zvi, Carol A. Newsom, and Pheme Perkins, eds, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha: New Revised Standard Version*, 5th edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. xii; Ulrich Beck, Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity (Los Angeles: Sage

social, Butler is quite certain nonetheless that a 'materialism based in an objective analysis of class' is impossible.<sup>19</sup>

Butler's ethics of precarity demonstrates the 'hypercynicism' of mourning politics. Hypercynicism, as Teresa Ebert explains, is not merely a personal attitude (cynicism/kynicism), but represents itself as 'a response to the more complex processes in the material base of an increasingly more global capitalism', while occulting its basis in class exploitation by using the language of the affective as the 'limit of critique'.20 Despite dissolving the basis of social theory in bodily feelings of vulnerability and precarity, according to which there can be no determination as to its cause as the body and its affects are thought to exceed the conceptual, in Butler's left orthodoxy there can be no critique-al questioning of the 'politics of mourning' as class ideology because the 'precarity of life' constitutes the 'limit of the arguable' beyond which any other 'way[ ] of figuring these conditions within the sphere of politics' such as to 'rid the world of this fact' would necessarily perpetuate 'violence' toward the other.<sup>21</sup> Violence is always already local and causeless in Butler's politics as an ontological real that belies history, rather than caused by the existing class structure, so as to put an end to the red critique of capitalism.

The hypercynicism of Butler's mourning politics is clear in their response to the 'war' in Gaza.<sup>22</sup> Butler frames their response as a critique of the contemporary *Denkverbot* of media representations that only allows 'hopeless moral outrage' so that 'we cannot even stage the debate over whether Israeli military rule of the region is racial apartheid or colonialism'.<sup>23</sup> Without 'making clear a moral and political position' on the nature of the State of Israel, Butler argues, it is impossible

Publications, 1992); Jane Franklin, (ed), *The Politics of Risk Society* (London: Polity Press), 1998; Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. by Peter Connor, trans. by Lisa Garbus et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

<sup>19 &#</sup>x27;Merely Cultural,' p. 36.

<sup>20</sup> Teresa L. Ebert, The Task of Cultural Critique (University of Illinois Press, 2009), p. 160; Rita Felski, The Limits of Critique (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015).

<sup>21</sup> Precarious Life, pp. xii, 19.

<sup>22</sup> Judith Butler, 'The Compass of Mourning', London Review of Books, 45.20, 19 Oct. 2023, n. pag. The following analysis of Butler's essay is based on 'The Left Travesty on Gaza', The Red Critique, 17, 2024.

<sup>23 &#</sup>x27;Compass of Mourning', n. pag.

to arrive at 'a normative aspiration that goes beyond momentary condemnation' as to the question 'what form of life would release the region from violence such as this?'<sup>24</sup> On Butler's framing, the question of the political and the nature of the State hangs entirely on how best to represent the 'violence, the present violence, the history of violence and its many forms' if we are 'to create a future in which violence [...] came to an end'.<sup>25</sup> In this way, Butler conflates a State that would allow its voiceless victims to be heard with the arrival of a future in which violence comes to an end without the need to end capitalism. In other words, Butler's highest normative political aspiration is a future form of State that would not be violent, despite the fact that the existence of the State itself testifies to an unresolvable class contradiction in the relations of production.

The statist solution Butler imagines may politically put an end to violence through more freedom of speech, while maintaining the structural violence of class, and is a direct result of their theory of the social as divided 'forms of life' that differ in their relation to the State: between 'bodies that matter' because they are symbolically valued members of existing nation States, and the precariat, who is excluded from representation in any State. Butler's social theory denies the existence of the proletariat as 'a class of civil society which is not a class of civil society' at the center of capitalism, and thus denies the conditions of life of the majority of Palestinians in Gaza whose lives they are mourning.<sup>26</sup> In this way Butler also ignores that what the Palestinians need is not merely political freedom, but what all workers need: economic freedom from need. It is not the Palestinians' 'exclusion' from the nation-State that explains the conditions of life in Gaza as well as what may politically be achieved, but the opposite: it is the nature of their inclusion in the class relations as a part of the proletariat (which is not the part that is directly productive of value), that determines the authoritarian form of the State and the political horizon of possibility for socialism there. This is because, as Marx explains:

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., n. pag.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., n. pag.

<sup>26</sup> Karl Marx, 'Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Law*. Introduction', Karl Marx/Frederick Engels: Collected Works, 50 vols (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), 3, pp. 175–87 (p. 186).

The specific economic form in which unpaid surplus labour is pumped out of the direct producers determines the relationship of domination and servitude, as this grows directly out of production itself and reacts back on it in turn as a determinant. On this is based the entire configuration of the economic community arising from the actual relations of production, and hence also its specific political form.<sup>27</sup>

It is their separation from ownership of the means of production that makes the Palestinians in Gaza subject to the law of value as a 'reserve army of labor' to be used to cheapen the cost of productive labor in the region, not their unjust 'exclusion' from cultural representation.<sup>28</sup>

The war(s) over Gaza between Israel and the US versus Hamas, with support from the Islamic Republic (formerly known as Iran), 'are economic and are ultimately about controlling resources in the interests of controlling the price of labor'.<sup>29</sup> These nation-states and their proxies all use nationalism, which divides workers into 'us' and 'them' categories of (il)legality and (il)legitimacy, to keep the workers exploited. Racism, in short, is 'the secret by which the capitalist class maintains its power' because '[1] abour cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded'. What is mystified by the mourning left is that even without the occupation, whether in their own nation-state or a reformed state of Israel, the Palestinians of Gaza, like the workers in South Africa after the official end of apartheid, would remain a source of exploited cheap labor in the region because '[r]ight can never be higher than the economic structure of society'. 31 Possessing 'equal rights', or what are called 'human rights', means having the freedom to be equally exploited by capital. The North Atlantic left, however, reads the class politics of Gaza, which exposes 'human rights' as the freedom to trade in the market, as a mark of being insufficiently attuned to otherness and thus a sign of 'incivility'. Class analysis of Gaza is taken to be disrespectful

<sup>27</sup> Karl Marx, Capital, Volume III, Karl Marx/Frederick Engels: Collected Works, 50 vols (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1983), 37, p. 777–78.

<sup>28</sup> Marx, Capital, vol. I, p. 626.

<sup>29</sup> Rob Wilkie, 'In the Case of Gaza', *The Red Critique*, 17, 2024, http://redcritique.org/WinterSpring2024/inthecaseofgaza.htm.

<sup>30</sup> Karl Marx, 'Letter to Sigfrid Meyer and August Vogt', London, 9 April 1870, Karl Marx/Frederick Engels: Collected Works, 50 vols (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1988), 43, pp. 471–76 (p. 475); Capital, vol. I, p. 305.

<sup>31</sup> Karl Marx, 'Critique of the Gotha Programme', *Karl Marx/Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, 50 vols (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1984), 24, p. 87.

of the cultural other on the left because it denies the need for a cultural politics for those subject to racialist violence. Class critique is silenced as a lack of civility so as to present the allegiance of the left to capital as the limit of the radical.

Butler, in the name of a 'different political morality' that would acknowledge 'all the horror there is to represent', maintains the bourgeois framing of events in Gaza by arguing that 'the history of violence, mourning and outrage as it is lived by Palestinians' is part of 'the history of colonial violence' rather than contemporary capitalism.<sup>32</sup> Leaving aside the allusion to the history of colonialism as a story of racialized violence — it is actually the history of capital accumulation — which Butler invokes not to explain but to mystify in the manner of Joseph Conrad by placing this 'horror' outside history ('where does this horror begin and where does it end?'), the root of the conflict in Gaza here is made affective (lived experience, mourning, outrage), and the goal of politics is therefore also immaterial: to recognize the horror of Gaza and, in so doing, symbolically value those whose lives have been devalued by racialist violence.<sup>33</sup>

It is not racial violence that explains the war(s) in Gaza, however, but the structural violence of class that daily through its inhuman economic logic determines who lives and who dies without the need for any overt political violence and despite any racial/moral justification or condemnation. The violence used against the Palestinians in Gaza — by Israel and Hamas — is wielded to regulate the cost of labor in the region as the Palestinians there constitute an 'industrial reserve army of labor' — 'a disposable mass of human material always ready for exploitation' that is 'a necessary product of accumulation or of the development of wealth on a capitalist basis'. By making Gaza a 'symbol of European oppression and colonialism', the North Atlantic left conflates the actual conditions of life of the Palestinians in Gaza as a cheap source of labor power for borderless capital with the metaphysics of racial violence, so as to affirm market relations as the limit of the possible. But the condition of the possible of the possibl

<sup>32 &#</sup>x27;Compass of Mourning', n. pag.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., n. pag.

<sup>34</sup> Marx, Capital, vol. I, p. 626.

<sup>35</sup> Slavoj Žižek, 'Jews and Palestinians are both Victims of Western Racism', *Haaretz*, 12 Dec. 2023. For more on the class politics of Gaza, see, 'Dossier on Gaza' in *The Red Critique*, 17, 2024.

Butler takes a 'matterist' or 'object-al' orientation to Palestinians lives, rather than a materialist one, by assuming that the root of the crisis in Gaza is the lack of estimation that 'Palestinian lives matter', which reduces them to a condition of 'bare life' as so many bodies traumatized by State violence, rather than a source of labor power that is opportunistically used to increase the value of borderless capital.<sup>36</sup> As in nationalist discourse, what is thought to be lacking is the freedom for Palestinians to express their cultural identity and thereby acquire the self-esteem necessary for self-determination. The politics of class that comes out of the social conflicts over material resources are thus displaced with the 'politics of recognition', which relies on the concept of the political as an autonomous cultural realm where the rule of capital as a real abstraction is subsumed in the affective concrete, where an 'undeconstructible justice' stages its 'infinite vigilance' against the 'violence of metaphysics'. 37 As in Hegel's master/slave dialectic, here the problem of the political becomes how to invent a novel symbolic context where the proper recognition and self-estimation of others may take place beyond the contest to the death demanded by the existing order. Butler adopts the left Hegelian solution and imagines the inversion of ideology from within, the transvaluation of values, to be the only true solution, rather than the class critique of ideology from its outside.

Butler's mourning politics is cynical in how the justification for opposing the dominant 'contextualization' of what is happening in Gaza relies on the recognition that since any 'framework' would have to 'consider some lives to be more grievable than others' it must necessarily defer the arrival of 'true equality and justice'. But, as Butler's affective framing in mourning the loss of politically non-violent others in Gaza equally does so, their mourning politics is actually hypercynical because what it means in the end is that 'no future of true peace can be imagined', and all that can be done is to mourn the loss of any truly emancipatory

<sup>36</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020).

<sup>37</sup> Nancy Fraser, and Axel Honneth. *Redistribution or Recognition?: A Political-Philosophical Exchange* (New York: Verso, 2003); Jacques Derrida, 'Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority", in *Acts of Religion*, trans. and intro. by Gil Anidjar (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 228–98 (pp. 234, 243).

<sup>38 &#</sup>x27;Compass of Mourning', n. pag.

goal.<sup>39</sup> By marking any explanation of violence that goes beyond their affective framing as equally violent in its silencing of the suffering of others, Butler reveals that the 'true' goal of their 'politics' is sentimental and reactionary, rather than materialist and transformative. The affective is deployed, in other words, not to intervene into the existing conditions with an explanation of their root cause, which is necessary to change it, but to deflect awareness away from the class outside (exploitation) onto the psychological 'inside' (mourning), where 'desire and its object are one and the same thing' and the intensity of feelings defines the limits of the possible. 40 Butler's writings on Gaza as a result, give a 'picture thinking' (Hegel) of events that, as in the mainstream commentary, depicts the 'horror' and 'violence' as occasions for empathy, but that refuses to explain its abstract causality with the 'force of abstraction'. 41 Because such an explanation requires 'conceiv[ing] the sensuous world as the total living sensuous activity of the individuals composing it', by failing to conceptualize the class politics of Gaza, Butler is therefore

compelled to take refuge in the 'higher perception' and in the ideal [...] and thus to relapse into idealism at the very point where the communist materialist sees the necessity, and at the same time the condition, of a transformation [...] of the social structure.<sup>42</sup>

In Butler's moralizing leftism it is only those who 'deplore violence and express our horror' who 'help to create the non-violent world' to come, which must always remain a spiritual center ('true equality and justice') rather than a material reality (the abolition of class).<sup>43</sup> The spiritual ideal of non-violence is thus made into the most infallible means for the realization of 'true' or 'ethical socialism' ('a normative aspiration' of 'a future in which violence comes to an end'), while ignoring the

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., n. pag.

<sup>40</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 26.

<sup>41</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. by A.V. Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 35, 463; Karl Marx, 'Preface to the First German Edition of *Capital'*, *Karl Marx/Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, 50 vols (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1983), 35, pp. 7–11 (p. 8).

<sup>42</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, 'The German Ideology', *Karl Marx/Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, 50 vols (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), 5, p. 41.

<sup>43 &#</sup>x27;Compass of Mourning', n. pag.

materialist violence of class which is necessary to change it.<sup>44</sup> The true radical in this political morality tale is one who obscures the structural violence of class society with the metaphysics of violence, but whose 'heart goes out' to all non-violent victims of politically 'violent' speech.<sup>45</sup>

Not only is Butler's framing of events in Gaza not a 'different political morality' as they claim, but because it cynically immunizes the class relations from critique while deploring violence in general, it also spiritualizes the goal of politics into an impossible 'justice to come'. <sup>46</sup> This spiritualization of the conflicts is why despite denying that what is happening in Gaza 'is not simply a failure of political empathy', this is precisely what Butler ends up affirming by making 'mourning' the imaginary basis for realizing a non-violent world. For Butler, 'true equality and justice' is only realized in an affective commons that banishes materialist class consciousness.

The left's mourning politics is hypercynical in how it gives a knowing wink to the audience of their textual performances that signals that although they 'know' that the affective has always been used to undermine radical critique, they also un-know it by making 'the work of mourning' the basis of a 'phantomatic' capitalism without social classes, in order to make their own brand of cultural reformism appear to be the limit of the political. Their mourning politics has all the signs of what Hegel calls the 'Unhappy Consciousness' as a result. 47 Caught between the necessity of revolutionary class politics and opportunistic adjustment to going along to get along in the market, they make 'what should be' appear indistinguishable from 'what is'. In this way, they deny the materialist connection between 'the most radical rupture with traditional ideas' and 'the most radical rupture with traditional property relations'. 48 This book is the exact opposite: in its analyses it opposes to the blue thinking of leftist hypercynicism the principled politics of writing red, which reconnects cultural theory to its class basis.

<sup>44</sup> Marx and Engels, Manifesto, pp. 510–13; V. I. Lenin, Materialism and Empirio-Criticism, V. I. Lenin Collected Works, 45 vols (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), 14, p. 368.

<sup>45 &#</sup>x27;Compass of Mourning', n. pag.

<sup>46</sup> Derrida, 'Force of Law', p. 243.

<sup>47</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. by James Black Baillie (Harper Torchbooks, 1967), pp. 189–219.

<sup>48</sup> Marx and Engels, Manifesto, p. 504.

## Thinking Blue Versus Writing Red

In its chromatic spectralysis of cultural texts, Thinking Blue/Writing Red is, despite appearances, a 'classical' text. It is classical not in its subject matter — which is diverse and ranges in its readings from texts of literary modernism (Melville's narratives, Pauline materialism,...) and high theory (Marxism, (post)humanism, new communism,...), to popular culture (Twin Peaks, Beyoncé's performances, ) and 'current events' (Trump, Covid,...) — but in its analytical mode. In its analyses it argues that there is no agency (change) without reflection (critique), no concrete realization of freedom (the new), without the abstract recognition of necessity (theory). In this it echoes the etymological origins of critique in ancient Greek (kritikos: discernment, judgment) and its medical associations with crisis (krisis: turning point) and kairos (opportunity) in the diagnosis and treatment of disease, in both the physical body as well as in the body politic.<sup>49</sup> In this classical tradition, there is no kritik without krisis, no kairos without kritik, as critique is necessary to discern the causes behind 'what is' to effectuate the concrete realization of what 'ought to be'.

Besides being classical in this philosophical sense, the analytical mode featured here is also, and more importantly, class-ical in the modern sense of 'radical' in that 'critique represents a class'.<sup>50</sup> As radical (i.e., root) knowledge, critique 'includes in its comprehension and affirmative recognition of the existing state of things, at the same time also, the recognition of the negation of that state, of its inevitable breaking up', and, therefore, 'exceeds', as Derrida puts it, the scholastic containment of critique as 'self-critique' that is 'most proper in the philosophical as such' because it foregrounds 'the mode of production

<sup>49</sup> See, *Corpus Hippocraticum*, and, Aristotle's *Politics* (1289b). Because 'in classical Greek the subsequent separation into two domains of meaning –that of a 'subjective crisis' and an 'objective crisis' — were still covered by the same term', the subjective diagnosis of disease that uncovered its 'is-ness' (critique) was also understood to be the means for its objective prognosis (crisis) in terms of its becoming (Reinhart Koselleck, 'Crisis', trans. by Michaela W. Richter, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 67. 2 (April 2006), pp. 357–400 [p. 359]).

<sup>50</sup> Karl Marx, 'Afterword to the Second German Edition of *Capital'*, *Karl Marx/Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, 50 vols (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1996), 35, pp. 2–20 (p. 16).

and reproduction of the philosophical'.51 Derrida's recognition of the institutional containment of 'outside' (radical) critique to 'immanent' (philosophical) critique is not contested but reinscribed in his theory of writing as différance (with an a), which he understands as suspending the 'logic of the decidable, in other words, of opposition, whether dialectical or not, whether an idealist or materialist dialectics'. 52 Such a move of suspending the dialectic of history in the writerly imaginary is symptomatic of what I am here calling thinking blue. By 'thinking blue' what I mean is the institutionalized mode of immanent critique that undoes the dialectic of the conceptual from within to produce an intellectual impasse that accepts what is as what ought to be, and thus, which must always end in 'a fit of the blues'.53 Through cultural mediations that defer and delay the implication of knowledge in the social totality, blue thinking displaces the 'outside' knowledge that workers need for their emancipation from capital to instead construct a virtual commons that oscillates with surface differences and emotional intensities, but that resists fundamental 'change', which requires the overcoming of differences with sober senses to produce the new international communism.

Derrida's understanding of critique as suspending the dialectic of 'inside' and 'outside' reinscribes the binaries of culture; it does not 'exceed' them. What it marks as the 'outside' is the *nonconceptual*, which it considers 'material', as in the scholastic sense of matter as the (sensual) other of the conceptual. Différance is 'neither a word nor a concept', and like Derrida's other neologisms such as the 'trace', 'supplement', 'pharmakon', etc., it represents a 'materiality without materialism', insofar as its being is dependent on its effects upon 'thought', which makes it legible as 'text'.<sup>54</sup> As in scholastic materialism, the material here is 'matterist': it is concerned with what is 'real' in

<sup>51</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, p. 20; Jacques Derrida, 'The Crisis in the Teaching of Philosophy: Right to Philosophy 1', *Who's Afraid of Philosophy*? (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 99–116 (p. 102).

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 101.

<sup>53</sup> Marx and Engels, Manifesto, p. 510.

<sup>54</sup> Jacques Derrida, Margins of Philosophy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 3; 'Typewriter Ribbon: Limited Ink (2) ("within such limits")', Material Events: Paul de Man and the Afterlife of Theory, ed. by Tom Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), pp. 277–360 (p. 281).

itself separate from social 'praxis'.<sup>55</sup> The concept of matter, however, is itself determined historically and in its abstract form, is a reflection in thought of the commodity-form within the social relations in which labor-power is commodified and made into a thing that only exists so long as it produces profit in the market. In its cultural analyses, *Thinking Blue/Writing Red* argues that the 'outside' of critique is not the excess of thought or the extra-discursive, whether as the opacity of 'matter' or the self-difference of thought from within, but the class antagonism that produces 'what is' as well as its negation, and thus explains the phenomenal and discursive as sites of class antagonism that inform conflicting ideas of what 'ought to be'.

Knowledge of the outside, rather than its undoing ('thinking blue'), is necessary for side-taking in the agora over the shape of the social — 'writing red'.56 Red writing is an intervention into the reinscription of the outside to the terms of the inside authorized by thinking blue that implicates writing in the 'constant/resistant critique' (*kritisieren beständig*) of capital/wage-labor relations, the dialectics of which is inscribed in the ratio of exploitation in 'the working day'.<sup>57</sup> The deconstruction of the dialectic of the concept in blue thinking leaves the material logic of the dialectic in the workday intact, it does not exceed nor escape it. Red writing goes beyond the metaphysics of writing as separate from the dialectic of class relations that shape writing and explain its alienated effects as owning to contradictions in the social relations of production. Writing, on this materialist account, is not merely a 'tool' nor is it 'agential' in-itself in its self-differing, but rather a necessary relay of the 'collective worker', as writing is 'the concrete concentration of many determinations' and the 'unity of the diverse'.58 Writing is a

<sup>55</sup> Karl Marx, 'Theses on Feurebach', Karl Marx/Frederick Engels: Collected Works, 50 vols (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975), 5, pp. 3–8 (p. 3).

<sup>56</sup> Red writing is 'side-taking' not in the immediate 'spontaneous' activist sense of taking sides in the cultural conflicts over 'values' in ideology by taking up predetermined 'choices' in the market, but in the materialist sense that in class society 'polemics aimed against the ruling class are transformed at a certain moment into revolution' (Leon Trotsky, *Terrorism and Communism: A Reply to Karl Kautsky* [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1961], p. xix).

<sup>57</sup> Karl Marx, 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte', Karl Marx/Frederick Engels: Collected Works, 50 vols (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1979), 11, pp. 99–197 (p. 106); Capital, vol. I, pp. 239–243.

<sup>58</sup> Karl Marx, Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft) (London: Penguin Books, 1993), p. 101.

diverse unity of social praxis because, it is, (1) always 'practical, real consciousness' of the life activity of humans that provides the means to coordinate and transform their diverse labor practices, (2) an archive of knowledge for-itself that connects the present moment of labor with its past and thus makes possible the differentiation of scientific advances from ideological false paths, and, (3) the medium for 'social-teleological positing' that guides transformative praxis through the never-ending critique of ideology in the historical series of humans' laboring activity.<sup>59</sup>

### Outside Critique in the Teaching Machine

Blue thinking has been both instrumental in the construction of the (post)humanities as well as the current 'post-truth' culture and has also been used to teach the high-tech workforce educated in the academy to blur the 'inside' and the 'outside' so that everything is thought to be a matter of differing values and marks of taste. Among other things, what this has done to the concept of social class is to make it is 'a sort of affinity' or 'congeniality', rather than something as crude as 'property and ownership'.60 Class, in other words, is made over into a delectable sign of cultural difference to be affirmed in localities as a mark of distinction, rather than the ruthless and systemic deprivation that determines who will be well housed and educated, medically cared for and nutritionally fed — and who will not — and that explains why such disparities continue to exist in the midst of abundance. Class, in short, is made casual, rather than causal, and thus naturalized. This 'post-al' view of a capitalism beyond capitalism in which the ruthless binary of class is translated into market differences and the cultural semiotics of distinction ('classy'), is underwritten by Derrida by his reification of writing as having 'exceeded [the] logic of the decidable' such that we take part 'in a completely different historical necessity': a 'phantomatic mode of production' that requires a new sense of justice that does not subscribe to the concept of 'social class' that is foundational for the 'Marxist critique' of capitalism.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Marx and Engels, German Ideology, p. 44; György Lukács, The Ontology of Social Being: 3. Labour (London: Merlin Press, 1978), p. 3.

<sup>60</sup> Jacques Derrida, et al., A Taste for the Secret (London: Polity, 2001), pp. 84–85.

<sup>61</sup> Derrida, 'Crisis', p. 101; Specters, pp. 69, 120.

The semiotic pluralization of 'class', authorized by Derrida's deconstruction of Marx's binary class theory as rooted in exploitation, is facing serious challenges. This occurs at a time when the 'middle class' — which is another spectral effect as their professional salaries come from the hidden unpaid surplus labor of workers — is losing the cultural markers of distinction and awakening to the reality that class is, in fact, binary. Recently a video rant posted to Tik Tok went viral that posed the question: 'Where did the American dream go? What happened to the middle class?'62 'Middle class', as Ebert and Zavarzadeh have explained, is that privileged signifier in bourgeois social commentary meant to signal that Americans live in a 'post-class' society that has left the class binary of exploiters/exploited behind because class has become plural and is now an index of cultural taste pegged to an 'inventory of objects' (lifestyles), rather than an economic reality.<sup>63</sup> In the viral Tik Tok video, however, 'middle class' signals an out of touch refusal to grasp the reality that 'the world has fucking changed' and while 'there used to be upper class, middle class, lower class. It's literally turning into the ultra-wealthy and then everybody else is just poor'. The secret of Derrida's 'taste for the secret' that makes him 'prefer the secret to the non-secret' is a class denial of the class reality of 'everybody else is just poor'.

What in Derrida's allusive philosophical writings is announced in the abstract idioms of high theory as a new order of being that has surpassed class as the basis of social critique has since been fully integrated in the corporate university as 'postcritique'. In the postcritique-al academy, it is the reactionary side of deconstruction in which concepts are thought to be 'oppressive' of difference that is preserved, while its critique of writing as a sign of personal and individual freedom is placed under a discursive ban by returning to an aesthetic reading of texts based on one's singularly affective response. In the 'affective turn' of the (post) humanities, as I discuss in Chapter 4, even the immanent critique

<sup>62</sup> Alanah Khosla, 'Mother causes a storm with rant about her adult children who are struggling to pay the bills', *Daily Mail*, 7 August 2023 https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-12380023/My-hard-working-children-struggling-pay-bills-Im-tired-feeling-helpless-did-American-dream-Mother-causes-storm-rant-adult-children-struggling-bay-bills.html [accessed 8 June 2024].

<sup>63</sup> Teresa L. Ebert and Mas'ud Zavarzadeh. *Class in Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 90.

of textuality is no longer to be tolerated but dismissed — at least rhetorically as it is secretly preserved — along with Marxist ideology critique for its pathological 'neglect of emotion' and 'chronic negativity', which are taken to be sure signs of critique as such being 'insufficiently attuned to [...] otherness' because of its singular focus on uncovering ideology. <sup>64</sup> Critique, by exposing ideology, is taken to be 'the dominant metalanguage' in how it fails 'to do [...] justice' to 'the distinctive agency of art works' and 'what literature does' as 'a coactor' that helps 'make a difference'. <sup>65</sup> The 'other' as text whose affective performance is to be 'appreciated' matters more in the postcritique-al (post)humanities than how texts construct the obviousness of social relations that maintains exploitative social differences.

Felski echoes Latour in arguing that the radical project of critique has failed because not only has critique become a culturally normative metalanguage and is therefore no longer 'outside' and oppositional, but also because its singular focus on exposing ideology fails to consider how the affective value of texts may help bring about more inclusive and just social practices. However, what this argument reveals is that 'postcritique' is not a 'new' inquiry into the agency of texts as is claimed, but a re-branding of the familiar post-al theory that makes the 'de-hierarchization' of cultural values the limit of social justice by separating the text from its roots in class exploitation. Felski is not opposing the 'dominant' mode of critique of 'the last four decades', as she claims.66 She has no problem with equating the culturally normative with the oppression of difference, which is the libertarian dogma that the dominant immanent and reformist criticism of post-al cultural theory teaches. Such a rhetorical distancing from the dominant is necessary for left intellectuals to maintain their appearance of radicality while providing the high-tech workforce with the affective make-up required in the cyber-economy by limiting the concept of agency to the merely surface innovation of cultural appearances. However, because the market for such skills in beginning to wear thin and the workforce is demanding more radical changes in social

<sup>64</sup> Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski, eds., *Critique and Postcritique* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), pp. 8, 11–12.

<sup>65</sup> Felski, Limits of Critique, pp. 5, 12–13.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., pp. 3-4.

relations, Felski is forced to diffuse the real object of her postcritique, which is to justify the exclusion from the (post)humanities of 'critique as outside', i.e., critique as a 'mode of militant reading' that is 'engaged in some kind of radical intellectual and/or political work' against 'oppressive social forces'. <sup>67</sup> Postcritique, like deconstructive immanent critique, opposes 'outside' critique by refusing to 'look[ ] behind the text — for its hidden causes, [and] determining conditions' and thereby reifies the surfaces of culture as an 'immanent [...] weightless, disembodied, freewheeling dance'.68 Where Felski introduces a 'difference' to distinguish her own brand of culturalism from the many other brands on offer in the academic marketplace is by using a lessalienating language than the old discourse theory previously required. Instead, she adopts the 'new materialist' language of Latour's actornetwork theory and talks about texts as a 'coproduction between actors'.69 Of course the 'lesson' here teaches the future workforce that exploiter/exploited relations are overcome through the aesthetic: when we learn to appreciate exploitative differences as merely cultural differences that fuel the feeling that life is worth living and give 'hope' in market society. Felski is not opposed to 'critique'; she is in fact quite eager to critique the 'radical' critique for that which she, following arch-reactionaries like Nietzsche, considers its 'nay-saying' rather than 'yay-saying'. To other words, critique that is non-affirmative of the existing has no place in Felski's version of the (post)humanities because its 'sadly depleted language of value' will not serve to sell, or, to use her word, 'legitimate', the university at a time of crisis.<sup>71</sup> The idea that 'the demand to give up illusions' is 'sad', however, is only displaced mourning over the 'state of affairs which needs illusions'.72

The negativity of critique that Felski dismisses is not, as she claims, an expression of a 'bad' affect or a pathological 'disposition', nor is it

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., pp. 1–2, 7.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., pp. 11-12.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>72</sup> Karl Marx, 'Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Law. Introduction'*, *Karl Marx/Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, 50 vols (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), 3, pp. 175–87 (p. 176).

a matter of 'style'. These are all tropes of a reformist cultural criticism to submerge critique in the affective and to affirm its own moody cultural politics as what someone once called 'capitalist realism': the inability to even imagine an alternative to capitalism.<sup>73</sup> As I will explain, the 'negativity' of critique has nothing to do with a subjective attitude, as in the oft-quoted and hollowed out fragment of Gramsci about the 'pessimism of the intellect' and its philosophical elaboration in Adornian negative dialectics and Žižek's negative ontology.<sup>74</sup> Critique is the negation of negation in the totality: a surfacing of class antagonism, for example, that explains why capitalism now can only be affirmed by denial of the self-negation at the root of its social ontology — the exploitation (and increasing abolition) of social labor for private profit.

It is ironic that Felski who does everything to deny 'critique as outside' and deprive it of any 'specialness' is herself denying the place and role of critique in the exploitative class relations. She is of course aware of this historic function, which is why her arguments are so invested in exposing the lack of allegiance of 'militant' critique to the corporate flattening of the humanities as (post)humanities. The affirmative denial of the class basis of critique can be seen in Felski's text, which in this way directly echoes Latour, as I explain in Chapter 12, in its anxiety that the 'exceptionalism' of critique as 'outside' the ideological has become 'normative' and permeated the culture. It does not occur to Felski or Latour to ask why the affective critique of outside critique as 'exceptional' is needed if it is so obviously un-exceptional because outside critique has become normative. Furthermore, how can the 'exclusiveness' of critique, which Felski claims perpetuates an out-of-touch academic jargon, be taken as a sign of the 'legitimation crisis' of the humanities when its popularity shows

<sup>73</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'Future City', New Left Review 21 (2003), pp. 65–79; Slavoj Žižek, 'The Spectre of Ideology', in Mapping Ideology, ed. by Slavoj Žižek (New York: Verso Books, 2012), pp. 1–33; Mark Fisher, Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative? (London: Zero Books, 2022).

<sup>74</sup> As Engels explains, 'Negation in dialectics does not mean simply saying no, or declaring that something does not exist, or destroying it in any way one likes', but is 'determined [] by the general and [] particular nature of the process' in the social totality ('Anti-Dühring', *Karl Marx/Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, 50 vols [Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1987], 25, pp. 5–312 [p. 131]).

it to be in tune with the times?<sup>75</sup> The reason for the incoherence here becomes clearer when Felski indicates the political interests behind her argument for 'limiting' critique when she represents her views as part of a 'groundswell of voices, including scholars in feminist and queer studies as well as actor-network theory, object-oriented ontology, and influential strands of political theory' who all, she says, consider Marxist scholars, who alone advance outside critique, 'risible' for our condemnation of immanent critique 'for not being critical or oppositional enough' because of their 'failure to live up to its radical promise'. 76 It seems that what has put the (post)humanities is crisis is not the 'normativity' of radical outside critique after all, but the 'exclusivity' of the reformist cultural criticism in what are feared to be 'militant' times. To grasp the class interests at work here, one needs only ask why the 'new materialist' scholars such as Felski are given grants in the millions of dollars to 'research' ways in which to 'limit' critique to 'redescribing' the literary surfaces of texts in agential language and turn critique away from its militant task of changing the world outside the text, while those who do the bulk of the teaching in the humanities are adjuncts who lack basic health care and cannot even pay their rent from teaching alone.<sup>77</sup>

Thinking Blue/Writing Red proposes to work through the class pessimism of the dominant post-class cultural theory (thinking blue) as a necessary mediation for an-other kind of thinking that foregrounds class as the basis for transformation of the totality (writing red). The essays collected here offer an alphabetpedia of how critique-al theory has been voided of class in the textwares of the North Atlantic bourgeois left, which has normalized the supremacy of capital and justified its bankrupt politics. In this anti-theory climate, the classical Marxism being advanced here, especially the chapter which opens the book on Orthodox Marxism, has been placed under a discursive ban and rejected for publication in the left public sphere (by such journals and fora as Monthly Review, Jacobin, Sublation Magazine, and Zer0 Books, e.g.), because it violates the rule of pragmatic accommodation and

<sup>75</sup> Felski, Limits of Critique, p. 5.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>77</sup> Lorenzo Perez, 'UVA English Professor Lands Large Danish Grant to Explore Literature's Social Use', *UVA Today*, 25 March, 2016, news.virginia.edu/content/uva-english-professor-lands-large-danish-grant-explore-literatures-social-use [accessed 8 June 2024].

endless negotiations on the terrain of capital and wage-labor relations that constitutes the 'politics' of the cultural left.<sup>78</sup> Its publication now is therefore an act of re-new-ing classical Marxism in the contemporary by putting it in active contestation with the dominant today.

<sup>78</sup> By contrast, the essay on orthodox Marxism has also been the most widely translated and published outside the North Atlantic left.

