

THE REALITY OF DISAPPEARANCE: CRITICAL THEORY AND EXTINCTION¹

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ABSTRACT: Debates about the planet's recent entrance into an epoch of earth history now characterized by the destructive effects of humankind's having become a planetary force to rival plate tectonics, super volcanos and asteroid impacts should have the effect of placing Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin's conception of natural history in a new light. For what it is perhaps most striking about this conception is not only its proximity to a present made newly aware of nature and history's total interpenetration, but just how precisely its understanding of natural history's essential transitoriness accords with what is now everywhere observable: that ever-accelerating process of disintegration through which it becomes clear that the life of phenomena can only be known today if also understood in terms of that reality of disappearance to which the current age daily testifies. For Adorno and Benjamin, such a conception of natural history had very real consequences for how philosophical cognition and construction would have to be remade, leading both to pursue far-reaching experiments in intellectual production that it is the task of this paper to reconstruct in the light of its possible relevance for the theory and practice of critical theory today. To draw out the stakes of these experiments will first require a reconsideration of current efforts at contending with some of the most practical problems of our own present. Setting out from Alexander Kluge's demonstration that the kind of "learning processes" necessary for effective resistance often fail because they are simply far slower than the combined force and velocity achieved by prevailing systems of domination, exploitation and extraction, this paper will then ask how a critical theory informed by natural history might today confront the contemporary problem of tactics and strategies at a time when the forces of organized destruction have themselves changed so dramatically. For now that older, more traditional systems of coercion have long since given way to a novel system of overwhelming planetary exploitation, extraction and extermination, it is necessary to ask again how such transformations in the forms of organized violence might be met by corresponding transformations in the theory and practice of critical theory in this new time of extinction. In

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response, this paper will seek to reconstruct the history of debates in critical theory about theory and praxis, tactics and strategies in the light of more recent discussions about how to combat a system whose result is the continuing and exponential increase in destruction brought about by global warming. The paper will then conclude by setting Adorno and Benjamin's conception of natural history in relation to more systematic conceptions of contemporary society by turning to those writers, like Wolfgang Streeck and Andreas Malm, who have recently begun to consider how the many contradictions and forces of destruction inbuilt to present-day society may well require a fundamental reconsideration of the contemporary status of various inherited forms of political resistance.

KEYWORDS: Critical Theory; Climate Change; Extinction; Form; Experiment

For contemporary critical theory to still be commensurate with the problems of the present there can be only a single question orientating its efforts, and that is the question of the role it will assume within that ever-accelerating process of planetary destruction today underway. In the face of such a catastrophe, critical theory will have to soon decide if it is willing to meet this challenge in a way that may well appear unprecedented but is in fact not so very unprecedented at all. For it was almost a century ago that the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research had already made a similar decision: because contemporary society was then understood to only further compound the age-old domination of people and nature alike, the Institute responded by devising a set of wide-ranging experiments to transform the very form of social philosophy itself. And because the many threats against which critical theory once made itself have since recoiled to become that boomerang of global warming against which contemporary critical theory must once more remake itself today, the reorganization of critical theory called for here is less a break with that tradition than its continuation. From this perspective, critical theory can still be recognized wherever it refuses to play by the terms of the ruling consensus, and understands that fears otherwise thought alarmist will have fact on their side wherever the forces feared are as real as they are today.² And it is for this reason that Robert

² Such characteristic traits are indeed significant but ultimately insufficient for identifying the work of contemporary critical theory as it responds to today's social, political and ecological challenges. Nonetheless, such critical distance is still essential to critical theory's orientation towards prevailing orthodoxies, and instructive for reconnecting it with that stubborn 'refusal to play along' [*nicht mitmachen*] described by Leo Lowenthal as the early Institute's central slogan. See Leo Lowenthal, 'The Institute of Social Research', in *An Unmastered Past: The Autobiographical Reflections of Leo Lowenthal*, ed. Martin Jay (Berkeley: University of

Hullot-Kentor was entirely right, and in conformity with what is best in this tradition, to have not long ago repeated what so many have for so long asked themselves whenever they could not help but hear in their inner ear the still-lingering fear that there is at present only one important question left, namely: ‘When will I be blown up?’³ And while that question may still be asked today by the residents of Baghdad and Kabul, Damascus and Borno, its urgency has elsewhere been overtaken by entirely different fears. ‘When will the seas take me?’; ‘When the fires consume me?’; others ask instead: “And at what point will that nature once considered a bounty reverse to become the bane of each and every life?” Such questions indicate a consciousness of catastrophe that a transformed critical theory could still take on as its own should it still wish for something of that older tradition’s significance to be continued today.

And yet the present crisis does often appear so unprecedented as to undermine any hope that critical theory might still be sufficient in meeting this task. For it is today self-evident that the many causes of the current catastrophe are entirely different from those of generations past. Indeed, even the mere mention of one of Theodor W. Adorno’s most frequently cited lines on the history said to unite the slingshot with the megaton bomb should be sufficient for tipping us off to the fact that our own present catastrophe consists of timescales unimaginably greater, of a character often unintentional, and of engines of evisceration for which the likely end of extinction may very well render all previous and contemporary efforts embarrassingly inadequate.⁴ And yet for some reason the resulting sense of inadequacy does still only show itself in the symptoms and not at the source. Take, for instance, the by now decades-old debate about the anthropocene and the many alternative names considered more suitable, and then ask if the relief that would be felt at the discovery of some more appropriate naming convention would really suffice — or, to the contrary, might not the relief felt be more accurately described as a way of obscuring that far

California Press, 1987), 49. Elsewhere Lowenthal will similarly emphasize the Institute’s status as ‘nay-sayers’ and Adorno’s imperative ‘Don’t participate’ as ‘the leitmotif of his [Adorno’s] life’s work’. Leo Lowenthal, ‘Sociology of Literature in Retrospect’, in *An Unmastered Past*, 166, 189.

³ Robert Hullot-Kentor, ‘Introduction: Origin is the Goal’, in *Things Beyond Resemblance: Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 1, 9-10. The question Hullot-Kentor repeats here was first raised in William Faulkner’s acceptance speech upon receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1950.

⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973), 320.

more significant discrepancy now separating the scale of the problem from the various linguistic, conceptual and practical means inherited over the centuries?⁵ For what is one to today call a machinery of destruction whose field of operation is at once global, local and everywhere uneven; whose technologies include semiconductors and combustion engines, container ships and financial instruments; whose agents are forever at the top whereas its lesser victims and beneficiaries are dispersed throughout an ever-growing bottom induced to always stay down; and what is to be done today about a machinery of destruction whose structure is such that every mode of possible resistance to it and every proposed form for either expressing or conceptually seizing it seems so rudimentary as to appear an archaic holdover from some nineteenth or early twentieth century now long since past? And so in this sense too the problem of extinction does indeed appear utterly unprecedented today, and would seem to thus require a wholesale reorganization of critical theory of a kind previously unseen. More likely than not, however, the kind of green critical theory that might result will betray all the hallmarks of that form of greenwashing whose sustainable duds and good intentions are indistinguishable from a form of conscience laundering necessary only for ensuring that the venal stupidity of destruction continues, as always, uninterrupted. But of course that most certainly need not be the case. For what the present essay means to suggest is that critical theory could also counter this system and reorientate its work by developing counter-forms of social and intellectual production informed, in part, by certain aspects of the critical theory tradition, but equally open to those considered outside the tradition as well. To meet this challenge will today require a form of critical theory inimical to the securities provided by opinions popular, academic or otherwise, and undaunted by the need for that kind of conceptual neatness so satisfied with itself that it hardly notices how the world goes on burning all around it. 'A philosophy that thinks to find peace within itself, in any kind of truth whatsoever,' Max Horkheimer once said, 'has therefore nothing to do with critical theory.'⁶ And in

⁵ On the history of the anthropocene and its many alternative names, see Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene: The Earth, History and Us*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Verso, 2016).

⁶ Max Horkheimer, 'Postscript', in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Mathew J. O'Connell and others (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 252.

times of war such as these there is undoubtedly something decidedly quaint about a philosophy that still speaks of peace and democracy, of rights and community when the reality of everyday life is of a kind of catastrophe critical theory would do better to confront by admitting that there is simply no way of any longer continuing as usual. Wherever irreducible reality breaks in, thought must there come to a stop, Adorno once said.⁷ And while one may afterwards remake critical theory's various forms of cognition and construction, and rethink the range of tactics and strategies still effective today, as this essay indeed suggests — one can only do so after having first stared the dispiriting reality of the present situation squarely in the face. The results will perhaps prove an insult to that sense of self-love determinative of so much our thinking, but in an age that has only recently achieved any insight at all into the fact of extinction, there would seem to be no other choice but to draw out the consequences of insights whose truth will only be felt insulting for the thought that does not even try to make itself the equal of the very real challenges posed to both individual and society today.

COGNITION

But learning processes like these do indeed take a good long time. Though the Ptolemaic world was already upended some five centuries ago, the human mind has by and large ignored its consequences; — and while two centuries have passed since extinction was first discovered, so many still believe in the eternity of the species as to render any discussion of our own blighted future nearly impossible; — and now, some century-and-a-half since the theory of natural selection first set humankind within that world of natural history it has ever since done its best to refuse to recognize as its own ...

The same confusion: which is not so much that we do not know the current state of affairs, social, scientific or otherwise, but that we simply choose not to believe all that it is that we do in fact know.⁸ And, indeed, that is in itself hardly

⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, 'The Actuality of Philosophy', *Telos* 3 (March 1977), 132.

⁸ 'It is plain', Jean-Pierre Dupuy writes with regard to the current climate crisis, '... that even when we know something with certainty, we may be incapable of believing what we know.' And this is the case, Dupuy continues, 'because ... we cannot bring ourselves to face up to the implications of what we know.' Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *A Short Treatise on the Metaphysics of Tsunamis*, trans. M.B. DeBevoise (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2015), 3, 10.

surprising. For the consequences of truly believing all this would likely be so calamitous as to destroy every remaining commonsense and custom, and to return everyday life to that miasma of confusion and fear from which every thought seeking security necessary flees. But now that a natural world once credited with being so sublimely unlike us has more recently become so human as to bear within itself our own unfortunate name, there is today little time left to any longer pretend that we do not know what it is that we are doing, and that we do not live in the world we have ourselves made. ‘A mortal must think mortal, and not immortal thoughts’, Epicharmus once said in a line Adorno selected as the frontispiece to an introduction that ended with a call for developing precisely what the philosophical tradition has for so long resisted: not first philosophy, as usual, but what Adorno called ‘last philosophy’ instead.⁹ For no matter how frequent are those tendencies to today transplant critical theory to the spheres of religion, metaphysics and ontology it had at all times rejected, critical theory’s more characteristic drive towards a form of last philosophy inured to the temptation of ideas, arrested at all times by the interruption of reality and committed to ‘not judge’, as Horkheimer said, ‘by what is beyond time but by what is within time’, should now have the effect of reorientating critical theory towards an organ of judgment that is as irreducibly historical as is the theory itself.¹⁰ And so what I would like to try to now develop is just one innovation from that early history of critical theory that might prove instructive for those today seeking a way of refounding critical theory upon organs of judgment more responsive to our own more contemporary task. To my mind, that organ of judgment is best understood in terms of what Adorno and Walter Benjamin once called natural history¹¹ — and which many have afterwards analyzed in terms of

⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique*, trans. Willis Domingo (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 12, 40.

¹⁰ Horkheimer, ‘Postscript’, 250.

¹¹ For Benjamin’s most sustained discussion of natural history, see Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1998). For Adorno’s earliest discussion of natural history, see ‘The Idea of Natural-History’, in Hullo-Kentor, *Things Beyond Resemblance*, 252–270. For an introduction to Adorno’s essay, see Robert Hullo-Kentor, ‘Introduction to T.W. Adorno’s “The Idea of Natural-History”’, in Hullo-Kentor, *Things Beyond Resemblance*, 234–251. For the most comprehensive discussion of Adorno’s notion of natural history in its historical and philosophical context, see Bob Hullo-Kentor, ‘The Problem of Natural History in the Philosophy of Theodor W. Adorno’, unpublished dissertation, University

the interpenetration of natural and historical forces inherent to that concept¹² — but which I will here suggest might be seen as a most peculiar kind of cognitive faculty expert in grasping that reality of disappearance so central to contemporary experience today.¹³ For today's challenge does not seem to any longer consist in the academic elaboration of any more concepts, theories or ideas, but in the far more urgent task of identifying spurs to intellectual production and sufficient action capable of integrating within themselves the characteristics of a world irreconcilable with those common philosophical prejudices concerning the being and the becoming of a thing, and trained to instead provide a more exacting consciousness of a world more accurately described in terms of that reality of disappearance so characteristic of individual, social and planetary life today. From entropic tendencies in society to the planned obsolescence of products and people, there is little doubt that disappearance is not only an 'immanent ... dimension of existence', as Jean Baudrillard once said, but is also one of the more flagrant and self-evident facts of contemporary social life.¹⁴ And to develop an elementary conception of phenomena in line with such facts, and for once capable of cognizing what Hegel called the 'sheer unrest of life' at the heart of any individual thing, will mean to today restore to phenomena that reality of disappearance that is its actual prehistory, present and posthistory

of Massachusetts, 1985. For the most comprehensive discussion of Benjamin's notion of natural history, see Susan Buck-Morss, *Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989).

¹² For recent secondary literature on Adorno's notion of natural history, see Deborah Cook, *Adorno on Nature* (Durham: Acumen, 2011); Max Pensky, 'Natural History: The Life and Afterlife of a Concept in Adorno', *Critical Horizons* 5:1 (February 2004), 227–258. It should be mentioned, however, that the above-mentioned interpenetration of natural and historical forces is, for Adorno and Benjamin, always understood dialectically, and not in terms of the many forms of hybridity so favored by contemporary theory. For a relevant critique of this vogue for hybridity, see Andreas Malm, *The Progress of this Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World* (London: Verso, 2018). The most instructive Frankfurt School-based discussion of the mediated relationship between nature and society in Marx and materialism more generally is to be found in Alfred Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Verso, 2014).

¹³ Susan Buck-Morss is perhaps closest to this conception: 'It is accurate to say', she writes, 'that Adorno had no concept of history in the sense of an ontological, positive definition of history's philosophical meaning.' 'Instead,' she continues, 'both history and nature as its dialectical opposite were for Adorno cognitive concepts ... which were applied in his writing as critical tools for the demythification of reality.' See Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute* (New York: The Free Press, 1977), 49.

¹⁴ Jean Baudrillard, *Why Hasn't Everything Already Disappeared?*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Seagull Books, 2009), 31.

in a way Hegel himself never quite captured but which Adorno and Benjamin sought to express for the first time in their notion of natural history.¹⁵ At the same time, however, it must also be admitted that critical theory's conception of the life of phenomena as articulated in the notion of natural history is itself only a further radicalization of Hegel's own conception. For what Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* most wanted was a practice of philosophy that would come to know phenomena, not in the form in which they appear at present, not in the shape in which they appear when only at their best, but in that essentially plastic form they have achieved and will have achieved throughout the whole of the course of their life. On the basis of this kind of cognition, one would then come to know the present moment of appearance as part of an essentially dynamic process through which no single moment could be known without first knowing the nearly innumerable series of moments that are otherwise lost and preserved within a phenomenon that both is and is not what it now appears to be at present. In this sense, Hegel's *Phenomenology* might be said to have already advanced something like a philosophy of disappearance, inasmuch as it attempts to grasp phenomena as essentially morphological, and as containing within itself, not only its non-identity, self-movement, transformation into its opposite and return to itself, but also that process of fleeting evanescence and enduring sedimentation of everything that once made it what it is but which has all but disappeared at the same time as it has been preserved within it. To know a thing from the inside, and not simply as it appears at present is to know a thing as that which necessarily exists in time, as a thing in motion — not as idea, but as that which is fundamentally natural and historical, and thus, as that which also necessarily disappears.

In the first pages of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the reader is asked to consider the kind of consciousness that would be necessary to know any particular thing as it exists in time — in this case, to know something of the actuality of a simple flower.¹⁶ For Hegel, the way in which that flower appears at present is insufficient for knowing the flower in its truth because its present appearance would necessarily exclude how that flower appeared during the prior course of its life. And because a sufficiently historical understanding would hold

¹⁵ G.W.F Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 27.

¹⁶ See Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 1–2.

that the flower's prior life is no less integral to its present, Hegel will afterwards speak of the flower's budding and blooming as equally integral to the form in which the flower appears at present. To know the flower means, for Hegel, that one must also know all of those prior moments even when they are no longer apparent. That such a conception would require the reintegration of all of those moments that have since disappeared but which are nevertheless inherent to phenomena is one initial sense in which one might today speak about the reality of disappearance since cognition here gives back to that which has disappeared a reality actual but otherwise lost. And while this conception is undoubtedly more dynamic than that of its predecessors, one will have nevertheless noted how such a figure of thought does not as yet concern itself with the whole of the actual life of the flower since its history appears to come to a stop at some point of achieved perfection after which nothing more is said. Indeed, that flower's subsequent history of fading, wilting, decaying, dispersing itself and then disappearing is ultimately ignored by Hegel. And so one might here note that even this most dynamic of historical conceptions is itself insufficiently historical wherever it excludes that afterlife of decay, disintegration and disappearance no less essential to the course of its life. And so it is no surprise that Adorno and Benjamin's own notion of natural history will intervene at precisely this point in order to include all that Hegelian conception appeared to leave out.

For what Benjamin's early studies of the baroque Trauerspiel discovered was a tradition unique for recognizing the mark of history and nature in all those aspects otherwise excluded by a more classical concern with a thing's origin, development and goal. For the writers of the baroque, Benjamin says, extending the metaphor, 'nature was not seen ... in the bud and the bloom, *but*, to the contrary 'in the *over-ripeness* and *decay* of her creations.'¹⁷ And in this sense the Baroque could be said to have corrected Hegel's image of the flower by returning to it the whole of that posthistorical life Hegel had himself omitted. From the perspective of natural history, then, any particular phenomena's 'essential being,' as Benjamin writes, would have to also include 'the past and *subsequent history* of this being'¹⁸ in such a way that its 'origin' could only be understood in terms of

¹⁷ Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 179; my italics.

¹⁸ Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 47; my italics.

‘that which emerges from the process of becoming *and disappearance*.’¹⁹ And it is through this extension of cognition’s capacity for grasping the whole of the life of a thing that Benjamin came to recognize how he had here committed an act of ‘unmitigated chutzpah,’²⁰ as he said, since what he had just established was ‘neither more nor less than the prolegomena to a theory of knowledge.’²¹ For what this kind of cognition claimed to know was not only the prehistory of phenomena but also its afterlife, the environment of its emergence no less than the environment of its eventual disappearance. And it is on account of this kind of cognition that Benjamin’s own gaze has long appeared to us so otherworldly and close to the disappearing world of our own present that it is often too difficult to bear — for what Benjamin here discovered was the ability to get so far into a thing’s insides as to find there the life that had congealed within what was otherwise thought petrified, and to find there too that form of fossilization that is the future of everything thought to still be living and thriving. Here that reality of disappearance from which all phenomena come, within which they endure, and towards which they tend can be returned to them so that past, present and future are not themselves destroyed by the phantasmagoria of society’s mythical impermanence. At once, however, the possibility of a kind of fatal misunderstanding may here arise. For in a certain respect, this conception of natural history might be seen to participate within certain unfortunate trends in the practice of contemporary history, historiography and the politics of remembrance more generally. For what such practices so often seek to preserve is, as François Hartog notes, ‘not only what had long since disappeared, but also what had recently disappeared, and even what was just about to disappear.’²² The result, according to Hartog, is that the world in which we live today ‘appears to us already as a set of museum pieces’ now that the archivist’s wish to preserve everything for the sake of some absent posterity overrides any other possible use

¹⁹ Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* 45; my italics.

²⁰ *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin: 1910–1940*, eds. Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno; trans. Manfred R. Jacobsen and Evelyn M. Jacobsen (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 261.

²¹ As quoted in Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991), 22.

²² François Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time*, trans. Saskia Brown (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 189.

of the present.²³ In the case of the faculty of natural history, however, any effective instruction in the reality of disappearance would not have a contemplative but instead a politicizing effect. Able to now recognize just ‘how long [one’s] present misery has been in preparation,’ those animated by such a faculty would find that ‘this kind of instruction does not cause [them] sorrow,’ as Benjamin writes, ‘but arms [them]’ instead.²⁴ And also helps to more closely align social philosophy and political practice with those geohistorical timescales for which traditional philosophical ideas remain so woefully inadequate in contending with the more pressing challenges of the present.

And yet everything today depends upon whether or not this faculty is able to realize itself in forms of presentation capable of approximating in material what this faculty only knows in fact. For it is only ‘on the strength of its dialectical *presentation*’, as Benjamin writes, that ‘[t]he fore- and after-history of a historical phenomenon [can be made to] show up in the phenomenon itself.’²⁵ And so new forms of construction are today imperative, and a form will have to be found to bring this otherwise frequent but still infrequently presented experience of history to expression — to give form, in other words, to that ‘logic of disintegration’ Adorno once called his oldest philosophical conception.²⁶ For were this transformation to be achieved, such a form would then become ‘a force field,’ as Benjamin writes, ‘in which the confrontation between [that phenomena’s] fore-history and after-history is played out.’²⁷ But not played out so that those states of mourning and melancholia so often associated with Benjamin should then follow; for once the cognition of natural history is able to see past, present and future catastrophe combined, the resulting shock also destroys that ideology of progress in which no one can any longer believe but from which nearly every other form of presentation still draws its strength. For Benjamin, the writing of catastrophe proceeds, instead, from the need to incarnate the whole of the life of

²³ Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity*, 185.

²⁴ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin; ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 2002), 481.

²⁵ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 470; my italics.

²⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Notiz,’ in *Negativ Dialektik, Gesammelte Schriften*, Band 6, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), 409. The relevant note is omitted from E.B. Ashton’s English-language translation.

²⁷ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 470.

phenomena in accordance with the knowledge that ‘actualization’ is in fact the dialectician’s founding concept.²⁸

CONSTRUCTION

At the same time, however, it must be admitted that contemporary efforts at communicating something of the reality of this rapidly disappearing world nearly always end in failure. For while today’s ecological authors, activists and movements all seek to reconstruct the various contradictory and catastrophic aspects of this reality so as to ultimately inspire an appropriate sense of outrage and action, their efforts have only infrequently met with anything resembling the desired effect. Instead, long-familiar itineraries of destruction have all since been learned by heart; calls to action collapse before they’ve even left the page; and prognoses of a coming world of misrule will rarely seem as urgent as the everyday need to preserve oneself in a period of post-capitalist interregnum when no one else will or can.²⁹ In such failures one should not see, however, some merely individual shortcoming, but instead a far more widespread and consequential problem of construction that cannot be solved so long as the usual modes of construction and presentation persist long after they have all long since failed. The imperative that would have to be answered today is in fact straightforward enough: ‘to find new forms for new content’, as Jean-Luc Godard put it some fifty years ago; but to today find sufficient forms is doubtless more difficult than it was in the *trente glorieuses* of Godard’s day.³⁰

And yet even here critical theory can still prove instructive. For the experiments undertaken by the various figures once associated with the Institute for Social Research were never meant to be restricted to the order of ideas,

²⁸ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 460.

²⁹ For a recent reflection on contemporary society’s entrance into a period of interregnum wherein states cede their constructive powers while only further increasing their powers of destruction, as well as the problems this necessarily entails for individuals left with little more than the adaptive strategies of coping, hoping, doping and shopping, see Wolfgang Streeck, ‘Introduction’, in *How Will Capitalism End? Essays on a Failing System* (London: Verso, 2016), 1–46. On the contrary faith in capitalism’s imminent breakdown and replacement, see Immanuel Wallerstein, Randall Collins, Michael Mann et al., *Does Capitalism Have a Future?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). For an account of the two-hundred-year-long history of related discourses of capitalist crises, see Francesco Boldizzoni, *Foretelling the end of Capitalism: Intellectual Misadventures since Karl Marx* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020).

³⁰ Jean-Pierre Gorin and Jean-Luc Godard. 1972. *Tout Va Bien*. United States: New Yorker Films.

theories and the like; to the contrary, theirs was also, and perhaps most importantly, a collective attempt to develop new institutional and philosophical forms to address the unprecedented problems of their own present. New content meant, for them, new forms requiring invention, with the result that social philosophy would have to afterwards become multidisciplinary if it was still to have any purchase on the present at all. New content also meant for them a new institution designed to bring together those united in the by now heretical belief that, as Horkheimer wrote, ‘formulating the negative in an epoch of transition was more meaningful than academic careers.’³¹ And while the general nature of that institution is by now well-known, a few details may nevertheless indicate something of the scope such efforts could still attain today. Consider, for instance, the various fields of expertise claimed by critical theory’s initial members — law and sociology, political economy and psychology, philosophy and the arts — as well as the vast, by now well-nigh unbelievable number of book reviews published in each issue of the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, the Institute’s house journal. To today confront the attention then dedicated to such diverse lines of inquiry is also to witness a rather different kind of critical theory than that which otherwise prevails at present. Indeed, a quick glance at the hundreds upon hundreds of books reviewed within any single issue of the *Zeitschrift* should be enough to demonstrate the vast material basis upon this transformation of philosophy’s institutional form was at that time made.³² Aside from substantial essays published in three languages (German, French, English), the average issue also included more than 300 book reviews arranged around such disciplines as philosophy and sociology, psychology and history, social movements and social policy, economy and literature. In other words, the very material out of which critical theory was once constructed was understood to require the kind of engagement with a wide variety of currents within contemporary reality that has today so atrophied that few seem to have even recognized all that’s been lost.

³¹ Max Horkheimer, ‘Foreword’, in Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research 1923–1950* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), xxv.

³² For an account of the *Zeitschrift*’s significance to early critical theory — albeit one suffused with a mistaken belief in critical theory’s subsequent resignation and evisceration of reason — see Jürgen Habermas, ‘The Inimitable *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*: How Horkheimer Took Advantage of a Historically Oppressive Hour’, *Telos* 45 (1980), 114–121.

Consider only a single illustrative example. In response to the publication of a new volume of Jürgen Habermas' essays, Wolfgang Streeck recently penned a review to point out the utter insufficiency of Habermas' continual invocation of European integration absent any detailed discussion of the actual economic interests and conflicts — that is to say, class conflicts and the interests of capital — underlying all such technocratic political initiatives.³³ And so one might justifiably ask in response how one is to account for lacuna such as this, and what are its consequences for critical theory today. For Streeck, the kind of fetish for normative prescriptions for which Habermas is today so renowned — and which has since become the rule for research associated with the last few decades of the Institute's work — consistently shows itself indifferent to the actual workings of contemporary political economy, and has the effect of placing the respective theorist upon a perch of moral superiority so far above the realities of concrete conflict that those conflicts' various agents, actors and institutions will almost invariably appear either unwilling or incapable of meeting the theorists' more lofty demands.³⁴ A characteristic failure of critical theory today consists in such insufficient attention paid to the inner workings of political economy that is now so common as to regularly pass without mention.³⁵ But, for Streeck, anyone who wishes to today speak about contemporary European democracy cannot do so without at the same time talking about European capitalism. 'Put otherwise,' Streeck says, '*we cannot do democratic theory without political economy*.'³⁶ In repeating such things, however, one immediately begins to feel like something of a killjoy.

³³ Wolfgang Streeck, 'What about Capitalism?', in *Critical Encounters: Capitalism, Democracy, Ideas* (London: Verso, 2020), 148.

³⁴ Streeck, 'What about Capitalism?', 150.

³⁵ Exception must here be made for scholars like the late Moishe Postone, as well as those working within the tradition of so-called *Wertkritik* and 'Open Marxism.' See Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). On *Wertkritik*, see *Marxism and the Critique of Value*, eds. Neil Larsen, Mathias Nilges, Josh Robinson and Nicholas Brown (Chicago: MCM Publishing, 2014); on 'Open Marxism', see Werner Bonefeld, Richard Gunn and Kosmos Psychopedis' three-volume *Open Marxism* (London: Pluto Press, 1992, 1992, 1995).

³⁶ Wolfgang Streeck, 'Small-State Nostalgia? The Currency Union, Germany, and Europe: A Reply to Jürgen Habermas', *Constellations*, Volume 21, No 2, 2014, 218; italics in the original. From within the longer history of critical theory, Streeck's ultimatum might be seen to reprise Horkheimer's earlier claim that 'whoever is not willing to talk about capitalism should also keep quiet about fascism.' Max Horkheimer, 'The Jews and Europe', in *Critical Theory and Society: A Reader*, eds. Stephen Eric Bronner and Douglas MacKay Kellner (New York: Routledge, 1989), 78.

For who still expects contemporary representatives of critical theory to read *The Economist*, *The Financial Times* or any other industry periodical outside their own little niche? Who subscribes to *Nature*, to *Science* or to the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*? That it today sounds like bad manners and outright malice to even ask such questions is surely a measure of just how complete the process of intellectual provincialization has today become. For it is undoubtedly easier to pontificate about social and scientific problems than it is to immerse oneself in that manifold of contemporary reality reproduced within disciplines philosophy has long demeaned for concerning themselves with facts far below the nobler reaches of the speculative mind. But this kind of prejudice does not belong at all to the actual tradition of critical theory; the very opposite. Indeed, the very principles of institutional and philosophical construction practiced by critical theory are in fact so utterly antagonistic to this kind of traditional theory that one would do well to recall again how Adorno's career began with the realization that philosophy could only become the contemporary of its time were it to begin by abandoning all the old questions still entertained today, and turn to a form of last philosophy instead. Only when critical theory leaves behind those questions will the need for new principles of construction even be felt.

By and large, however, professional philosophy has progressed little beyond the point Adorno reached nearly a hundred years ago. For it was already during the early 1930s that it had become clear to him that one would have to accept what we have ourselves at all times denied: that is to say, the 'disintegration of all security within great philosophy' as the very condition for continuing philosophy at all.³⁷ And the consequences that follow from this are indeed considerable. For Adorno, this meant that philosophy would only begin again after having first 'divorced itself from all questions of meaning', and after having recognized just how much 'the symbols of philosophy are decayed.'³⁸ Such a philosophy, he continues, would have to also 'learn to renounce the question of totality' and 'give up the great problems'.³⁹ And to the anticipated reproach that all this sounds like so much 'unfruitful negativity' — for which that frightful term 'negativism' has

³⁷ Adorno, 'The Actuality of Philosophy', 133.

³⁸ Adorno, 'The Actuality of Philosophy', 127.

³⁹ Adorno, 'The Actuality of Philosophy', 127.

become its contemporary, perhaps even more preposterous analogue — Adorno replied by returning the insult, and noted how all such pseudo-intellectual nonsense can only proceed by employing what Gottfried Keller earlier called ‘gingerbread expression[s]’ [*Pfefferkuchenausdruck*].⁴⁰ Better, Adorno said, to leave behind questions no longer relevant than to add still more out of some misplaced sense of dutifulness that can only today continue without content. And here Adorno does not shy away from admitting that to set off from this point may well lead to what he calls the ‘dissolution of that which has long been called philosophy’; but, for Adorno, this is a situation that is not to be feared but instead encouraged.⁴¹ Indeed, for philosophy to still be possible today, Adorno writes, it cannot ‘shrink back from that liquidation of philosophy’ effected by both its own intra-philosophical development and, even more, by the development of society itself. What is said to remain of philosophy in Adorno’s work has today concentrated itself around a series of watchwords too well known to bear repeating, but what is perhaps more frequently forgotten is the imperative he then set for all future philosophy once it had been recognized that it no longer possessed the ability to disclose the full power of contemporary reality. At that point, Adorno says, one will have to follow such insights to their end, and from there abandon oneself to what he rightly calls ‘the risk of experimentation.’⁴² The kind of experiments in philosophical construction Adorno and Benjamin later carried out as the necessary material consequence of their cognitive insight into natural history are precisely what unifies the whole of their efforts. For theirs was an experiment made from the times, answerable to its threats, and necessitated by an unending effort to invent new forms to express new content. The result was not articles but essays; not generalities about the age but case studies; not token examples taken from experience but hundreds upon hundreds of open-form interviews — and the list continues ad nauseam to include all the other experiments undertaken in fragments, co-production, paratactical writing, social diagnostics and physiognomies, collage, philosophical diaries, radio writing, Denkbilder, literary montage, reflections on television, radio and film, and so on,

⁴⁰ Adorno, ‘The Actuality of Philosophy’, 130.

⁴¹ Adorno, ‘The Actuality of Philosophy’, 129–130.

⁴² Adorno, ‘The Actuality of Philosophy’, 132.

and so on. In each case, one would have to trace in detail the various ways in which that cognitive faculty that is natural history impressed upon Adorno and Benjamin the need for philosophical forms capable of approximating the power of reality that faculty could alone disclose and traditional philosophy could no longer.

And of course that need for experiment is no less pressing today, especially after generations of intellectual provincialism have created a situation in which critical theory's early insights and experiments have been unlearned for far too long. In this sense, Alexander Kluge was entirely right to have recently claimed that 'a certain form of critical theory no longer exists ... [it] has simply disappeared.'⁴³ For what has long since been lost is not only the knowledge of certain forms of cognition and construction specific to the first-generation of critical theory, but also the way in which those earlier forms are now themselves insufficient and thus require a series of further experiments of the kind Kluge has himself carried out for so long. For while it is true that Adorno and Benjamin's linguistic experiments always sought more suitable modes of expression and resistance appropriate to their time, it is no less true that more contemporary modes of intellectual production must be invented as the enemy continually transforms itself in turn. And this Kluge understood early on. 'We would say we are in such a dire situation' today, Kluge remarked in a 1984 interview, 'because of how the enemy operates.'⁴⁴ 'We therefore do not have the time' early critical theory once had because effective resistance no longer comes from conventional means of insurrection that can no longer be relied upon today.⁴⁵ 'It is old-fashioned', Kluge continues

to assume as they did in the 1930s that these struggles will be determined in the streets when there is a mass medium in every house that acts as a kind of window. Against such a power to convince millions through television, all conventional means are powerless. That means that I also have to produce for this window. I can

⁴³ Alexander Kluge, 'Nur das unsichtbare Bild zählt', Interview with Alexander Kluge by Peter Laudenbach, in *Der Tagesspiegel*, 11.09.2003. <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/kultur/nur-das-unsichtbare-bild-zaehlt/447010.html> (Accessed October 31, 2021).

⁴⁴ Alexander Kluge and Stuart Liebman, 'On New German Cinema, Art, Enlightenment, and the Public Sphere: An Interview with Alexander Kluge', *October* 46 (Fall 1988), 40.

⁴⁵ Kluge and Liebman, 'On New German Cinema', 40.

only influence a mass medium through a counter-mass medium.⁴⁶

For just as Benjamin had seen nearly a hundred years ago how text had at that time migrated from books to billboards and thereby sought to transform his own intellectual production in turn, so too has Kluge long sought more modern and effective modes of production for the contemporary society of today. His work in film, television and literature represent an expanded multimedia range contemporary critical theory would do well to take on as its own today, newly sensitized as it must be to those points at which a contemporary critical theory should both proceed from and break with its predecessors, and aware at all times that critical theory is not a scholastic exercise but a form of intellectual and social experiment that participates within that total process of society in which it must at all times decide the part it will play. In this sense, what Alfred Schmidt once wrote of Feuerbach is no less true of what critical theory could still become today. ‘Instead of *beginning with philosophy* in order to *end with philosophy*,’ Schmidt writes, ‘[Feuerbach] wanted to begin with *non-philosophy* in order *through philosophy* to return to *non-philosophy*.’⁴⁷ That the insights and methods of people like Kluge, Schmidt and Streeck are hardly even mentioned in common companions to critical theory might be today seen to signal a blind spot upon which critical theory might now remake itself along those multimedia, materialist and political-economic lines these one-time students of Adorno and Horkheimer themselves exemplify.⁴⁸ To seek to do so, however, assumes that there is still time left to learn again all that has been lost over the course of decades during which theory and

⁴⁶ Kluge and Liebman, ‘On New German Cinema’, 40.

⁴⁷ Alfred Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Verso, 2014), 24; my italics.

⁴⁸ The two most commonly used companions to critical theory, namely, those published by Routledge and Cambridge, are notable for their near-total disregard of these three figures. The recently published *Routledge Companion to the Frankfurt School* (2019), for instance, includes only three paragraphs on Kluge’s work with Oskar Negt, makes no mention of either Streeck or Schmidt — and of that volume’s forty-four contributors, only seven are women. Similarly, the relatively older *Cambridge Companion to Critical Theory* (2004) includes no mention of either Kluge, Streeck or Schmidt — and of its thirteen contributors, only one is a woman. By contrast, the massive, nearly 1,700-page-long *Sage Handbook of Frankfurt School Critical Theory* includes separate articles on both Kluge and Schmidt, a brief footnote on Streeck — and yet still, and unfortunately, of the volume’s 101 contributors only 18 are women. See *The Cambridge Companion to Critical Theory*, ed. Ed Rush (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); *The Routledge Companion to the Frankfurt School*, eds. Peter E. Gordon, Espen Hammer and Axel Honneth (New York: Routledge, 2019); *The Sage Handbook of Frankfurt School Critical Theory*, eds. Beverly Best, Werner Bonefeld and Chris O’Kane (Los Angeles: Sage Publishing, 2018).

practice have thus far failed to keep pace with societal changes. To understand something of our own contemporary situation, it will be necessary to consider again critical theory's own earlier confrontation with the problem of state violence before moving beyond the canon of critical theory to determine the range of possible tactics and strategies still relevant today.

TACTICS AND STRATEGIES

Catastrophes will frequently go unrecognized for as long as they are thought to loom in some far distant future. For Benjamin, by contrast, the real catastrophe consists instead in the continuing perpetuation of the status quo of today — and according to the most recent report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), Benjamin is undoubtedly correct.⁴⁹ Right now carbon dioxide levels are higher than at any time in the last two million years, the last decades' temperatures have not been seen for about 125,000 years,⁵⁰ and if emissions continue at the rate achieved since the IPCC's first report in 1990, it is estimated that many of those now studying at university will experience global temperatures 4.4–5.7 degrees C hotter than pre-industrial levels within the course of their own lifetimes.⁵¹ At that temperature, extreme heat events otherwise occurring once every ten years will occur more than nine times instead, while those now

⁴⁹ 'The concept of progress', Benjamin writes, 'must be grounded in the idea of catastrophe. That things are 'status quo' is the catastrophe.' Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 473.

⁵⁰ Masson-Delmotte, V., P. Zhai, A. Pirani, et al., 'Summary for Policymakers', in *Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis. Contribution of Working Group I to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*. IPCC, 2021. Cambridge University Press (in press). Date of Document: 7 August 2021 17:00 CEST, SPM 9. Accessible at https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/downloads/report/IPCC_AR6_WGI_SPM.pdf.

⁵¹ The above numbers refer to what the IPCC calls the 'very likely range' of global temperature change in the 'long term' (years 2081–2100) in the case of its so-called worst-case scenario (SSP5–8.5). See Masson-Delmotte, V., P. Zhai, A. Pirani, et al., 'Summary for Policymakers', SPM 18. What is especially peculiar about this 'worst case scenario', however, is that the rate of continuing emissions it assumes over the course of the next thirty years — roughly doubling from current levels by 2050 — is almost exactly what has in fact occurred over the thirty-year period from the time of its first report in 1990 to today. According to the International Energy Agency, annual global CO₂ emissions stood at roughly 20 Gt in 1990 before finally reaching roughly 34 Gt in 2019. See AEA, *Global energy-related CO₂ emissions, 1990–2021*, IEA, Paris <https://www.iea.org/data-and-statistics/charts/global-energy-related-co2-emissions-1990-2021> (Accessed 1 November, 2021). It is thus difficult to understand why a so-called 'worst-case scenario' would in fact be nothing more than an extrapolation from the status quo, rather than the far worse — but no less plausible — outcome that things do actually get considerably worse.

occurring every fifty years will be seen every single year except ten within any given fifty year period. Even under the most favorable circumstances — that is to say, if the world were to reach no more than 1.5 degrees C above pre-industrial levels, as established in the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement — our climate would still remain at a level unwitnessed within the observable record, with effects like heat waves and firestorms, floods and droughts, ocean warming and acidification increasing in frequency and intensity far above what is today experienced as the hell of climate catastrophe around the world.⁵² And that, it must be added, is in fact the best-case scenario, an achievement that would require the world to reach net-zero emissions by 2050. Unlikely as that may today seem, such reports do at least provide proof for what everyone knows but which has never made the least bit of difference: there is quite simply little to no time left.⁵³ Consider, for instance, the ever-decreasing window for sufficient change. In 2010, it was said that the world had thirty years to halve emissions; in 2020, only ten years remained — and because what matters is not annual but cumulative emissions, every single day of emissions means that the window for survival gets progressively smaller and smaller by the day.⁵⁴ The question today, then, is whether the structure of contemporary societies are at all adequate to the scale of this catastrophe, and whether critical theory is still willing to transform itself to meet this threat. For it may well be that the present system of planetary destruction is simply too total and too rapid to be stopped in time, and that the many contradictions and questions, tactics and strategies once native to past traditions of effective resistance have been for too long unlearned to any longer provide much help. To judge by the rhetoric and actions of today's climate movement, it would seem as though the radical tactics and strategies of the past have all for some reason been 'defamed, [deemed] antiquated, unlearned and turned unreal', a situation resulting, in the words of Andreas Malm, in the 'consequent deskilling of

⁵² Masson-Delmotte, V., P. Zhai, A. Pirani, et al., 'Summary for Policymakers', SPM 19.

⁵³ Masson-Delmotte, V., P. Zhai, A. Pirani, et al., 'Summary for Policymakers', SPM 19–20. On the subject of the various social, political and economic contributors to global warming, the IPCC's report is notably silent. In discussing the above-mentioned climate change scenarios, for instance, the IPCC is at pains to make clear that 'socio-economic assumptions and the feasibility or likelihood of individual scenarios is not part of the assessment.' Masson-Delmotte, V., P. Zhai, A. Pirani, et al., 'Summary for Policymakers', SPM 15.

⁵⁴ Niklas Höhne, Michel den Elzen, Joeri Rogelj, et al., 'Emissions: world has four times the work or one-third of the time', *Nature* 579, 25–28 (2020).

[contemporary] movements.’⁵⁵ And while one may well disagree with the claim that, as Malm says, we now ‘have to learn how to fight all over again,’⁵⁶ and choose to instead focus upon other, apparently more effective tactics — from those of the riot, blockade, barricade, occupation and commune favored by Joshua Clover⁵⁷ to the new style of political communication inaugurated by Podemos’ Pablo Iglesias⁵⁸ to the rethinking of distributional forms of political organization advanced by Rodrigo Nunes⁵⁹— it is today self-evident that the terms of present-day strategic and tactical struggles had better be informed by the most exacting understanding of history, theory and contemporary social analysis if the struggle against global warming is not to fall prey to the familiar division between armchair activism and unthinking actionism so ruinous of past efforts — indeed, this is likely one of the more immediately relevant lessons to be learned from critical theory’s much-maligned account of the vexed relationship between theory and practice.⁶⁰ In what follows, I will try to sketch a few of the more significant problems confronting discussions of contemporary tactics and strategies before finally turning to the question of organized violence and counter-violence as it appears in the light of our current catastrophe.

Anyone even passingly familiar with contemporary social problems would be right to feel alarmed by the discrepancy that today exists between the scale of the problem and the relative insufficiency of the response. Perhaps even more troubling, however, are a whole series of disparities that now set the speed, violence, power and complexity of contemporary systems of destruction against the corresponding weakness in tactics and strategies employed by current

⁵⁵ Andreas Malm, *How to Blow Up a Pipeline: Learning to Fight in a World of Fire* (London: Verso, 2021), 61.

⁵⁶ Malm, *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*, 62. Some of Malm’s critics will justly point out that the political subject of Malm’s call to action — the ‘we’ who will have to learn how to fight all over again, in this instance — would benefit from more careful differentiation so as to also include those already engaged in more militant forms of action in the so-called ‘global South.’ For one such relevant critique in relation to Malm’s more recent work, see Max Ajl, ‘Review: Andreas Malm’s *Corona, Climate, Chronic Emergency*,’ *The Brooklyn Rail* (November 2020). <https://brooklynrail.org/2020/11/field-notes/Corona-Climate-Chronic-Emergency> (Accessed 1 November, 2021).

⁵⁷ See Joshua Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot: The New Era of Uprisings* (London: Verso, 2016).

⁵⁸ See Pablo Iglesias, *Politics in a Time of Crisis: Podemos and the Future of a Democratic Europe*, trans. Lorna Scott Fox (London: Verso, 2015).

⁵⁹ See Rodrigo Nunes, *Neither Vertical Nor Horizontal: A Theory of Political Organisation* (London: Verso, 2021).

⁶⁰ See Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Marginalia to Theory and Praxis,’ in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 259–278.

movements of active resistance. In this sense, global warming is only the latest episode in an historical process in which one side has long maintained an overwhelming advantage in that balance of forces that continues to this day. For hundreds of years colonial and neocolonial powers built a system whose effects upon the earth system are in many instances irreversible, the Great Acceleration of the postwar period considerably accelerated its effects and, if current estimates are correct, then the energy infrastructure already built by today's plunderers will produce enough emissions to frustrate even the most conservative goals of the Paris Climate Conference a mere six years after its initial adoption.⁶¹ And while the ruinous character of all this extraction and exploitation have long been recognized, there has never been anything resembling a sufficient response. It is not by chance that the climate movement Extinction Rebellion has chosen an hourglass for its logo. And yet many still hope that the worst may still be avoided, fewer still believe it and ever fewer will try to effectively reverse it. How many will succeed will ultimately depend upon far too many factors to here enumerate, but it is nonetheless certain that no one will be able to do so without first considering the relative speed and complexity of the various machines of contemporary destruction in relation to the many societal developments that would be necessary to counteract such forces. For if earlier emancipatory struggles once had to contend with the destructive technologies of the nineteenth century, that contest has since grown far more difficult now that it must face the exterminating technologies of the twenty-first century and the even greater technologies of extinction at work today.⁶² To come to grips with this evolution of violence for which so many feel so fatally unprepared today, Kluge's 1973 story, *Learning Processes with a Deadly Outcome*, may prove curiously instructive.

In Kluge's story, the earth of the early twenty-first century has already been ruined and a number of surviving space colonies thrive on the exploitation of raw materials extracted from other planets. This kind of corporate extraction is so

⁶¹ Tong, D., Zhang, Q., Zheng, Y. et al. 'Committed emissions from existing energy infrastructure jeopardize 1.5 °C climate target', *Nature* 572, 373–377 (2019).

⁶² On the use of such terms as 'extinction' to refer to the contemporary destruction of species rather than the arguably more appropriate term 'extermination,' see Justin McBrien, 'This Is Not the Sixth Extinction. It's the First Extermination Event,' *TruthOut* (September 14, 2019), <https://truthout.org/articles/this-is-not-the-sixth-extinction-its-the-first-extermination-event/> (Accessed 1 November, 2021).

brutal that one would rightly expect its slave-like workers to eventually rebel against their continued exploitation. But here the corporations possess a truly spectacular ‘temporal advantage’ over their workers: because their extractive machines can move from planet to planet with lightning speed, the workers of any single planet will never be quick enough to organize themselves and lead a successful resistance.⁶³ By the time they are sufficiently prepared, the company will have already moved on, and all possible resistance will have been lost before it has even begun because humans’ ‘learning processes necessary for resistance’, as Kluge calls them, are still based upon those unfortunate cycles of human biology that are ultimately too slow to keep up with systems of destruction that proceed at such unbelievably greater speeds of self-transformation.⁶⁴ If it takes seven years for workers to learn how to rebel while the company can itself move on in just a couple of years, then the very temporality of rebellion has so changed that effective rebellion is simply no longer possible. And in the light of the last thirty years of IPCC reports’ increasingly stark warnings, Kluge’s story might be today seen as a frighteningly prescient parable. For the disparity now separating the speed of destruction from our own comparatively inferior capacities of resistance might be seen to undermine so many of those older ways in which one once found hope in a struggle in which contemporary systems of destruction today enjoy an ever-increasing temporal advantage over the whole of humanity. Old idols have indeed fallen, but ever-newer idols will have to soon fall as well now that that project of enlightenment which once believed that difficult problems would eventually be remedied within the eternal life of the species is today as dangerous as the conviction of mothers and fathers everywhere that their own dutiful daughters and sons are the only hope left for a better future. Given the ever-narrowing window of time left for resistance, undue trust in all such learning processes will indeed have a deadly outcome today.

But in addition to the problem of the relative speeds separating systems of destruction from forms of possible resistance, there is also the equally relevant problem of a vastly unequal relationship between these systems’ violence and the utter inadequacy of contemporary modes of resistance. Indeed, the recent history

⁶³ Alexander Kluge, *Learning Processes with a Deadly Outcome*, trans. Christopher Pavsek (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 92.

⁶⁴ Kluge, *Learning Processes with a Deadly Outcome*, 92.

of twentieth and twenty-first century resistance is certainly one of the more dispiriting episodes in the long history of emancipatory struggles. ‘Barricades are ridiculous against those who administer the bomb’, Adorno already wrote some sixty or so years ago.⁶⁵ And yet the game today continues with little to no attempt to draw the consequences from the ineffectiveness of all such antiquated forms of protest when set against the far superior strength of state violence ranged against it. Partly because the state of the situation is already so utterly dispiriting, partly because one simply does not want to know what it is that is so dispiriting and what would be necessary to counter it. But such indifference has its consequences, and foremost among them is the way in which this willful ignorance about the actual balance of forces dooms so much activism to utter in consequence. And so one should ask oneself today: is the state akin to a contracting party with whom one can enter into negotiations so as to then extract from it more favorable terms — or is it, instead, and as Adorno insisted, a machine that only preserves itself by endlessly ‘accumulating means of destruction’?⁶⁶ Is climate action a petition for good governance — or should the climate movement instead recognize that it is engaged in a war in which it will have to soon contend with the ‘incredible growth of military power in the hands of small groups,’ as Adorno insists, and from which there may well follow the ‘virtual impossibility of resistance to the military power concentrated in these groups’?⁶⁷ Is the analysis of this situation of unequal forces ‘a substantial task for acquiring social insight today,’ as Adorno claimed, or is it better to not even ask such questions now that the passive acceptance of extinction as fate is deemed preferable to the accusation of some kind of ‘negativism’ or ‘catastrophism’ invoked amidst the blather of wishful thinking that dominates so much social thought and action today?⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Adorno, ‘Marginalia to Theory and Praxis’, 269.

⁶⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophical Elements of a Theory of Society 1964*, eds. Tobias ten Brink and Marc Phillip Nogueira; trans. Wieland Hoban (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 133.

⁶⁷ Adorno, *Philosophical Elements of a Theory of Society*, 134. Concerning the contemporary valence of martial metaphors used to describe the current ‘climate war,’ and the widespread acknowledgement that global warming will indeed incite ever more wars over land, resources and wealth, it is perhaps worthwhile to consider the fact that the increasing prevalence of such discourses and ubiquity of such realities has not as yet inspired strategic and tactical reflections of a similarly militant character by those against whom the current war is now being waged.

⁶⁸ Adorno, *Philosophical Elements of a Theory of Society*, 133.

That such questions are hardly taken up by contemporary critical theory is evidence of a break with its tradition, and is likely also the sign of a far more substantial process of unlearning that has affected so many protest and resistance movements over the course of the last decades. For how else is one to account for the fact that nonviolence today enjoys a prestige long since devalued by the actual course of politics, while the more militant tactics of the past hardly exist as practical possibilities at present? As Andreas Malm has recently shown, the shibboleth of nonviolence reigns supreme today in total disregard for the way in which those movements mistakenly regarded as nonviolent — the abolitionist, suffragette, civil rights and anti-apartheid struggles — were never nearly as nonviolent as is today maintained, and, when effective, were always coupled with militant wings for which various forms of violence were always considered one tactic among many.⁶⁹ And while there is today much talk of decolonizing critical theory, there seems little desire to learn from anti-colonial movements how a transformed theory and practice of violence — or better termed, of *counter-violence* — has been essential to historical and contemporary struggles alike. And this despite the fact that critical theory is itself the inheritor of a tradition that has long known how the state's monopoly on the legitimate use of violence as codified in law, private property, emergency powers and unequal exchange is itself founded upon plunder, injustice and extermination — even if it must also be admitted that, for critical theory, the many forms of political violence dedicated to either countering or redressing this imbalance frequently left them decidedly ambivalent. Contemporary movements advocating tactics unequal to the power of state violence would seem to have thus forgotten that fundamental nexus of state, law and violence that has always ensured that capitalism is not only religion, as Benjamin thought, but a global ecological system dependent upon forms of violence often unseen and only rarely integrated into discussions of effective forms

⁶⁹ See Andreas Malm, *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*, 5-64. In a related manner, Francis Fox Piven argues that students of American social movements have been rather uniformly timid about the historical and contemporary role of violence in various social movements in order to assume for themselves some 'moral upper hand,' as she calls it, said to issue from a position of principled non-violence. Nevertheless, Piven writes, 'The reiterated claim that protest movements are ordinarily nonviolent obfuscates more than it illuminates' because the use of violence is no less strategically useful than the use of nonviolence. Francis Fox Piven, *Challenging Authority: How Ordinary People Change America* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 24-25.

of counter-violence. In this sense, critical theory would do well to take up again the study of state violence and counter-violence in a manner similar to how its tradition once tracked the dynamic nature of those commodities that are at once things and processes, and which can only be known in their truth via the diversity of forms each assumes in its relationship to the social totality. For it is only when one comes to see such transformations in form as resulting from fundamentally historical relations that one might then begin to speak that ‘language of commodities’, as Marx called it, that is as native to the life of commodities as it is otherwise so inaccessible to our own.⁷⁰ And it is surely no coincidence that one today speaks of a ‘language of violence’ — especially upon recognizing how the violence of the strong must be repaid in kind if the weak are not to remain entirely powerless — without either the theoretical or the practical fluency needed to effectively intervene within the process of those ever-changing forms of violence that are the contemporary conditions of its present mode of life. At its most manifest, state violence only shows itself in those individual acts of brutality that were recently so significant to the rise of the Black Lives Matter Movement in the wake of the murder of George Floyd. More often than not, however, state violence is hidden from sight and is not even recognized as such by its perpetrators, victims and public alike. Indeed, the contemporary state’s appearance of legitimacy and claim to consent is itself premised on the mystification of all those forms of violence that proceed from the moment of dispossession to appropriation, from privatization to commodification and from monetization to financialization today. But if it is true that state violence can only be comprehended in its functioning if it is also seen in so dynamic a manner, then what is it that today ensures that violence is not seen to be equally differentiated when it is practiced by those opposed to these systems of destruction?⁷¹ For here the tactics are no less varied. To study the progress of social movements is to know how they frequently follow an evolutionary course from debate to critique, from

⁷⁰ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy Volume One*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1976), 143.

⁷¹ For a defense of property destruction similar to Malm but applied this time to recent USA-based resistance movements against white supremacy, see R.H. Lossin, ‘In Defense of Destroying Property’, *The Nation* (June 10, 2020), <https://www.thenation.com/article/activism/blm-looting-protest-vandalism/> (Accessed 1 November 2021).

protest to disobedience, property destruction to incendiaryism, sabotage to strike, and, finally, from insurrection to revolt, rebellion and war. There is at work here, in other words, a morphology of violence whose variety of forms would have to be understood in their diversity if they were to be more effectively employed as tactics in response to ever-changing conditions and threats. ‘If the emissions have to stop, then we must stop the emissions,’ as Greta Thunberg rightly says.⁷² And that means that a fair portion of already existing CO₂-emitting energy infrastructure, as well all new energy infrastructure, must be brought to an immediate halt. If contemporary states and institutions, capitalists and philanthropists will not stop them, then that is precisely what a ‘movement of millions should do,’ as Malm says: ‘announce and enforce the prohibition. Damage and destroy new CO₂-emitting devices. Put them out of commission, pick them apart, demolish them, burn them, blow them up.’⁷³ There has never been a divine right to private property, and there is now no remaining justification for the maintenance of forms of property that continue to accelerate the current catastrophe. ‘Property does not stand above the earth,’ as Malm says, and if states will not themselves put these machines of destruction out of commission, then ‘others will have to do it for them. Or property will cost us the earth.’⁷⁴ And yet such a simple reconsideration of tactics will only become possible once the climate movement abandons that ‘fetish’⁷⁵ for nonviolence, as Malm calls it, that is itself based on a ‘sanitized history’⁷⁶ of past political struggles, as well as its penchant for a ‘form of inaction within the world of activism’⁷⁷ that will prove powerless in arresting the forces of destruction in which the contemporary climate movement’s actions appear to not even really believe. For while it is here argued that insight into natural history and ever-more appropriate forms of intellectual production may enable critical theory to better meet the problems of the present, it must also be acknowledged that there can be no adequate counterforce to contemporary systems of destruction that does not

⁷² As quoted in Malm, *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*, 19.

⁷³ Malm, *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*, 67.

⁷⁴ Malm, *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*, 68-69.

⁷⁵ Malm, *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*, 53.

⁷⁶ Malm, *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*, 61.

⁷⁷ Malm, *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*, 13.

first set out from a more realistic appraisal of those modern ‘means of extermination,’ as Streeck calls them, against which contemporary critical theory must now remake itself if all talk of cognition and construction, tactics and strategies is not to be entirely in vain.⁷⁸

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⁷⁸ Wolfgang Streeck, ‘Engel’s Second Theory: Technology, Warfare and the Growth of the State’, *New Left Review* (May/June 2020), 86.