



The Dialectics of Melancholy and Nostalgia in Apophatic Marxism

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ABSTRACT

Following the provocation put forth by China Miéville in which he proposed the development of an “apophatic Marxism,” this article seeks to advance his suggestion of transmuting Marxism beyond the baggage of its historical experimentation and substantively putting it to work within our present material conditions. In this article, I argue that unlike cataphatic Marxist analyses of the past, the apophatic way is one that is better primed to take seriously the unique plethora of aporias and uncertainties that seem to define the twenty-first century. In particular, I propose that a critical engagement with affects such as *melancholy* and *nostalgia* allow us to learn from past political motivations as well as discover and develop liberatory tactics better attuned to the advantages of an intersectional praxis.

KEYWORDS

Theology; Marxism;
apophasis; melancholy;
nostalgia; affect; place

“Political humility demands not new certainties for old, but a new, less certain way. With such humility should come grief appropriate to the epoch. ‘Don’t mourn,’ goes the Left injunction, ‘organise.’ A bullying disavowal. How can we organise except through mourning?”¹

–China Miéville

“We are realists. We dream the impossible.”

–Ernesto “Che” Guevara

The Anthropocene leaves the human race in a highly unstable and urgent space/time. Like other radical scholars – or, I would wager, any scholar that is at least progressive minded – my life is deeply mired in the psychological tar pits of ecological grief. Sometimes it is hard to wade out of it. Living, watching, and experiencing our world burn in front of us with no substantial action being taken due to the inherent nature of capitalism leave many of us crippled with solastalgia,² as Glenn Albrecht has called the feeling

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¹Miéville, “Silence in Debris: Towards an Apophatic Marxism,” 116.

²Solastalgia is a neologism coined by Albrecht that combines the Latin *sōlācium* (comfort) and the Greek *-algia* (grief, pain, suffering). Although it has mostly been used to describe distress attributed to climate change, it can also characterize existential despair felt by communities suffering from the effects of, for example, colonialism, natural disasters, strip mining projects, industrial agriculture, etc. In this way, it can be a foil to Mark Fisher’s definition of the “weird” (that which does not belong).

of “homesickness one gets when one is still at ‘home’”; the “pain experienced when there is recognition that the place where one resides and that one loves is under immediate assault ...”³

Solastalgia can fuel a diversity of motivations and perceived pathways for the future. For some, it can lead to an “eco-nihilism”⁴ that tends to be the foundation for both neo-liberal policies (“we’re fucked anyway, so we might as well capture as much capital as we can in the time we have left!”) and climate change denialism (“climate change is nothing but another woke-liberal-globalist-communist plot to strangle liberty and freedom for all!”). However, the most recent iteration of eco-nihilism has expressed itself as eco-fascism, an environmentalism that tends to equate certain humans with being the primary cause for climate change on Earth (and should therefore be subjugated) and others as the ethical inheritors of the Earth (and should therefore be in control). Most eco-fascist arguments place climate change blame on the Global South, despite the fact that (a) a majority of greenhouse gas emissions are produced through transnational energy conglomerates and militaries that, like the emissions themselves, do not care about geopolitical borders; (b) the Global South is most in danger for the immediate effects of climate change; and (c) the totality of the Global South produces well below 30% of global greenhouse gas emissions.⁵ This dangerous ideology has already inspired several mass shootings, including at a Christchurch, New Zealand mosque in 2019 that left 51 people dead, an El Paso, Texas shooter that killed 23 in the same year, and a 2022 shooting of a grocery store in a predominantly Black neighborhood in Buffalo, New York in which 10 people were murdered.

As with all fascist ideologies, there is a favoring of certain people over others. Most eco-fascist screeds – including the manifestos left by the shooters in the terror attacks listed above – espouse a staple of fascist ideology: racial “replacement theory,” the argument that race is stable and essential for national identity and those deemed “nonwhite” are both expanding and conspiring to eliminate the “white race.”⁶ Never mind the fact that those who are deemed “nonwhite” and “white” are wholly socially constructed and have varied substantially throughout history – in just the past 200 years, for example, the nonwhite Other has been as diverse as Black, Latinx, Indigenous, Jewish, Irish, Italian, and so on.⁷

Conventional progressive politics, particularly liberal politics, tend to face our ecological crises by doubling down on a commitment to Truth, which itself is connected to a Weberian conception of a disenchanted scientism. Ironically perhaps, the way that liberals interact with Truth tends to be from one agent to another; Truth itself has an innate agency to motivate others (for the liberal, “speaking truth to power” is a statement of social/ontological fact rather than a first step in an emancipatory politics), as if the only thing that is necessary to win political victories is to utter the right incantation of

³Albrecht, “Solastalgia: A New Concept in Health and Identity,” 49.

⁴Lee, *Eco-Nihilism*.

⁵Boden, et al., “Global, Regional, and National Fossil-Fuel CO₂ Emissions (1751 - 2014) (V. 2017).” By comparison, even conservative estimates (such as the cited 2017 study by the Oak Ridge National Laboratory) attribute 15% of total greenhouse gas emissions to the United States alone. This figure does not take into account the immense amount of emissions that spew out of the imperialist American military that is spread across more than 1,000 installations on every continent but Antarctica (see Turse, “America’s Empire of Bases 2.0”).

⁶Hancock, “A Darker Shade of Green: Understanding Ecofascism.”

⁷Olson, *The Abolition of White Democracy*.

Truth and it will break through the veil of incomprehension bewitching one's political adversaries. This elitist, coercive, and ultimately self-soothing political commitment is what China Miéville has termed "revolt through the reveal."⁸ As if we are not all ensnared within the hegemonic mists of forces beyond our control. As if all that is needed is for the liberal magician to expose the prestige, and all irreconcilable contradictions will be burned away by the blinding light of Truth itself.

Others, such as myself, have faced this solastalgia by refusing to succumb to the comfort of replicating and regurgitating the same totalizing systems of the twentieth century, while also taking care not to dispose of some of their more indelible qualities. I am not speaking here of fascism, which contains no essential truths for humanity, but instead, of a transmutation and revitalization of Marxism that, like the perspective of many of my colleagues and interlocutors, is seen as a heuristic system that is necessarily and inherently able to be separated from the material realities of the last century and reapplied to the crises of our present. This, in itself, may not sound any different than Orthodox Marxism – or what will be referred to henceforth as *cataphatic Marxism*. Yet, what I hope to do is build upon China Miéville's proposal for an *apophatic Marxism*; a Marxism that takes seriously the plethora of aporias and uncertainties that seem to define the twenty-first century. In short: this ain't your granddaddy's Marxism.

Apophatic theology

Before getting too deep into what an apophatic Marxism might look like, it would be worth giving a brief overview of the rich history of apophatic theology. Apophatic theology is an attempt to reach the divine through negation – to follow the "negative path" (*via negativa*) which understands that the goodness of the divine is beyond that which is comprehensible, describable, or experienceable by humanity. This is in contrast to cataphatic theology, which is perhaps more recognizable, as a theology of affirmations – the *via positiva* attempts to describe all of the attributes of what God *is* as opposed to what God *is not*. Both approaches are attempting to connect with the divine, but in an apparent opposition to cataphasis, "the apophatic way, or mystical theology ... has for its object God, in so far as He is absolutely incomprehensible."⁹ While apophasis as a philosophical school emerges with Neo-Platonism, the more familiar engagements within Western philosophy occur once it had fused with the Jewish tradition by Philo of Alexandria and with Christian thought by Dionysius the Areopagite.¹⁰ Yet, this is not to say that apophatic philosophy is strictly a Western phenomenon; apophasis is an important school of thought in many philosophies/theologies around the world, particularly throughout Asia.¹¹

Often, apophatic theology expresses itself in motifs of "divine darkness,"¹² such as night, shadows, clouds, or mist. These motifs invite us to reflect on the mystery of darkness, which holds within it the "basic philosophical dilemma of a nothing that is something."¹³ Darkness represents an absence, but within that absence is a presence: the

⁸Miéville, "Silence in Debris: Towards an Apophatic Marxism," 116.

⁹Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 28.

¹⁰Carbine, *The Unknown God*.

¹¹Franke, *Apophatic Paths from Europe to China*.

¹²Thacker, *Starry Speculative Corpse*.

¹³*Ibid.*, 18.

presence of absence. Darkness is a useful apophatic theological heuristic in that darkness not only represents the incomprehensibility of a very unhuman deity – such as the Abrahamic God – but it also provides us, as Angela of Foligno argued in the thirteenth century, a mode of ecstatically annihilating our humanness so as to strive to achieve a union with that which is so radically unhuman that it remains completely occluded through human categories.¹⁴ “And when I am in that darkness, I do not remember anything about humanity or the God-Man, or anything that has form. Yet when I am in that darkness I see everything and I see nothing.”¹⁵ For many mystics, the consecutive emptying and negating of the self is a chief prerequisite in being able to receive divine presence. Meister Eckhart stressed:

So in truth, no creaturely skill, nor your own wisdom nor all your knowledge can enable you to know God divinely. For you to know God in God’s way, your knowing must become a pure unknowing, and a forgetting of yourself and all creatures ... You cannot do better than to place yourself in darkness and in unknowing.¹⁶

It should come as no surprise then, that within our solastalgic age, there seems to be an enthusiastic revival to seek solutions through processes of negation. As William Franke pointed out: “apophatic reflection belongs particularly to periods of crisis, when confidence in established discourses crumbles, when the authoritative voice of orthodoxies and their official affirmations – and even affirmative, assertive discourse per se – begin to ring hollow.”¹⁷ In other words, to borrow a familiar axiom of the occult: “as above” with apophatic theologies, “so below” with radical political (a)theologies. In Catherine Keller’s aptly titled *Cloud of the Impossible*, she succinctly voices this dialectic: “a voice in me shrills: let unsaying mean ‘enough with the talking’ – an activist apophasis! *Do this truth, make it happen!*”¹⁸ This is reminiscent of another radical theologian who engaged with “activist apophasis”; the abolitionist John Brown, who, after becoming frustrated with the excessive loquaciousness of the New England Anti-Slavery Convention in May 1859, declared: “these men are all talk; what is needed is action – action!”

An apophatic Marxism, then, is a radical reengagement with Nicholas of Cusa’s “learned ignorance” (*docta ignorantia*). Instead of remaining shackled to an enlightenment rationalism, we must start, strive, and apply change from a position of *lacking*. To clarify, the cataphatic Marxist attachment to rationalism and radical enlightenment is not an incorrect stance – and it does, in fact, give us solid analyses of the world and ways of moving forward – it is, however, a position that is incomplete and insufficient for the challenges of our time. “Lack,” Miéville demands, “must be part of how we see the world, how we act in it, how we speak and change it.”¹⁹ “Yet,” Vladimir Lossky reminds us, it is an *active* lacking, “this *ignorantia*, not only *docta* but charitable also, redescends again upon these concepts that it may mould them ...”²⁰ We must, as Dionysius the Areopagite advised us, “strive upwards unknowingly” (ἀγνώστως ἀνατάθητι),

¹⁴ Angela of Foligno, *Memorial*.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹⁶ Eckhart, *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, 56.

¹⁷ Franke, *On What Cannot Be Said*, 31.

¹⁸ Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*, 26.

¹⁹ Miéville, “Silence in Debris: Towards an Apophatic Marxism,” 118.

²⁰ Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 49.

to transmute the cataphatic material dialectic into *coincidentia oppositorum* – a union of opposites.²¹

Despite sometimes being labeled a cataphatic thinker, Marx himself understood the power of apophasis. For example, he famously never divulged his ideas on what a communist future would look like, despite being pressured to do so on many occasions, including in a letter from Friedrich Engels on November 27, 1851, pleading for him to expose “the much-vaunted ‘positive,’ being what you ‘really’ want.”²² Marx’s refusal to delineate the specific contours of communist society was not only a bid to avoid what he saw as idealist projections, but was also a willingness to *unknow* – to gaze into the brilliant darkness of an aporetic futurity. In fact, Marx preferred to use the term “communism” to describe the *movement* that would defeat the capitalist order, rather than as a characterization of the *society* that would begin to emerge after. He made this perfectly clear in *The German Ideology*: “Communism is for us not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things.”²³ As pointed out by Colin O’Connell, “what we have here is an image of the future primarily based on the *via negativa*.”²⁴

I would like to stress again that my focus on apophasis is not a reaction to any kind of *inaccuracy* in Marxism’s historical relationship with cataphasis. Rather, focusing on apophasis is an attempt to offset the political reliance of cataphatic thought on the various Marxisms. Additionally, striving to leverage cataphatic/apophatic approaches as a dyad of opposites betrays the very thinking that I am attempting to point us toward. This confusion is not a unique problem and is one that apophatic theology has wrestled with since the beginning: “Now we should not conclude that the negations are simply the opposites of the affirmations ...”²⁵ Dionysius, along with apophatic theologian John Scotus Eriugena, understood that a negation of all created affirmations therefore implies a kind of dialectic super-affirmation – what Deirdre Carabine calls a “*hyperphatic* theology, in which both theologies are ultimately transcended.”²⁶ This is a philosophy which reaches negation *through* affirmation, a twisting of doctrines in which the *via positiva* and *via negativa* are not opposing routes, but merely switchbacks upon the same mountain path which ascends through the cloud layer of unknowing toward the Sisyphean summit of transcendence. Ultimately, I agree with Miéville in his assertion that “what may be most effective is a hyperphatic Marxism.”²⁷

There is, of course, a danger in rejecting a purely scientific explanation of the world – and we see that danger made manifest in the proliferation of conspiracy theories and climate change denialism today. But relying purely upon scientism is also dangerous, and turns a blind eye to the more holistic reality of our universe and the politics enacted within it. Miéville stresses “there is to the social world something surplus to any reductive literalism, and that thus the supple deployment of apophatic techniques – because each usage must be ruthlessly evaluated – allows for *greater*

²¹Cusanus, *Of Learned Ignorance*.

²²Engels, “Engels to Marx. 27 November,” 493.

²³Marx, *The German Ideology*, 57.

²⁴O’Connell, “Marxism and the Logic of Futural Discourse,” 200.

²⁵Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, 136.

²⁶Carabine, *The Unknown God*, 312.

²⁷Miéville, “Silence in Debris: Towards an Apophatic Marxism,” 129.

precision.”²⁸ In other words, to borrow a phrase from my late mentor Gaymon Bennett, we are not telling a “mere subtraction story in which superstition is stripped away and nothing of real value is lost.”²⁹ Rather, our understanding of the world through this “reductive literalism” is *produced* through pathways of power which must be adaptively and constantly reenacted so that they may be crafted into our scientific common sense. Within this arena of power, an apophatic receptivity broadens the ways in which we can know and change the world by taking seriously aspects of the unsayable and unknowable that exist outside of a strictly scientific materialist framework. After all, secularization, as a modern philosophical project, is also a kind of apophasis – a political and ontological stance of unsaying. However, what secularism as a political project lacks is its own “*docta ignorantia*, its knowing what in its moment it does not know.”³⁰ For an example of a political *docta ignorantia*, let us take one of the important apophatic characteristics of power – that of political intuition – which Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci argues:

is not expressed through the artist, but through the “leader”; and “intuition” must be understood to mean not “knowledge of [humanity],” but swiftness in connecting seemingly disparate facts, and in conceiving the means adequate to particular ends – thus discovering the interests involved, and arousing the passions of [humanity] and directing them toward a particular action. The “expression” of the “leader” is [their] “action” (in a positive or negative sense, of launching or preventing a particular action, which is consistent or inconsistent with the end which one wishes to attain).³¹

The twisting of the vines of cataphasis and apophasis transcends and transmutes into an unbreakable rope called *praxis*, that ideal combination of political education and action. “Such a theology performs its *negations* for the sake of the most *positive* relations possible.”³² Opening the ways of knowing beyond cataphatic thought allows us to parse subtle distinctions; for example, let us examine the nuance between that which is *unspeakable* and that which is *unsayable*. The “unspeakable horrors”³³ of Marxism’s ideological enemies – oppression, war, imperialism, racism, sexism, etc. – have been examined extensively within the Left canon. The word “unspeakable” is not a throwaway term, but one that expresses an inherent particularity within the depravities of capitalism. These depravities are difficult to describe due to their systemic expansiveness, which is perhaps why theologians like Paul Tillich describe the capitalist system as “demonic.”³⁴ Perhaps this agentive ascription is also why Walter Benjamin, during the first rise of fascism, asserted “that capitalism will not die a natural death.”³⁵ Apophatic mystery is an important component to systemic analysis “because ‘mystery’ is polysemic, and though it is certainly not opaque, as lived social reality there is always something more to that oppression than can be said. There is a mystery of iniquity.”³⁶ In this

²⁸Ibid., 124.

²⁹Bennett, “Anima, Animism, Animate: Ethnography after Authenticity,” 7.

³⁰Keller, *Political Theology of the Earth*, 160.

³¹Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 252.

³²Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*, 3; emphasis added.

³³Lenin, “Speech at the Unveiling of a Memorial to Marx and Engels,” 165.

³⁴Tillich, *Basic Principles of Religious Socialism*.

³⁵Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 667.

³⁶Miéville, “Silence in Debris: Towards an Apophatic Marxism,” 138.

way, capitalism's "unspeakable" horrors are a foil to Marx's "unsayable" description of communism.

A politics of the unsayable, of incapacity, of unknowing, an openness to being surprised, is a necessary condition for an effective politics and is one that Marx also argued for in *The Poverty of Philosophy*: "Human reason, which is anything but pure, having only incomplete vision, encounters at every step new problems to be solved."³⁷ The more that we claim to know, the more the unknown reveals itself. For Étienne Balibar, this incompleteness (*inachèvement*) is not only necessary for philosophy, but must be made active, into a verb: to incomplete (*inachever*).

Marx *incompleted Capital* (and toiled all his life to incomplete it) ... One might go even further and assert that the nature of a great philosophy is not only to incomplete itself, but to *incomplete others*, by introducing itself or by being introduced in their writing ... And if it is true that the regulating idea of "system" is fundamentally a modern version of the old *imago mundi*, the meaning of all these aporetic undertakings is, if not to "transform," probably to *incomplete the world*, or the representation of the world as "a world."³⁸

Nostalgia, melancholy, and the dialectics of place

The incompleting of the world in the twenty-first century is a project profoundly influenced by the reciprocal apophatic amalgam of *nostalgia* and *melancholy*. We live in the ruins of hegemonic ideologies – haunted by the specters of the totalizing systems of the past century, whether they were/are victorious, vacillating, vanishing, or vanquished. Nostalgia and melancholy profoundly influence the material ideologies of our world(s), but their influence cannot be pointed to, unmasked, and captured. Rather, we must empty and unknow ourselves so that we may catch a fuzzy glimpse before, as Slavoj Žižek has said, "this being dissolves itself into nothingness or, more precisely ... changes into another kind of reality."³⁹ However, the traits of nostalgia and melancholy are not universal; they have a strong relationship to *place*, and are therefore also agents of placemaking.

Philosophers and cultural geographers have robust distinctions between what is considered a *space* versus what is considered a *place*. As Lisa Messeri succinctly summarized: "space is universal, empty, and a priori, while places are meaning-filled subsections of space."⁴⁰ But as she also points out, this is a problematic distinction since space becomes associated with "the global, the objective, and the masculine" and place gets attributed to the local, the subjective, and the feminine.⁴¹ Despite this, I agree with Messeri that place remains a helpful category and I likewise intend to destabilize it, to treat it as "multiple and varied, constantly being made and altered."⁴² Indeed, I believe this flux can be assigned to, amongst other factors, the similarly fluctuating union of nostalgia and melancholy. Place is both constructed by, and constitutes meaning for, the practices of everyday life.⁴³

³⁷Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, 172.

³⁸Balibar, "The Infinite Contradiction," 146.

³⁹Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 25.

⁴⁰Messeri, *Placing Outer Space*, 13.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*.

The importance of place to nostalgia in particular is a factor that is often glossed over due to the way the term is used within our common vernacular. Yet nostalgia's essence is dependent on the activity of placemaking, a practice in which it is necessary to secure a deep, emotional connection to occupied spaces. The subsequent severing of place from being therefore becomes the initial trauma that fuels feelings of nostalgia. As Edward Casey has argued: "nostalgia, contrary to what we usually imagine, is not merely a matter of regret for lost times; it is also a pining for *lost places*, for places we have once been in yet can no longer reenter ..." ⁴⁴ This "pinning" for places that no longer exist within space and/or time is why melancholy is inseparable from nostalgia. ⁴⁵

This last point, in particular, is important within a post-Cold War/post-Soviet context. I intentionally use these two terms interchangeably. The trauma that was the collapsing of the Soviet Union, beginning in 1989 and fully crumbling by 1991, is an event that profoundly reshaped the material and affective geopolitics of our planet. Even though the term is often used as a (frankly, Western imperialist) descriptor of the non-Russian member-states that were part of the Soviet Union, I argue that the entirety of this planet exists as a post-Soviet space (place?). The consequence of losing a major super-power that, for nearly the entire twentieth century, opposed the capitalist order is one that we continue to reckon with today. Whether that capitalist opposition was in practice or in name only does not even empirically matter if one analyzes how quickly and brutally – following the disappearance of that dissenting geopolitical voice – capitalism has mutated, subjugated, and colonized the world, along with the minds of most everyone in it, over the course of these past 35 + years. For example, the intensification of neoliberalism might better be understood as a refinement of what Aimé Césaire called the "terrific boomerang effect" ⁴⁶ of colonialism wherein North Atlantic foreign policy has come home to roost domestically. The effects of this super-colonization is what Mark Fisher has called *capitalist realism*: "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it." ⁴⁷ An anecdote from the former Chancellor of Germany, Willy Brandt, further supports this line of reasoning.

[Brandt] never forgave Gorbachev for allowing the dissolution of the Communist bloc – not because Brandt was a secret believer in Soviet Communism, but because he was well aware that the disappearance of the Communist bloc would also entail the disappearance of

⁴⁴Casey, *Getting Back into Place*, 37.

⁴⁵Although place is usually dependent upon both space *and* time, since place is not a static category and the same space within a place becomes a different place in a different time. Hence why one's "return" always holds within it at least a *souçon* of sadness. This is also why spaces that seem to deviate from this affective reality tend to give us uncanny feelings of liminality. The most obvious and interesting examples of this are within generic zones of transit (e.g. airports, shopping malls) which have come to dominate the late capitalist landscape – locations which Marc Augé called "non-places." Mark Fisher, in *Ghosts of My Life*, added another important layer to non-places, namely, the commercial flattening of our perceived passage of time – starting during the advent of neoliberalism in the late-1970s – which he hinted at calling *non-time*. He argued that we have lost the ability to grasp and articulate the present, and therefore, we are unable to reconcile the passage of time outside of a corporate calendar. Time now passes according to quarterly reports and fiscal years. And because of this, we have lost any kind of idea of "progress" (or, perhaps, "progress" has abandoned us). This is what Fisher has called "the slow cancellation of the future." Or, as my late comrade and mentor David Graeber once asked, in his beautiful way of always being able to cut through the bullshit: "where, in short, are the flying cars? Where are the force fields, tractor beams, teleportation pods, antigravity sleds, tricorders, immortality drugs, colonies on Mars, and all the other technological wonders any child growing up in the mid-to-late twentieth century assumed would exist by now?" (see Graeber, "Of Flying Cars and the Declining Rate of Profit," 66).

⁴⁶Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 36.

⁴⁷Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 2.

Western Europe's social-democratic welfare state. That is to say, Brandt knew that the capitalist system is ready to make considerable concessions to the workers and the poor only if there is a serious threat of an alternative, of a different mode of production that promises workers their rights. To retain its legitimacy, capitalism has to demonstrate how it works better even for the workers and the poor, and the moment this alternative vanishes, elites can proceed to dismantle the welfare state.⁴⁸

This kind of capitalist realism presents a very different kind of apophysis: its broken, mutilated dialectic between past and future has created an annihilation of hope and a hegemonic feeling of an eternal present. This is why an apophatic Marxism is so crucial to articulate. Through mourning, a melancholic approach to history allows us *to remember* as a form of praxis. Walter Benjamin is perhaps the most significant Western theorist of this kind of active "remembering" (*Eingedenken*), in which historical facts are not firm and static, but are the "convergence in memory of accumulated and frequently unconscious data."⁴⁹ Benjamin's practice of remembering as a militant melancholic lament was almost certainly drawn from Jewish mysticism – in particular the act of *zekher*, that is, re-actualizing memory within one's present experience – and is about the shaping and transmitting of history, rather than passively preserving it, so that one could "pass it on as experience to those listening. It thus bears the marks of the storyteller much as the earthen vessel bears the marks of the potter's hand."⁵⁰

Actually existing apophatic Marxism

Before continuing, I wish to take a brief tangent, for it would be intellectually and ethically irresponsible to not point out that recent revolutions throughout Latin America have already innately mobilized this kind of active Benjaminian melancholy and nostalgia in highly effective ways. By "waking up the shadows" of people like Augusto César Sandino, Farabundo Martí, Emiliano Zapata, Simón Bolívar, José Martí, Pancho Villa, and scores of Indigenous figures, the continuing revolutions in Chile, Cuba, Venezuela, Bolivia, and Mexico, among others, have been able to enact social movements in the present while *actively* using the lessons of the past.⁵¹ Some scholars have dubbed these associated acts of resistance as being part of a "post-neoliberalism" moment, which points toward geopolitical reconfigurations and privileges radical possibilities of what *ought* to be instead of a resignation to what the world *is*.⁵² In the past, this kind of "insurgent critical thinking," as Alexander Aviña has termed it, allowed revolutionaries in Mexico, for example, to find in Marxism effective tools for explaining contemporary conflicts *through* their 1910 revolutionary constitution – the ideals of which were betrayed in favor of neoliberal *Yanqui* collaboration in recent years by the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional*.⁵³

Peasant radicalism, in particular, has a deep revolutionary tradition in many parts of Latin America and the concept of a living past which acts upon the present and future – an ontological reality which may seem like a novel concept to theorists in the Global

⁴⁸Žižek, "Why Gorbachev Failed."

⁴⁹Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, 157.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 159.

⁵¹Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia*, 74.

⁵²See Ruckert et al., "Post-neoliberalism in Latin America"; Davies and Gane, "Post Neoliberalism? An Introduction."

⁵³Aviña, "A Revolution of the Poor, for the Poor and by the Poor."

North – has always been an innate and integral component to social movements in the Global South. This is a reality that Aviña's aptly titled book *Specters of Revolution* brilliantly covers.⁵⁴ It is also a reality that Guillermo Bonfil Batalla has termed "deep Mexico" (*México profundo*), the occluded reality that Mesoamerican Indigenous ontologies dialectically permeate throughout, while also consistently resist, Mexican (and, indeed, all Latin American) elite nationalist institutions.⁵⁵ This idea was expounded upon by Subcomandante Marcos, the enigmatic former military leader and spokesman for the ongoing revolutionary organization which continues to hold substantial territory in the Mexican state of Chiapas since 1994: the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (*Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional*, EZLN). Expanding upon Batalla's proposition, Marcos argued that Indigenous peoples are a part of what he termed "basement Mexico," a position of nonbeing to the state, but one that had also existed before its establishment.⁵⁶ However, this temporal disruption and embracing of a living past has always been, and continues to be, the revolution's strength. Revolutionaries are able to, through memory, preserve hope for the future without falling victim to the Western trap of teleological thinking.⁵⁷ Or, as it was beautifully stated in an EZLN communique: "a rebellion with mostly Indigenous blood has defied the present disenchantment by putting one foot in the past and the other in the future" (*una rebelión con sangre mayoritariamente indígena ha desafiado el desencanto presente poniendo un pie en el pasado y otro en el futuro*).⁵⁸

Capitalist realism, on the other hand, is more coercive of the past, hoping to place history in a kind of stasis. Starting well before the fall of the Soviet Union, but intensifying as it crumbled, there has been an attempt to ontologically and epistemologically collapse communism to an historical existence of unceasing alienation and oppression.⁵⁹ This not only ignores the rich, global diversity of communist experimentation, but even within Soviet historical space, it flattens the diverse experiences of those living all over the vast Soviet Union, many of whom, even during the stagnant latter years of the Soviet experiment, had found great hope, joy, and pride in their contributions to the building of socialism.⁶⁰ By casting itself as the natural victor, apophatic post-Soviet capitalism has ushered in yet another disenchantment of the world. While Weber lamented twentieth century capitalism's dehumanizing need for instrumental rationality, twenty-first century capitalist realism signifies a second order disenchantment brought on by the failure of its alternatives on a global scale.⁶¹

⁵⁴ Aviña, *Specters of Revolution*.

⁵⁵ Batalla, *México Profundo*.

⁵⁶ Maher, *Anticolonial Eruptions*.

⁵⁷ Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia*.

⁵⁸ EZLN: *Documentos y Comunicados*, 257.

⁵⁹ As I have written about before (see Genovese, "The Necessity of Communist Morality"), this irony seems to be a case of psychological projection since capitalism empirically produces alienation and oppression on a much wider scale. The attempt at delegitimizing current radical experimentation (particularly throughout Latin America) continues today through violence that is both direct (e.g. Operation Gideon, the 2020 U.S.-backed failed *coup d'état* of Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela) and indirect (e.g. the attempt to legitimize so-called "Havana Syndrome" starting in 2016; unsubstantiated claims that Cuban sonic weapons are being used against Western embassies). This latter example is a perfect instance of psychological projection, since the U.S. regime has been using long-range acoustic device (LRAD) weapons against its own people since at least the 2009 G20 Summit protests in Pittsburgh and I have personally witnessed LRADs being deployed by the Phoenix Police Department against peaceful protestors between 2016–2021.

⁶⁰ See, for example, Ghodsee, *The Left Side of History*; Ghodsee, *Red Hangover*; Ghodsee, *Why Women Have Better Sex Under Socialism*; von Eschen, *Paradoxes of Nostalgia*; Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*.

⁶¹ Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia*.

In a capitalist realist world, the past is permanently encased behind a plexiglass display case, eclipsing the brilliant shadow of death. It appears as Benjamin's Angel of History – reigning over a place of limitless ruin – yet, capitalist apophysis negates Benjamin's inherent messianism; there is no longer the “now-time” (*Jetzt-zeit*) speaking back to the defeated ancestors of the past and carrying their banner forward into a hopeful future that may lead to their redemption.⁶² Capitalist realism takes the opposite approach and depends on the flattening of past tragedies to promote an inactive remembrance that is much easier to categorize and control. Enzo Traverso argues this salient point, a detail that intensely resonates in the 2020s as we see a renewed commitment, particularly in the Global North, to inaugurate a third Red Scare against communism/socialism, a threatening of Jewish existence (particularly through the fallacious equation of Judaism with Zionism), and state retaliation against Black social movements and Indigenous sovereignty:

The memory of the Gulag erased that of revolution, the memory of the Holocaust replaced that of antifascism, and the memory of slavery eclipsed that of anticolonialism: the remembrance of the victims seems unable to coexist with the recollection of their hopes, of their struggles, of their conquests and their defeats.⁶³

In 1959, Theodor W. Adorno recognized this creeping flattening of history, as nations began to initiate programs to “work through their past” as a way of foreclosing an active relationship to traumatic memory: “in this usage ‘working through the past’ does not mean seriously working upon the past ... on the contrary, its intention is to close the books on the past and, if possible, even remove it from memory.”⁶⁴ One of the best examples of this can be found in Spain's “pact of forgetting” (*pacto del olvido*), a bipartisan political decision to not address atrocities committed by the Spanish state following the fascist coup of Francisco Franco in 1936. This “pact” was institutionalized in the 1977 Amnesty Law which, only two years after Franco's death, guaranteed impunity for all fascist crimes during the Civil War and during Franco's reign. It should be pointed out that an overwhelming amount of Francoist Spain's victims were socialists and communists. However, through this melancholy, and putting “one foot in the past and the other in the future,” many of the victims have been fighting for justice, and in 2010, they convinced Argentinean criminal courts to begin an investigation to indict surviving Francoist officials and rightfully charge them with crimes against humanity.⁶⁵

Hope among ruins

As cliché as it sounds, we live in dark times. It can often feel alienating, and indeed, as I have discussed, it has been *built that way*. But there is a certain kind of hope in that place, there is light beyond light emitting rays of brilliant darkness. It lies within the quotidian, within occluded familiarity, within the obnoxiously obvious. As David Graeber so poignantly put it: “... the ultimate, hidden truth of the world is that it is something that we make, and could just as easily make differently.”⁶⁶

⁶²Benjamin, “On the Concept of History.”

⁶³Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia*, 10.

⁶⁴Adorno, *Critical Models*, 89.

⁶⁵For more on this, see the film *The Silence of Others* (2018).

⁶⁶Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules*, 89.



Figure 1. V.V. Spassky, “To the Lighthouse of the Communist International,” 1919. Lenin Library, Moscow.

In 1919, in commemoration of the founding of the Communist International, amongst the blood and hunger of the utterly brutal Russian Civil War, Soviet artist V.V. Spassky created a work that perhaps epitomizes an apophatic Marxism (Figure 1). In the illustration, a lone figure seems, at first glance, lost at sea. Amid turbulent waves, a heavily damaged ship flying the tattered banner of Tsarist Russia is being swallowed by the inky darkness of the night, and in the foreground, we have that hunched survivor, gripping a makeshift oar that is festooned with a red handkerchief and a black wreath, standing atop a rather peculiar life raft: an open copy of *The Communist Manifesto*. On the verso is written the rallying call “Proletarians of all countries, unite!” (*Proletarii vsekh stran, soyedinyaytes'!*) and on the recto, the name of the man who coined it, Karl Marx. But this depiction is an unusual one, especially for an artwork created in the spirit of celebration. The scene is melancholic and dangerous, a far cry from archetypal depictions of the New Soviet Man or the idyllic glory of socialist achievements. The figure is shirtless, hunched, disheveled, in pain. There is a glimmer of hope on the horizon – the lighthouse – but it is quite far away, leading one to surmise that there are no guarantees that it can even be reached.

Enzo Traverso’s analysis of the image is that “the message of the poster is clear nonetheless: the socialist future is not compromised, since the Communist International embodies a light of hope.”⁶⁷ Yet what I see in this work is the anxiety caused by the vicissitudes of war, especially considering the time in which it was created. In 1919, the Russian Revolution was being ideologically and materially attacked by not only the remnants of Tsarist loyalists, but also the entirety of the reactionary world: the United Kingdom, the United States, France, Sweden, Germany, Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire, as well as fascist paramilitary groups like the Black Hundreds and even the nascent Freikorps. This savagery, compounded by the stalling out of the initial wave of other internationalist socialist revolutions in Europe, constrained and forced the workers’ state to ossify and enact repressive measures that were quite far off from the Bolshevik leaders’ ideas of building socialism.⁶⁸ Instead, amongst this confusion, what we have in this image is a depiction of escape from the “unspeakable” and a gamble toward the “unsayable.” The revolution, personified in this weary survivor, has not sunken into the waves of depression and defeat, but is persisting in active apophysis, a praxis of melancholy: “poised between triumph and catastrophe, this is an expression neither of optimism nor of defeat but of a superposition between the two.”⁶⁹

Traverso laments that “at the end of the twentieth century, we have experienced a similar revolutionary shipwreck, but there is no visible lighthouse yet.”⁷⁰ But perhaps he is looking too hard for the cataphatic light, when the rhizomatic rays of melancholic darkness are already here – or perhaps, they never left – pointing us toward the gray in-between. As Miéville correctly asserts: “To live according to radical politics, perhaps more than with any other approach to the world, can be to experience moments in which hope and lament, utopia and apocalypse, are inextricable.”⁷¹ This is the “hyperphasis” that Carabine alluded to; the middle way that has stored enough revolutionary

⁶⁷Traverso, *Revolution*, 7.

⁶⁸Miéville, *A Spectre, Haunting*.

⁶⁹Ibid., 40.

⁷⁰Traverso, *Revolution*, 8.

⁷¹Miéville, *A Spectre, Haunting*, 40.

force so as to attain escape velocity from the paralysis of liberalism. This is the essence of a generative melancholy and nostalgia; for melancholy, at its root, is an identification with that aforementioned *lack* rather than a *loss*.⁷² An apophatic Marxism, following Marx himself, identifies with communism as it *is* dreamed and expected, not as it *was* realized and attempted.

So, may we head toward that faint gleam in our misty future – that subterranean light buried beneath the horizon which promises nothing to us except the possibility of something radically different and darkly beautiful, if only we might wield our eternal imaginations to materially enact its spectral desires. It is the only promise that can be made in our liminal time of apocalypse and utopia – our “apocatopia.”⁷³ Indeed, this potentiality should not be squandered. It may very well be our last opportunity.

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⁷²Žižek, “Melancholy and the Act.”

⁷³Miéville, *A Spectre, Haunting*, 40.

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