

# One or Two Melancholias? 1917, 1968 and the Question of Organisation

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## Abstract:

This paper weaves together two recurring themes in philosophical and political debates of recent years: the idea, loosely inspired by Walter Benjamin, that describes melancholia as a dominant structure of feeling and desire among the left; and the suggestion that we are currently witnessing a revival of debates on the question of organisation. My argument identifies not one but two left-wing melancholias, the specular relation between which precludes the work of mourning and deprives us of the conditions for thinking organisation concretely. It follows that a real return to the question of organisation can only take place if we escape this melancholic mechanism; I propose that the very idea of organisation might offer us theoretical resources with which to do so.

**Keywords:** organisation; left-wing melancholy; melancholia; 1917; 1968; schismogenesis; real opposition; dyads

*We come to love our left passions and reasons, our analyses and convictions, more than we love the existing world that we presumably seek to alter with these terms or the future that would be aligned with them. ... What emerges is a Left that operates without either a deep and radical critique of the status quo or a compelling alternative to the existing order of things. But perhaps even more troubling, it is a Left that has become more attached to its impossibility than its potential fruitfulness, a Left that is most at home dwelling not in hopefulness but in its own marginality and failure, a Left that is caught in a structure of melancholic attachment to a certain strain of its own dead past, whose spirit is ghostly, whose structure of desire is backward looking and punishing.*

Wendy Brown

*The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.*

F. Scott Fitzgerald

It has been said for some years now that, after a long hiatus, what was once called the *Organisationsfrage* — the question of organisation — is in the process of making a comeback. Shortly after the mobilisations that rippled across the world in 2011, Alain Badiou wrote that, “however shining and memorable”, they ultimately arrived back at the “universal problems left in suspense in the previous period, in the centre of which

one finds the problem of politics par excellence, namely organisation”.<sup>1</sup> Regarding another revival recently promoted by Badiou (among others), that of the “idea of communism”, Peter Thomas has remarked that

the most widespread response [to it] ... has been the proposal that a coherent investigation of the meaning of communism today necessarily requires a reconsideration of the nature of political power, of political organization and, above all, of the party-form.<sup>2</sup>

Jodi Dean, herself a prominent advocate of a return to communism, the question of organisation and the party-form, has summarised the issue thus: “the idea of communism pushes toward the organization of communism”.<sup>3</sup> Mimmo Porcaro, in turn, has argued that the permanent crisis in which the world has lived since the financial meltdown of 2008 renders outdated every “evolutionary vision” of the overcoming of capitalism, and the need for moments of rupture raises the problem of “coordinated action, articulated in steps and phases”, and the kind of organisation that might be capable of that: “The crisis thus rings in, once again, *the hour of Lenin*.”<sup>4</sup> More recently, Frank Ruda has lamented a “paralysis of the collective and social imaginary” regarding “new ways of conceiving of emancipatory politics”, and insisted that the development of these “necessarily [has] to be linked to rethinking the question of organization.”<sup>5</sup>

This small sample indicates two broad traits of the discourse surrounding the idea of this return. First, its performativity: most of the time, rather than advance concrete proposals or suggest new ways of approaching the question of organisation, it argues for the importance of doing those things and takes the form of an injunction to do them. Second, a tendency to treat the question of organisation as coextensive with that of the party, thus making the return of one synonymous with the return of the other. Should we conclude then that this all there is to this return — either the reassertion of a historical form from the past or an appeal to an imminent future that never arrives? Or should we take this as evidence that the return is not yet here — that something still blocks the question of organisation and prevents us from fully posing it?

In what follows, I propose that we read the claim regarding the return of the organisation question alongside another recurring theme

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1 Badiou 2011, p. 65.

2 Thomas 2013.

3 Dean 2014, p. 822.

4 Porcaro 2013. (Italics in the original.)

5 Ruda 2015. (Modified.)

in recent debates — the idea, loosely inspired by Walter Benjamin, that identifies melancholia as a dominant structure of feeling and desire among the left. What I hope to do is unearth a connection between the two, showing how a self-perpetuating melancholic mechanism eclipses the question of organisation, but also why it may take more than a simple return to past answers to free ourselves from it. More precisely, I contend that we are dealing with not one but two left-wing melancholias, and that their specular relation, by virtue of reducing politics to a set of abstract choices between absolute values, deprives us of the conditions for thinking organisation concretely. Overcoming that predicament therefore demands that we reconstruct those conditions rather than pick sides by reasserting this or that option from the past. Doing this, in turn, offers us a way of approaching the question of organisation that goes beyond the search for an ideal organisational form, and thus also severs its automatic association with the question of the party. It also affords us the means to claim the legacy of both those melancholias, which frees to carry on with the work of mourning the losses and defeats that are at their source.

### Who Are the Melancholics?

In a well-known 1999 piece, Wendy Brown proposed Walter Benjamin’s concept of “left melancholy” as a means to shed light on the “crisis of the left” that at the time had already been going on for two decades or more, depending on who you asked. The term was supposed to describe “not only a refusal to come to terms with the particular character of the present”, but a “narcissism with regard to one’s past political attachments and identity that exceeds any contemporary investment in political mobilisation, alliance, or transformation”.<sup>6</sup> Committed “more to a particular political analysis or ideal — even to the failure of that ideal — than to seizing possibilities for radical change in the present”,<sup>7</sup> left melancholies shield themselves from facing failure by displacing the narcissistic identification with the lost object onto the hate of a substitute. In the particular conjuncture analysed by Brown, it was cultural politics, identity politics and “postmodernism” that normally played the role of villains, scapegoated as the vectors of dispersion that sundered the solidity and assuredness of a left project that had ceased being viable.<sup>8</sup>

More recently, Jodi Dean has revisited Brown’s argument in order to suggest a different diagnosis. While praising the 1999 essay

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6 Brown 1999, p. 20.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid., p. 23.

for providing “an account of a particularly left structure of desire”,<sup>9</sup> and seeing it as part of the process of elaboration of the defeats of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Dean suggests that it failed to correctly identify “what was lost and what is retained, what is displaced and what is disavowed”.<sup>10</sup> Apart from the almost fifteen years that separate the two pieces, what is central to this difference is Dean’s emphasis on the drive aspect of Freud’s understanding of melancholia, on the one hand, and her different interpretation of “left melancholy” itself, on the other. For Dean, rather than “Benjamin’s unambivalent epithet for the revolutionary hack”<sup>11</sup> who cannot overcome his former attachments even in the face of failure, the term should instead be read as a description of what is more or less the opposite. Accordingly, then, her diagnosis ends up being almost symmetrically opposed:

Instead of a left attached to an unacknowledged orthodoxy, we have one that has given way on the desire for communism, betrayed its historical commitment to the proletariat, and sublimated revolutionary energies into restorationist practices that strengthen the hold of capitalism.<sup>12</sup>

The left melancholia diagnosed by Dean is one in which the experience of defeat and subsequent abandonment of revolutionary desire have been channelled into a drive whose “incessant activity” — “criticism and interpretation, small projects and local actions, particular issues and legislative victories, art, technology, procedures, and process ... the branching, fragmented practices of micro-politics, self-care, and issue awareness”<sup>13</sup> — has failure, not success, as its goal. For the melancholic left, enjoyment comes precisely from its incapacity to win, its “withdrawal from responsibility, its sublimation of goals and responsibilities”.<sup>14</sup> That is what ultimately explains why it cannot break out of the repetitive patterns that ensure its continued impotence: it *wills* that impotence, it derives pleasure from it.

Who is right, then — which diagnosis is correct? Or should we consider Brown’s, as Dean suggests, an earlier moment of elaboration of that melancholia, to be completed in the present day?<sup>15</sup>

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9 Dean 2013, p. 81.

10 Ibid., p. 84.

11 Brown 1999, p. 20.

12 Dean 2013, p. 87.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid., p. 88.

The first thing to note is that, although that is in no way a demerit *per se*, neither reading is entirely faithful to Benjamin’s use of the concept. Even if Dean is certainly closer to the original, each of them creatively extrapolates on and ascribes a new meaning to the term first introduced in a 1931 review of Erich Kästner’s poetry. For starters, whereas Brown and Dean understand “melancholia” as qualifying “left” — as a particular “structure of desire” proper to the left-wing of the political spectrum, however defined —, the relation in Benjamin works the other way around: it is “left” that qualifies “melancholia”. Kästner is not criticised for being an old party hack stuck in the same politics of yore, nor for being a journalistic hack who has turned his old revolutionary leanings into trendy commodities, but for finding a market niche in catering for a widespread melancholia that is only the latest chapter in the malaise that eats bourgeois society from the inside.<sup>16</sup> It is the audience, not the poet, who is melancholy — or rather, it is the bourgeoisie.<sup>17</sup> It is to the bourgeois public, in whom the hollowness of commodified life might even stir some “revolutionary reflexes”, that the New Objectivists like Kästner raise the mirror of a “yawning emptiness”.<sup>18</sup> Yet this simply transposes the repulsion that reacts to an all-pervasive spiritual immiseration “into objects of distraction, of amusement, which can be supplied for consumption”,<sup>19</sup> cancelling any political significance that these feelings or the artworks that respond to them might have. The latter do nothing to intimate that things could be different, or how; what they offer to both public and artist is ultimately only the contentment of contemplating one’s own vacuity. This is why Benjamin concludes that “this left-wing radicalism is ... to the left not of this or that tendency; but simply to the left of what is in general possible. For from the beginning all it has in mind is to enjoy itself in a negativistic quiet”.<sup>20</sup> It is, in short, the outwardly radical expression of bourgeois nihilism — but ultimately no more than the left-wing variant thereof.

Yet none of this gets us closer to understanding our own time. The second thing to notice in Brown’s and Dean’s texts, then, is the observable behaviours that are in each case chosen as evidence of melancholia, and

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16 “Tortured stupidity: this the [sic] latest of two millenia [sic] of metamorphoses of melancholy.” Benjamin 1974, p. 31.

17 “Kästner’s poems are for the higher income bracket, those mournful, melancholy dummies who trample anything or anyone in their path” and suffer from “the mournfulness of the satiated man who can no longer devote all his money to his stomach”. Ibid.

18 Ibid., p. 29.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid., p. 30.

what sector of “the left” is supposed to embody them. It is clear, when examined in this way, that the two texts somewhat mirror each other.

It is relatively easy to see that what Brown has in mind is a tendency to blame the defeats of the last decades not on an incapacity to respond to a changing environment, but on the “wrong turns” allegedly taken by the advocates of a type of politics that emerged in the 1960s. Her melancholic is the “old-school” leftist who would rather rejoice in the failure of younger generations of activists than question his own deep-set analyses and prescriptions. Dean’s reference to the abandonment of “antagonism, class, and revolutionary commitment”, on the other hand, initially suggests a broader argument. After all, the sublimation of revolutionary desire into “the repetitious practices offered up as democracy (whether representative, deliberative or radical)”<sup>21</sup> is an accusation that could be levelled at New Labour as much as at contemporary anarchism. More importantly, it papers over rather important distinctions such as whether we consider that move as conscious or unconscious (deliberately giving up on the revolution as opposed to choosing self-defeating methods to pursue it), strategic or tactical (rejecting the very idea as opposed to the short-term viability of revolutionary activity), due to the acceptance of “an inevitable capitalism” or to an elaboration of past “practical failures”.<sup>22</sup> What the blanket reference to “real existing compromises and betrayals”<sup>23</sup> ends up doing is strike an equivalence between those cases where betrayal can be asserted with relatively little controversy (say, New Labour) and those in which a more or less *unconscious* compromise is precisely what must be shown (abandonment of revolutionary desire as the source of melancholia and drive). It soon transpires that the latter, not the former, are the target. What Dean really has in mind is not ostensibly conscious “traitors”, but the *de facto* betrayal of those who engage “in activities that *feel* productive, important, radical” but ultimately seek only to reproduce “an inefficacy sure to guarantee [them] the nuggets of satisfaction drive provides”.<sup>24</sup> As Dean’s choice of examples makes clear — an emphasis on the personal, the local and the small-scale, single-issue campaigns, micropolitics etc. — one recognises this kind of melancholic by their attachment to precisely the kinds of practices that one would associate not with the “old school” but with a post-1968 left.

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21 Dean 2013, p. 87-8.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid., p. 87.

24 Ibid. My italics. The implication here is that, if these activities are felt to be productive, those who engage in them do so because they consciously seek something effective to do, rather than merely pretending to do it. Even if — and that is Dean’s argument, precisely — their unconscious desire points in the opposite direction, this should be enough to differentiate them from deliberate traitors.

Should we take this to mean that Dean’s diagnosis is no more than a confirmation of the actuality of Brown’s? Or should we accept the historical perspective in which Dean places both and see her own position as indicative of a swing of the pendulum in the opposite direction: the moment when the new left’s critique of the old left has itself come under critique — by a third perspective, one would hope, that is neither one nor the other? A third option would be that, rather than choose between them, we decide that both are correct: that we are in fact dealing not with one, but two melancholias — and thus also, in a way, with two lefts.<sup>25</sup>

### The Two Lefts

The main feature separating mourning from melancholia which Freud seeks to explain is the fact that the melancholic “represents his ego ... as worthless, incapable of any achievement ... reproaches himself, vilifies himself and expects to be cast out and punished”.<sup>26</sup> The reason is that, in melancholia, incapacity to give up the love for the lost object results in an identification with it, so that “an object-loss [is] transformed into an ego-loss”, opening a “cleavage between the critical activity of the ego and the ego as altered by identification”.<sup>27</sup> Hate towards the object, which was always present as ambivalence but loss allows to come to the fore, is thus directed towards the self. The “self-tormenting in melancholia, which is no doubt enjoyable, signifies ... a satisfaction of trends of sadism and hate which relate to an object, and which have been turned around upon the subject’s own self”.<sup>28</sup>

Freud observes that, “[i]f one listens patiently to a melancholic’s many and various self-accusations, one cannot in the end avoid the impression that often the most violent of them ... fit someone else, someone whom

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25 It is generally the case that any attempt to use psychoanalysis in social or cultural critique depends on constituting a collective subject that can be treated as analogous to an individual psyche (as the one who has lost an object of love, failed to mourn it etc.). Doing so, in turn, implies compressing into that one subject a number of agents who may or may not identify with each other at different times; a web of processes that have their own individual trajectories; practices whose reproduction has its own inertial pull; individuals who may experience what is predicated of that collective psyche in very disparate ways; and so on. This is not to say that such operations cannot detect true and revealing “family resemblances” among the elements that they assemble, but simply to point out that, as operations, they are open to questions as to whether they abstract too much (if what they predicate of the unit that they compose is indeed predicable of all its components) or too little (if they ascribe to a restricted group a behavior that could be predicated of a larger one).

26 Freud 1957, p. 246. Modified. Although Freud had started two years before, this piece, which would come to tinge reflections on the state of left politics so significantly, came out roughly at the same time as the 1917 revolution in Russia.

27 Ibid., p. 249.

28 Ibid., p. 251.

the patient loves or has loved or should love.”<sup>29</sup> What is curious in Brown’s and Dean’s diagnoses of the left — and, I would wager, in the direct experience most people have of it — is that such attentive exegesis seems for the most part unnecessary. While both identify a tendency for the left to derive pleasure from its own “impossibility ... marginality and failure”,<sup>30</sup> they also detect a tendency for the responsibility for that paralysis to be shifted onto someone else’s shoulders. One may more or less consciously choose to remain ineffective; but that is always in response to the damage wrought by an other (“antiracists, feminists, queer activists, postmodernists, unreconstructed Marxists”<sup>31</sup>) or to the threat of the other’s politics (“moralism, dogmatism, authoritarianism, utopianism”<sup>32</sup>). Thus, whereas Freud’s melancholic is really recriminating the other when he ostensibly blames himself, the left melancholic ostensibly *does* blame the other. This is what creates the mirroring effect that exists between Brown’s and Dean’s analyses. To the extent that both see one sector of the left as tending to react to shared defeat by holding another sector responsible, each could include the other as evidence of precisely that kind of behaviour, that is, of shifting the blame onto an other. Or, more precisely in their case, onto *the other who blames others*.

This specular structure suggests that, while historical defeat and feelings of impossibility and failure are shared by a whole spectrum that could be called “the left,” this situation is effectively experienced from at least two different perspectives. That there are two different perspectives means that, even if the “unavowed loss” is in both cases *formally* the same — “the promise that [one’s analysis and commitment] would supply its adherents a clear and certain path toward the good, the right and the true”<sup>33</sup> —, the content is different in each. In other words, the concrete commitments whose promise of correctness and righteousness was lost were different for each perspective. And if the actual losses being mourned are different, that is because the difference between these two

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 29 Ibid., p. 248. This sentence is important in the text’s overall economy because, while from that point on Freud will tend to identify the indirect target of recrimination with the lost object (and thus “someone whom the patient ... has loved”), it implies a different possibility: that the indirect target which the melancholic has in mind when reproaching himself is not the lost object, but a third party which is perhaps blamed for the loss. See Freud: “[P]atients usually still succeed, by the circuitous path of self-punishment, in taking revenge on the original object and in tormenting their loved one through their illness. ... After all, the person who has occasioned the patient’s emotional disorder, and on whom his illness is centred, is usually to be found in his immediate environment.” Ibid., p. 251. This alternative, as it will become clear, is relevant for the reading proposed here.

30 Brown 1999, p. 26.

31 Ibid., p. 23.

32 Dean 2013, p. 87.

33 Brown 1999, p. 22.

different perspectives was already well established by the time when the rise of neoliberalism ushered in the “winter years” (to borrow Félix Guattari’s turn of phrase) of the 1980s and 1990s.

Brown’s and Dean’s accounts imply a chronological structure: although the two lefts coexist in the present, they have not always done so, and one of them is clearly fairly recent. This entails both that the divide is not reducible to older oppositions (like the one between Marxists and anarchists) and that the rupture can be traced back to some period or specific event. Even if neither are explicit in this respect, their textual clues all point in the direction of a break situated at some point between the 1960s and 1970s; we could therefore approximatively indicate it by the name “1968”. And if we can point to that moment as the one in which a new left arose by contesting a left shaped by an earlier event, no better candidate presents itself to the role of said event than 1917.

Drawing the distinction chronologically has the advantage of highlighting the extent to which one position emerges in reaction to the other, attempting to draw its lessons and explore its blind spots. After 1917 “gave world capitalism the worst fright it ever had”,<sup>34</sup> it must indeed have seemed, for a few decades at least, that the enigma of revolution had essentially been solved. Even if the Russian Revolution was not quite as theory had predicted, the Bolsheviks had been the first to weld theory and practice in the form of a victorious party, demonstrating that it was definitely possible for communists to successfully take power and retain it.<sup>35</sup> By the late 1960s, however, many saw the experience of really existing socialism as drifting ever farther from its own ends, while most of its epigones outside the Soviet bloc had given up on the idea of revolutionary change altogether. To activists coming of age at the time, it looked as though the model had turned out bad where it did not work and even worse where it did. That sense of impasse led many to seek new models elsewhere or try to create them themselves. The time had come for a “revolution in the revolution” — a phrase that was “key to the political 1960s”,<sup>36</sup> in Chris Marker’s words.

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 34 Lecerle 2007, p. 270.

35 Even an anarchist like Victor Serge could then say: “My side was taken, I would be neither against the Bolsheviks nor neutral ... I would be with the Bolsheviks because they pursued, tenaciously and without losing heart, with magnificent fervour, with reflexive passion, necessity itself; because they were the only ones to do it, taking all initiative upon themselves ... They were certainly wrong about several essential points: in their intolerance, their belief in state control, their penchant for centralisation and administrative measures. But if it was necessary to fight their mistakes with freedom of spirit and a spirit of freedom, that had to be done among them”. Serge 2001, p. 563.

36 See Marker 1977. Apart from the February 1969 speech by German student leader Rudi Dutschke that Marker quotes in the film, the phrase also figures in a 1966 speech by Chinese general Lin Piao and as the title to Régis Debray’s 1967 bestseller on Latin American guerrillas. Thanks above all to Debray (but also to Carlos Marighella), the Cuban foco guerrillero and urban guerrillas like Uruguay’s Tupamaros and Brazil’s Aliança Libertadora Nacional would become, alongside the Chinese Cultural

While “1917” and “1968” are evidently no more than shorthand for the plural fidelities that each of those events has inspired over the years, the differences in perspective, sensibility and priorities that they indicate seem intuitive enough for the distinction to make sense. In broad contours, they define the legacies of arguably the two revolutionary events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the greatest impact on left-wing imaginary, as well as the two generally divergent, though occasionally intersecting, lines of inheritance that descend from them.<sup>37</sup> We could try to summarise the rift as pitting, on one side, a left that emphasises political action as the driver of social transformation, and accordingly has a greater investment in the state apparatus, in themes of unity, leadership and hegemony, and in the party as organisational form. Historically, that focus on unity has also translated into a strong attachment to a certain idea and stage of development of the working class. On the other side, we find a left that places greater stress on the initiative of social actors themselves, and thus tends to be wary of the limits of state action and the risks of enforced unity. To what it perceives as the permanent danger of reproducing patterns of bureaucratisation, authoritarianism and top-down control, it responds with an emphasis on plurality, autonomy and bottom-up organisation.

Tracing this split back to its origin allows us, first of all, to bring to mind something that the subsequent story of “compromises and betrayals” could make us forget. Namely, that while the 1980s saw its fair share of former *soixant-huitards* use the denunciation of really existing socialism as a way of rationalising some biographical continuity into their change of political allegiance,<sup>38</sup> the opposition between a 1917 and a 1968 left did not emerge as a simplistic dichotomy of totalitarianism versus freedom or revolution versus reform. At its source, it was a dispute on *how to do revolutionary politics* — which is also to say that it concerned the nature of revolution.

Secondly, this move enables us to see how, from the start, the two sides’ identities were largely dependent on each other, defining themselves over

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Revolution, important (if not always very practical) organisational references for the next few years. See Debray 1967; Marighella 1969. Curiously, another icon of the period, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, presents focuses less on innovation than on the recovery of what had been cast aside. In his balance sheet of the May events in France, he states that if “the month of May saw a breach of modern capitalist society and also of the old authority of the Left, it did far more than that: it represented a return to a revolutionary tradition these parties have betrayed”. Cohn-Bendit 1968, p. 16.

<sup>37</sup> Needless to say, the borders between those perspectives is complex and shifting, and runs within those events themselves — not everyone present that was present in 1968 would necessarily be representative of the “1968 left”.

<sup>38</sup> While it is unclear, as noted above, if these are included in Dean’s analysis as belonging to “the left”, I am explicitly excluding them from my account — not in the name of some idea of what the left “really” is, but because she does not actually seem to have them in mind.

time through their mutual opposition. This helps explain why, when faced with the historical defeat of their respective analyses and commitments, they would be so reluctant to accept or even acknowledge the loss of certainty. When the other is defined as the negation of who one is, questioning one’s convictions is too much like giving in to the other, and giving in to the other is too much like losing oneself. Shifting the blame thus allows each side to claim revenge for the other’s failings at the same time as it exorcises its own doubts.<sup>39</sup> What one attacks in the other — by attacking exactly the kind of ideas that would have to be considered if questioning were to really take place — is also its own vacillations: the fear of being wrong, the suspicion that it is perhaps responsible for its failure after all.

Mutual recrimination generally tends to develop into a positive feedback loop: the more each side blames the other, the more likely both are to defend themselves by shifting the blame. The same goes for the commitments that define one’s identity: the more they come under attack, the more one tends to reassert them unilaterally. The upshot is that both sides end up constantly demarcating their mutual difference through the reiteration of terms that function as the negation of each other: unity, centrality, concentration, identity, closure, the party-form; multiplicity, connection, dispersion, difference, openness, the network-form (or no form at all). That, of course, only makes self-criticism less likely: if each question allows for only two answers, one of which is associated with the other, the cost of doubting our choice becomes unreasonably high. On the other hand, the more the other is found to be wrong, the less I need to ask myself if I am right. For as long as the two sides are locked in reciprocal negation, self-criticism can exist in inverse proportion to criticism of the other. What is more, the process can carry on even as Brown’s and Dean’s analyses render it self-reflexive. Each side can read their diagnoses and agree that “yes, the problem is the other who always shifts the blame to others” — seemingly without realising that, from the perspective of the other whom I blame, *the other who shifts the blame to others is me*.

What follows from this is that we are dealing not with one “orthodoxy” whose limits are “safeguarded from ... recognition”<sup>40</sup> by its adherents, but *two*. The 1968 left can in fact be just as prone to shielding itself from hard questions by displacing them onto the shoulders of its 1917 counterpart

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<sup>39</sup> See Freud’s observation that “[t]here is no need to be greatly surprised that a few genuine self-reproaches are scattered among [those ostensible self-reproaches which are actually directed at someone else]. These are allowed to obtrude themselves, since they help to mask the others and make recognition of the state of affairs impossible”. Freud 1957, p. 248.

<sup>40</sup> Brown 1999, p. 23.

than the other way round.<sup>41</sup> My hypothesis is that this pattern of evading and assigning responsibility, of entrenching identity and shunning the work of mourning, is what accounts for the eclipse of the question of organisation and the difficulty of posing it anew.

It would be a mistake to suggest that the question disappeared in the 1960s and 1970s. On the contrary, that was a period of intense experimentation with different forms and practices: the consciousness raising groups of the feminists, the ecclesial base communities of Liberation Theology, groups of prisoners and mental patients, the welfare programmes of the Black Panthers, the combination of “organised” and “diffuse” elements in Italy’s Autonomia. As that age drew to a close, however, and old and new forms alike ran up against their limits, debates on the left appear to have increasingly become expressed in terms of exclusive disjunctions like hegemony *or* autonomy, macropolitics *or* micropolitics, unity *or* diversity... Naturally, it is unlikely that many people would, if asked, argue that it is indeed possible or even desirable to have only one of those things in each case. “Of course”, they would say, “some balance between them is necessary”. Yet this only makes it more curious that much of the communication that actually takes place in the left should be expressed in the most abstract terms, as if it really were a matter of an either/or choice. That only begins to make sense when viewed in the context of a specular relation that tends to erase the common ground (“some balance”) on which a real discussion could take place even while each side might separately acknowledge that only on this ground can concrete problems be posed. This is how, instead of arguing over differences that are clearly laid out in relation to concrete shared references (such as different analyses of the situation at hand and hypotheses on how to change it), we wind up endlessly relitigating old conceptual oppositions that are unlikely to produce any new conclusions, let alone action.

The more each side identifies with one of two possible abstract answers to a set of equally abstract questions posed in moral terms (“what is the *right* thing to do?” rather than “what is the best thing to do *in this situation?*”), the less visible becomes the fact that concrete problems always raise issues pertinent to both: “how, here and now, can we balance a maximum of autonomy with the capacity to act in a coordinated way?” “How, in the conjuncture at hand, can we reconcile decision-

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41 See, for example, how Félix Guattari (who, in all fairness, confronted the hard questions more often than others) states that “each time” that movements of prisoners, women, immigrants, mental patients and so on had failed “it was because the old forms and structures of organization take power, holding the rhizomatic element of desire in a system of arborescent power”. Guattari 2009, p. 276. Obviously excluded here is the hypothesis that they could also fail for themselves, in their own terms.

making capacity with the broadest democracy and participation?” The less each side recognises the other as dealing with the same set of problems, the easier it is to construe it as a caricature (Stalinist control freaks, out-of-touch bureaucrats, woolly liberal do-gooders, obtuse ham-fisted anarchists...). Likewise, the easier it is to see one’s own practice not as it actually is, with its limits and challenges, but as the embodiment of the ideals it is supposed to enact or enable (efficiency, leadership, horizontality, openness...). Whatever limits are encountered can thus always be discounted or disavowed as being contingent, accidental, temporary, *someone else’s fault*. Our core beliefs, questioning which would force us to rediscover some common ground with the other, can thus remain intact.

Two “left-wing melancholias”, then, marking out two distinct lefts: one proper to the 1917 left, another pertaining to its 1968 counterpart, each responding at once to a shared experience of defeat (the rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s and its continuing hegemony) and to their own particular losses (the ignominy of the Soviet bloc and the dissipation of the alterglobalist movement, for example). Between the two, a relationship of mutual reinforcement that corresponds quite precisely to what Gregory Bateson called *symmetrical schismogenesis*: a “cumulative interaction”<sup>42</sup> in which the members of two groups react to each other with an identical pattern of behaviour, with equal intensity but in opposite directions, so that

each group will drive the other into excessive emphasis of the pattern, a process which if not restrained can only lead to more and more extreme rivalry and ultimately to hostility and the breakdown of the whole system.<sup>43</sup>

It is more appropriate in this case to speak of “perspectives” rather than “groups,” as the point is not so much that there are two clearly delimited, denumerable camps that we could identify with “1917” and “1968”, even if it is often not difficult to situate individuals or organisations in one side or the other. The two perspectives pre-exist the camps that they bring together, in that they are the principle of cohesion around which they coalesce and reproduce themselves. They subsist regardless of who might be counted on what side at any time, and might coexist within the same group, even the same individual.<sup>44</sup> Unlike in Bateson’s examples,

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42 Bateson 1981, p. 112.

43 Bateson 1981, p. 68.

44 There would thus also be such a thing as a left-wing schizophrenia: it would consist in thinking some questions from one perspective, some from the other, without ever reconciling the two.

however, this opposition does not seem to lead to a full-blown rupture (“the breakdown of the whole system”), arguably for three reasons.<sup>45</sup> First, because the two perspectives not only share a common defeat, they also identify themselves before others as part of a single camp (“the left”); like an unhappy couple, they continue to live under the same roof even as they lead mostly separate lives. Second, because the fight over their common identity (the mantle of “the true left”) keeps them tied to each other, even if around an antagonism; if they carry on living under the same roof, it is because they are permanently fighting over who should keep the house. Thirdly, they effectively need each other, not only because their identities depend on their mutual opposition, but because the presence of the other offers exemption from responsibility for their own mistakes; after all, the one comfort to be had in marital grief is not having to take charge for one’s own happiness (or otherwise).

In the system that is formed by the relation of these two melancholias to each other, finally, we discern the structure of drive that Dean describes. To carry on doing the same thing in order to obtain the same results, to always opt for paths whose limits have been exposed in the past, all of this is a way of punishing oneself for defeat and a disavowed loss of conviction without ceasing to extract some enjoyment from failure at the same time. Yet this is all done while ostensibly attributing responsibility for this failure to an other, so that it never becomes necessary to question one’s own choices and beliefs. By choosing to keep on encountering the same impasses instead of revising our certainties — which would naturally entail acknowledging the ground shared with the other —, we remain free to carry on failing.

### To Finally Return to the Question of Organisation

If the hypothesis linking the disappearance of the question of organisation to the consolidation of this schismogenic mechanism is correct, a return to that question would necessarily involve overcoming this mechanism. That might help explain why this “return” so far has often sounded more like the repetition of an injunction to take up the question again than an effort to actually restart it. It also suggests a limit that any attempt to rekindle the question solely by restating one of its past answers will eventually encounter: it is of the nature of this kind of relation that any intervention that stays within the territory charted by symmetrical schismogenesis will tend to reinforce it rather than break with it. Yet this also gives us a clue regarding where to look for signs that the organisation debate might indeed be stirring anew: in clear-eyed

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45 For Bateson’s examples, taken from both Western culture and the latmul of Papua New Guinea, see Bateson 1936, pp. 176-87. On schismogenesis as positive feedback, see this telling remark: “The writing of *Naven* had brought me to the very edge of what later became cybernetics, but I lacked the concept of negative feedback.” Bateson 1981, pp. xix-xx.

appraisals of the limits of actual processes and in attempts to think outside of the disjunctive simplism of either/or choices.

Fortunately, such signs can indeed be found. For example, in how a new generation of militants trained in the horizontal practices of the 2011 protests have engaged in electoral campaigns without portraying what they were doing as a simple “return” to the party-form or a recantation of earlier “mistakes”, but as a veritable political experiment that tested convictions and tactics learned elsewhere on a new terrain.<sup>46</sup> We can also see them in several analyses of the protest cycle of the last decade that openly acknowledge its limitations without abandoning some of its more fundamental commitments.<sup>47</sup> We can find them, in short, in good-faith attempts to incorporate practices and questions previously not recognised as one’s own without supposing that this would automatically mean shifting to the opposite perspective. Wherever there are people who do not feel constrained to be *either* this *or* that, and who adopt tactics and practices not for the sake of sustaining an identity but because they look like they might be what works in the case at hand, there is hope of escaping the pull of the left’s double melancholia.

It is not the case, of course, that the 1917/1968 rift ever really exhausted the range of possible positions, nor that communication and hybridisation between the two perspectives ever ceased to exist. The overall point here is in fact the opposite: as flexibility is a condition for viable practice, any practice that tried to be purely one or the other would could not survive for long. Purity is never given as such except as an imaginary misrecognition and disavowal of real activity. Still, there are reasons to suggest that the effort to pose problems in concrete ways, outside of a sterile opposition between ossified identities, could grow in the near future. First of all, of course, there is the very dissemination of diagnoses of melancholia, including those that identify it as a potentially positive condition.<sup>48</sup> Then there is the widely shared sense of urgency,

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46 Evidently, discourses and analyses may vary significantly within initiatives like Podemos, Momentum and Democratic Socialists of America, not least between the grassroots and the leadership. In Spain, the likes of Pablo Iglesias and Iñigo Errejón have sometimes presented Podemos as evidence that Spanish movements acknowledged the “error” of rejecting party politics. As I have argued elsewhere, my impression is that many 15M activists now engaging with institutions have a rather more sophisticated take — one that projects a complementarity among different practices instead of the need to choose between them. See Nunes 2015.

47 Examples covering a broad range of languages, registers and political orientations include: Martins and Cordeiro 2014, Legume 2015, Marom 2015, Maniglier 2016, Gerbaudo 2017, Jones 2018, and the excellent dossier organised by the Spanish journal *Alexia*, “De Tahrir a Nuit Debout: la Resaca de las Plazas”, available at <http://revistaalexia.es/de-tahrir-a-nuit-debout-la-resaca-de-las-plazas/>.

48 Enzo Traverso, the latest to come to grips with “left-wing melancholia”, construes it in a more positive light than Brown and Dean. Inevitable in a context in which utopian expectations have been replaced by “global threats without a foreseeable outcome”, he argues, it is “[n]either regressive nor impotent”, but constitutes a “melancholy criticism” maintaining open a space in which “the search for new ideas and projects can coexist with the sorrow and mourning for a lost realm of revolutionary experiences”. Traverso 2006, pp. xiv-xv. The “conservative tendency” identified by Brown, Traverso

hopefully also potential, that arises from a conjuncture crisscrossed by several overlapping crises (ecological, of social reproduction, economic, of representation). Finally, there might be something about the ebb of the 2011 cycle itself that stimulates responses that are at once more critical and more open.

It is interesting to note that Wendy Brown's "Resisting Left Melancholy" came out in 1999, the year when the "Battle of Seattle" at once relativised the fragility that she described and somewhat revised the very content of the word "left". The "alterglobalism" of the following years would, in a way, be the revenge of 1968 against the reactive "traditionalism"<sup>49</sup> that Brown's article criticised. Not only had a new generation of activists come to claim that libertarian legacy, they presented themselves as finally capable of actualising potentials until then condemned to remain latent and end up betrayed. In the heady cocktail of 1960s radicalism and technological determinism of those years, the internet promised to lift the material obstacles that had until then prevented horizontal, bottom-up ways of organising from scaling up. In so doing, it tendentially made older forms of organisation obsolete at the same time as it brought the dream of a decentralised, self-organised global society closer within reach.

Much of that sensibility and imaginary would resurface in 2011, despite there being little organisational continuity or even memory to connect the two moments.<sup>50</sup> And yet, at least to those who have lived through both, the reckoning occasioned by the latest seems at once more heartfelt and more profound. We could conjecture that this stems from two dissimilarities them.

The first concerns historical circumstances. Whereas the alterglobalist moment arrived unexpectedly at a time of capitalist expansion, the 2011 protests were the long-delayed response to an event, the 2008 crisis, that had created great expectations for radical politics. But while the former petered out over half a decade, squeezed out of the global agenda by the War on Terror and its inability to go beyond its characteristic form of action (the summit protest), the latter ebbed even faster, incapable to build on its initial successes and defenceless against

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suggests, could just as easily be interpreted as "a form of resistance against demission and betrayal". Ibid., p. 45. Nevertheless, this vision appears to hesitate between an actuality and a project yet to be realised: "[i]n order to be fruitful ... this melancholia needs to become recognizable". Ibid., p. xv. Traverso identifies three fields of memory and mourning that correspond to the three "sectors" of world revolution as the 1960s and 1970s radical left understood it: the anticapitalist movements in the West, the anti-bureaucratic movements within really existing socialism and the anticolonial movements of the Third World. It would not be difficult, I believe, to show that the cleavage between the two lefts runs through the memory of each of these.

49 Brown 1999, p. 25.

50 The notable exception was Spain, arguably also the place where the 2011 protests have had the most impact.

a decisive backlash. The sensation of shrinking horizons and missed opportunities that surrounds it is therefore much greater.

The second difference has to do with political composition. The alterglobalist moment was always more of a patchwork of fixed political quantities, in which parties and trade unions still played a significant part even if the younger activists were the real protagonists. Always an unsteady alliance of "vertical" and "horizontal" elements, it still allowed both sides to deal with impasses by blaming each other. In 2011, however, the "vertical" element was negligible and the direction of the protests much more clearly in the hands of "horizontals". The limits that those struggles encountered were not necessarily new, and many of them had already been seen in 1968 and the early 2000s; but the combination of big stakes, high hopes, a steep fall and no-one else to blame made them much harder to ignore.

We could force a parallel here. It was also the case that nothing that was "revealed" when the Berlin Wall fell in 1989 had not been known for a long time. And yet, even though the collapse of the Soviet bloc may have been only "the death-event of the already dead",<sup>51</sup> it still meant to many that it was finally impossible to carry on as before. If the self-scrutiny we see now runs deeper, this may in fact be because 2011 was in some ways the 1989 of 1968.<sup>52</sup>

If there is a return to the question of organisation today, or at the very least growing talk about the need for it, it is of course primarily because recent experiences have left many people feeling that organisation is something they lack and could use more of. As I hope to show next, however, organisation is by its very nature ideally suited to play the role of transitional object that can help us escape the circuit of drive in which our double melancholia detains us — provided we are also willing to change how we conceive it.

### Organisation as Mediation

In the heyday of the *Organisationsfrage* debate, which we could roughly situate between the "revisionism debate" around the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the Third International's Fifth Congress in 1924 (the so-called "Bolshevisation Congress"<sup>53</sup>), organisation appears as a figure of

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51 Badiou 2003, p. 59.

52 It is in this context that we might, for example, find two of the thinkers who were most influential in shaping the broad outlook of alterglobalism state that they are "not among those who claim that today's horizontal movements in themselves are sufficient, that there is no problem, and that the issue of leadership has been superseded. Behind the critique of leadership often hides a position we do not endorse that resists all attempts to create organizational and institutional forms in the movements that can guarantee their continuity and effectiveness." Hardt and Negri 2017, p. 8.

53 It was at this congress of the Communist International that, following the passing of the "Theses on the Structure of Communist Parties" at the Third Congress in 1921, a rigidified version of the Bolshevik organisational model was imposed on all affiliates.

*mediation*. Following György Lukács' formula, organisation is "the form of mediation between theory and practice", and "as in every dialectical relationship, the terms of the relation only acquire concreteness and reality in and by this mediation".<sup>54</sup> Yet theory and practice were not the only terms between which organisation was supposed to mediate. Lukács himself saw in the party the "concrete mediation of man and history"<sup>55</sup> and, in conscious subordination to party discipline, the mediation between individual and collective will. Even a cursory read of the classic Leninist statement on organisation, *What Is To Be Done?*, will show that its chapters are already from their titles governed by a number of dualisms (spontaneity and purposefulness, economic and political struggles, "artisanal" organisation and "revolutionaries by trade") which branch out into yet more oppositions (masses and leaders, "from within" and "from without", and so on). It is evident that, in all these oppositions, Lenin is making the case for one of the terms against the other; it is equally evident, however, that this case is never unilateral or disjunctive, but supposes precisely some mediation between the two. After all, Lenin would have otherwise found himself in the awkward position of having to argue *against* practice or *against* the masses.<sup>56</sup> Even if Lenin's goal was to reinforce one of the sides of the equation at the other's expense, it was never a matter of choosing one at the exclusion of the other, but of instituting a mediation between them — a task that fell upon organisation, no less, to perform. As we shall see, in fact, the act of stressing one term over the other should be read not as the *negation* of mediation, but as part of the work of mediation itself: to emphasise one pole of a dualism against the other is a way to propose a certain balance between them. Even *overemphasis*, as is often the case with Lenin, is justified if it is meant to compensate for what one perceives — rightly or wrongly, as the case may be — as a balance unduly tilted in the opposite direction.<sup>57</sup>

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54 Lukács 1997, p. 299.

55 Ibid., 318.

56 One finds instead that he was often enthusiastic about both the *praktiki* (activists) of Russian Social Democracy and the spontaneous uprising of the masses: "we *will* be able to do these things, precisely because the mass that is awakening in *stikhiinyi* [spontaneous] fashion will *push forward from its own milieu* a greater and greater number of 'revolutionaries by trade' (if we don't convince ourselves that it is a great idea on all occasions to invite the workers to mark time)". I am employing here the new translation of *What Is To Be Done?* available in Lih 2008, p. 774. Italics in the original.

57 See Lih 2008, pp. 26-7, regarding Lenin's well-known observation in defence of *What Is To Be Done?* at the Second Congress of Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party in 1903, in which he makes exactly that point: "Obviously, an episode in the struggle against economism has here been confused with a principled presentation of a major theoretical question .... We all know now that the 'economists' bent the stick in one direction. In order to make the stick straight it was necessary to bend the stick in the other direction, and that is what I did."

As we have seen, one of the mechanisms keeping the "two lefts" locked in their specular relation is the transformation of a series of conceptual pairs into exclusive disjunctions: micropolitics *or* macropolitics, diversity *or* unity, horizontality *or* verticality, hegemony *or* autonomy, and so on. Now, exclusive disjunctions are nothing but unmediated oppositions, or oppositions between which no mediation is admitted. What we have here then is a circular causality: if these terms can appear as mutually exclusive, it is because what should mediate between them has disappeared; as a mediating element, organisation cannot but disappear, given that what it is supposed to mediate presents itself as unmediatable.

That disappearance, it should be noted, is at once theoretical and practical, and the relationship between those two aspects is also mutually reinforcing: excessive abstraction inhibits practice, the absence of practice stimulates abstraction. Yet it is precisely because of this circularity that organisation might go from lost object to transitional object: the means for recovering itself.

To think organisation concretely is to think in terms of specific problems rather than merely conceptual relations. The more we do so, the more apparent it becomes that the challenges involved in assembling and channelling the collective capacity to act are the same for all, regardless of theoretical allegiances or political preferences; the same difficulties, constraints, thresholds, dangers. Conversely, acknowledging that common ground is a condition for responding to actual situations instead of just reiterating abstract principles or reproaching reality for being unlike our model. It is on that common ground that a partisan of autonomy might accept that the circumstances call for stronger coordination, or a "verticalist" admit that attempting to enforce unity will only create more division under given conditions. Rather than each being capable of playing only their characteristic type (the Stalinist, the autonomist, the insurrectionist...) and droning on about their one characteristic idea (centralisation, autonomy, direct action...), those who recognise their interpellation by the same set of problems can explore a range of solutions tailored to the occasion at hand, at once more complex and more precise than any general model. It is a matter of inverting the usual procedure: instead of starting from the big differences and acknowledging commonalities only as an afterthought ("of course, some balance is necessary..."), we start from what is common and situate differences in relation to a shared problem. This makes them appear not as absolutes, but as relative to each other: different shades in a range of possible responses to a shared condition.

Doing that, however, hinges decisively on what we mean when we speak of organisation as a mediating element — and ultimately on how we understand mediation itself.

## Force over Form

There are basically two ways of thinking mediation. The first conceives the relation between the terms to be mediated as a logical opposition: they negate each other, and hence cannot be predicated without contradiction of the same subject at the same time. What mediation must do in this case is bring the two predicates together in a third term that would be their synthesis. Given that we are dealing with a logical contradiction, the problem (the contradiction) is in principle solved as soon as the solution (the synthesis) appears. By means of a third term that at once cancels and conserves them in a higher unity, it will be possible, from that moment on, to predicate the two previously incompatible terms from the same subject. That is why Lukács does not say that organisation mediates between theory and practice, but that it is the *form* of this mediation. For him, a communist party in the Bolshevik mould, in open rupture with social-democratic organisations mired in reformist “opportunism”, was the “form at last discovered” within which the logical contradictions between theory and practice, mass and leaders, history and existence, individual and collective will, economic and political struggles could be resolved in an age of imminent revolution.

Understanding mediation in terms of logical contradiction thus subtly directs us to consider the problem of organisation as concerning the *form* that would solve it: a determinate type of organisational form in which the solution would, at least in principle, already be contained.<sup>58</sup> This helps explain why, to this day, talk of “organisation” so easily slips into, or is effectively treated as being shorthand for, a discussion of “the party”.<sup>59</sup> To be sure, nothing can prevent practical “deviations” from corrupting this form, precluding it from acting as the mediation that by right it is. However, as the very talk of “deviations” suggests, these are no more than accidental modifications of what, in its essence, would be the fully realised answer to the problem.

We arrive at a different idea of mediation if we change how we conceive of the opposition. Kant gave the name *real opposition* to this other kind of relation, in which the two terms are opposed but not logically contradictory. Rather than a predicate being the negation of the other (*A* and not-*A*), here both are affirmative in their own right, and even if they cancel each other out, that does not stop them from being predicable of the same subject at the same time. They might cancel each other out completely, in fact, and the resulting “nothing” will still not be

58 It is true that the theses on the organisational structure of communist parties approved at the Third International's 1921 Congress state right at the start “[t]here is no absolute form of organisation which is correct for Communist Parties at all time”. What is unquestionable, however, is that the dominant form of organisation is the party, whatever shape it may take.

59 For example: “The real *Organisationsfrage* today is not the affirmation or the negation of the party, conceived in the abstract, but rather, the question regarding the particular type of party-form that could help these movements to continue to grow.” Thomas 2013, p. 8.

a positive existence. Thus, if two mechanical forces of equal intensity act in opposing directions on the same body at the same time, the body remains at rest; that rest, however, is not a non-being, or the negation of movement. It is still something: a real physical state produced by the interaction of two real forces.

[S]ince the consequences of the two [predicates], each construed as existing on its own, would be *a* and *b*, it follows that, if the two are construed as existing together, neither consequence *a* nor consequence *b* is to be found in the subject; the consequence of the two predicates *A* and *B*, construed as existing together, is therefore zero.<sup>60</sup>

From which it also follows that, if the intensity of *A* or *B* changes, the outcome will be other than zero: the predominance of the consequence *a* mitigated by the presence of *b*, or vice-versa. Under these conditions, F. Scott Fitzgerald's challenge poses hardly any difficulty. It is perfectly possible to maintain two opposing ideas in the mind at the same time; all it takes is for us to consider them as being in real opposition to each other.

In short, real opposition is not an opposition between concepts, but between real forces or tendencies. And whereas two concepts that logically negate each other produce no reality, but only impossible entities like “square circle”, opposed forces can come into all sorts of mixtures bearing all sorts of proportions. Alternatively, we could say that real opposition is not an opposition between determinate qualities, but between quantities — a specific class of quantities, in fact, called *intensive*: those that are non-additive, that is, not composed of smaller quantities of the same kind.<sup>61</sup>

When we call an object “hot” or “cold”, we are registering the physical sensation of a change of state in our body occasioned by coming in contact with that object. Yet the fact that the verbal resources we have to do so make us ascribe a determinate quality to it (“hot”, “cold”) should not blind us to the fact that what we are doing is describe an intensive

60 Immanuel Kant 1992, p. 212. As we know, this pre-critical distinction would be central to Kant's attack on the Leibniz-Wolff school in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and, later on, to the deduction of attractive and repulsive forces in the *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*. Italian Marxist Lucio Colletti mobilised it against the persistence of Hegelian “dialectics of matter” in dialectical materialism, identifying in its affirmation of the “heterogeneity between thought and being” the reason to see Kant as “the only classic German philosopher in whom it is possible to detect at least a grain of materialism.” Colletti 1973, pp. 104-5. For the sake of brevity, I am obliged to set aside here a discussion of that argument, as well as of the criticism levelled at it in Macherey 1990, pp. 232-47. For Colletti's later relativisation of his position, see Colletti 1975.

61 Thus, for example, while the total mass of three bodies will be the sum of their masses (mass being an extensive quantity), the total temperature of a system composed of two bodies will not be the sum of their respective temperatures prior to being put together.

difference between the object and our body: it is hotter or colder than we are. Many of the qualities that we regularly ascribe to things (“heavy”, “light”, “wet”, “dry”) function in this way: what they name is a *quantum* of some property (weight, temperature, humidity) resulting from an intensive relation. They correspond to *definite quantities* produced by a real opposition. Thus, for example, the quality of “heavy” that we predicate of an object names the excess of the downward pull of gravity on its mass over the upward traction that we exert on it.

That intensive relations differ from determinate states, and that the former are the cause of the latter, is an idea that we can trace as far back Anaximander. Thus, for example, Plato:

Wherever they apply, [real oppositions/intensive relations] prevent everything from adopting a definite quantity; by imposing on all actions the qualification “stronger” relative to “gentler” or the reverse, they procure a “more or less” while doing away with all definite quantity. ... [But] once they take on a definite quantity, they [are] no longer hotter and colder. The hotter and equally the colder are always in flux and never remain, while definite quantity means standstill and the end of all progression. The upshot of this argument is that the hotter, together with its opposite, turn out to be unlimited.<sup>62</sup>

What Plato is pointing out here is a fundamental asymmetry between two regimes. Particular bodies might be called hot or cold, the quality of coldness or hotness that we attribute to them corresponding to the determinate *quantum* of temperature established by the real opposition between its temperature and ours. Yet the relation “hotter and colder” is not the relation between this or that particular body, this or that determinate quantity, but the intensive difference considered in itself. Once it is expressed in particular bodies, that difference is of course the condition for any determinate quantity; in that regard, it is a principle of change, preventing everything “from adopting a definite quantity” permanently. In itself, however, it is not the relation between two things or *quanta*, but “unlimited” in the sense that it is a pure relation of “more and less” — an intensive dyad extending indefinitely in two directions. In Gilbert Simondon’s words:

as Plato remarked, every realised quality appears as though inserted, according to a measure, in an indefinite dyad of contrary and absolute qualities; qualities go by pairs of opposites, and this bipolarity is given to every existing being as a permanent possibility of orientation...<sup>63</sup>

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62 Plato 1997, 24c.

63 Simondon 2013, p. 163.

The distinction between logical and real opposition, contradiction and intensive dyad, explains why it was said above that thinking oppositions as exclusive disjunctions was doing so “abstractly”. Specifically, the abstraction lies in treating “absolute qualities”, which only indicate the two opposing directions in which an intensive dyad stretches (“more or less”), as if they were actual entities between which one could, and in fact should, decide. Opting for “horizontality” or “verticality” in absolute terms is like choosing “the cold in itself” or “the hot in itself” — when “cold” and “hot” exist only as definite quantities arising from intensive relations, and any single thing is at any given time only the balance of intensive relations acting on it. What exists is “never this or that isolated element [or quality], but only mixtures; ... the individual being is no longer an absolute unity, but the stability of a relation”.<sup>64</sup>

What does mediation mean in this case? Whereas logical opposition demands a logical solution — the construction of a third term as the synthesis in which the first two are somehow made compatible —, what we have here is something else. If every “realised quality” (our sensation of hot or cold, light or heavy) is a definite quantity individuated from an intensive dyad (hotter and colder, lighter or heavier) by the interaction of really existing forces, mediation here is a problem that cannot be solved, not even in principle, once and for all. If forms are but the temporary, more or less fragile stability of the relations that compose them, the balance of forces is the more fundamental problem; and since that balance changes over time under the action of internal tendencies and outside factors, the object of mediation ought to be forces, not form. No form could, in and of itself, be a one-size-fits-all solution, even if some forms are preferable to others owing to the balances that they afford. Each situation demands an answer appropriate to *that* situation, to the balance verified in *that* moment. Neither a choice for this or that quality in absolute nor a form “discovered at last”, it is a definite *quantum* of force that tilts the existing balance in the desired direction. It is not just that every organisational form is only ever good *for a determinate end, in determinate circumstances*, there being none that would be good absolutely. In its existence over time, as the forces that act on it change, every form necessarily faces questions of the “how much?” type (how much autonomy? how much coordination? how much planning? how much spontaneity?).

This should make it clear why, even though mediation is said here to take place between two “absolute qualities”, this is in no way a doctrine of the golden mean. The “balance” that each intervention seeks is defined according to goals that vary from case to case and situation to situation; thus, for example, the Marxist idea of revolution stressed centralisation at

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64 Simondon 2013, 374. (Modified.)

first and decentralisation afterwards. As the desired effect varies, there is properly speaking no absolute golden mean, and even excess might, in the appropriate conditions, be the right measure.<sup>65</sup> That is in fact the idea behind Lenin's image of "bending the stick", as it is also the insight with which Machiavelli effectively broke with the Ancient conception of politics.<sup>66</sup> If he taught that the Prince must learn how not to be good, it was not just because he was "the first to visualise the rise of a purely secular realm whose laws and principles of action were independent of the teachings of the Church ... and of moral standards".<sup>67</sup> This realm, as the examples that Machiavelli borrows from Antiquity show, had always been present, even if disavowed. It was above all because he understood that asking oneself about the "right conduct" in absolute terms is not only a moral (or theological) question, rather than a political one, but a potentially disastrous way of approaching practice. Because it is about relations of forces, politics has no room for the *always right* or the *absolutely correct*; if circumstances change and the methods remain the same, ruin is the most likely result.<sup>68</sup> It is for that reason that *virtù*, for Machiavelli, was not on the same plane as virtues (mercifulness, generosity), but rather like the faculty tasked with moderating their use: the capacity to determine when, how and in what proportion to employ them. "[T]he moment, the measure and the means"<sup>69</sup> are crucial: "it is enough to take one little step farther — a step that might seem to be in the same direction — and truth turns into error."<sup>70</sup>

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 65 We could go further and say there is no "right measure" either, if what is understood by that is a conduct that agents could be sure would be the most appropriate for a given situation. Agents always act on limited information, and their action is always subject to the interference of factors that they could not have previously taken into account. We find a particularly bloody example of how excess might function as the right measure in *The Prince*: Messer Ramiro d'Orco, having been assigned by Cesare Borgia to establish military control over Romagna, and offering ample evidence of his character as a "cruel and unscrupulous man" in fulfilling the task, was publicly executed once the region was pacified, his body cut in half and his head put on a stake, so that the Duca Valentino could dissociate himself from his vassal's brutality. Machiavelli 2005, p. 27.

66 See note 51 above.

67 Arendt 1973, p. 36.

68 Machiavelli 2005, p. 85. Lenin, on this count a Machiavellian through and through, makes a similar point about his erstwhile Second International comrades: "They fully appreciated the need for flexible tactics; they themselves learned Marxist dialectic and taught it to others ...; however, in the application of this dialectic they committed ... proved to be so undialectical in practice... [T]hey were hypnotised by a definite form of growth of the working-class movement and socialism, forgot all about the one-sidedness of that form, were afraid to see the break-up which objective conditions made inevitable, and continued to repeat simple and, at first glance, incontestable axioms that had been learned by rote..." Lenin 1974, p. 102. Modified.

69 Boff 1988, p. 20.

70 Lenin 1974, p. 103.

Thus understood, mediation could in no way be reduced to a form; it exists as activity, constant exercise, *dynamic equilibrium of forces*. Since it mediates between absolute qualities that negate one another, it also necessarily presents itself in the form of trade-offs: an increase in autonomy of the parts entails a loss in coordination for the whole; centralisation might accelerate decision-making but weaken grassroots control over representatives; emphasis on a group identity boosts cohesion but turns potential allies away; and so on. We can say that these qualities, all of which are to some extent desirable, are mutually exclusive; yet precisely *not* as logical oppositions, which would force us to opt for one or the other, but as real oppositions, which means that they must be balanced or *dosed*. To say that they cancel each other, in this case, is to say that they always coexist *to some degree*, in mixtures that contain one *and* the other in greater or lesser proportion. And if it is impossible to have everything at once (maximum identity and maximum openness, maximum centralisation and maximum democracy, maximum autonomy and maximum coordination...), nothing prevents us from having all of them to some degree, balanced according to the needs of the occasion.

This, in turn, promises us a way to revisit the sterile oppositions that have immobilised imagination for so long and see them as something else: an invitation to place thought and practice at the service of the invention of new solutions, guided by concrete problems and conditions rather than doctrinaire adherence to fixed identities. It also promises us a way to claim the legacies of 1917 and 1968 without reverence or bitterness, delivering us from the need to choose between them, freeing us to see both in their limits and to find in them lessons that can illuminate challenges we face today. Finally, it promises us a manner of posing the problem of organisation that breaks with the supposition of an ideal organisational form and enables us to explore it again in its full extension: as the question concerning the many ways in which the collective capacity to act can be accumulated, focused and deployed, and the trade-offs, comparative advantages, conditions and constraints that apply to each. If these promises can be translated into practice, perhaps we might at last begin to be done — at least done *enough*, done *for now* — with the work of mourning the past.

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