

“Confronting time out of joint. . . – On economic rationality and imagination”

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Abstract

It is often suggested that today we are living in the “end times.” Confronted by a perpetual incursion of major global crises, we increasingly find ourselves incapable of meaningfully relating to the present, let alone to the future. The forever deferred “end” throws the very idea of time out of joint. Unable to advance, our imagination retreats, with retrograde tendencies taking over both culture and politics. From incessant movie prequels and sequels, through the re-emergence of populist fascist politics, all the way to the return of Cold War rhetoric, we witness our reality becoming increasingly substituted by a string of peculiar rehashings and reunions. History, as we knew it, is no longer “made”; we strain to cling to the past, equating the future with dystopia. Crucially, this *problematique* of the fading of temporality is not new. In fact, it has got a history of its own. This paper explores our current (a)temporal whereabouts by reflecting upon them from the perspective of their historical trajectory. It does this by revisiting the work of André Gorz—a thinker whose contributions equip us with the insights needed to confront time out of joint effectively and embrace the idea of future. The article argues that the roots of today’s temporal malaise can be found in the process of “economicization,” which subordinated the notion of utopia to its principles, thereby nullifying it. Examining the effects of the unbridled reign of economic rationality over our imagination, it calls for a temporal intervention by means of ecological rationality.

Keywords

André Gorz, ecology, economic rationality, future, imagination

Introduction

If there is one thing that truly distinguishes today’s Western societies from those of the past, it must be their profuse lack of imagination. Indeed, ours is the period of reboots, remakes

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and revivals, of a perpetual recycling devoid of any genuinely creative dimension. It is as if popular culture and politics were caught up in some sort of a strange backward-gazing ritual that renders them incapable of offering us anything more than the relics of the past, albeit in shinier packaging. From incessant movie prequels and sequels, through the re-emergence of populist fascist politics, all the way to the return of Cold War rhetoric, we witness our reality becoming increasingly substituted by a string of peculiar rehashings and reunions. No wonder that the idea of future moves increasingly outside our grasp. We have no conception of it, relegating it to the all-familiar status of “more of the same.”

Yet, what we encounter is anything but “the same.” For, as Homi K. Bhabha points out, “[t]he past never returns without a radical transformation of both itself and the present in which it is appearing” (see Zolghadr, 2006). It is thus important to note that the retrograde tendencies of our age are not straightforwardly symptomatic of us going—or, indeed, bringing something—“back.” They are all about the present. Think, for instance, about the effectiveness of today’s populist slogans. These have very little, if anything, to do with our ability to remember the “good old days.” To be sure, they play with and upon nostalgia. But they do so in a very specific manner. Paralleling consumerism, which captures nostalgia by generating “an unreal, synthetic, universal image of the past” (DaSilva and Faught, 1982: 49), populist slogans employ images that come to eclipse and progressively erase our critical memory. So, when our so-called “leaders” are proclaiming that we must “take back control” and make this or that “great again,” the question of what it is that they are actually advocating that we ought to recall and resurrect, is never posed. Tapping into our desire to escape present conditions, objectified retrograde illusions become a substitute for the critical image of a future. As such, they impede not only our memory but also our imagination.

What seems to be at stake, then, is not so much a return of/to the past, but the foreclosure of both the understanding and radical questioning of our historical trajectory and, therefore, also, of our present. Where are we now? How did we get here? And why? These questions now stand beyond scrutiny. Rather than learning from our past mistakes and trying to ascertain a path toward a better future, we are simply enjoined to reboot the machine, to hit that button so that we can play again and again. This notion of reboot exudes an aura of a fresh start, ironically augmenting the present state of affairs by reigniting belief in the system, which remains unchanged. Indeed, as DaSilva and Faught (1982) demonstrate in their study of American popular culture, nostalgia becomes “an ahistorical defense of the status quo” (p. 49).

Thus, today, retrograde denotes a reactivity rooted in a general impotence, a widespread inability to take control and to make. We are captured by a yearning for some idea of the past (and long-disqualified past ideas) in a desire to retreat from the social pathologies of the present. Unable to imagine and create, we keep attempting to reboot. In this process, however, the very idea of time is thrown “out of joint.” We progressively lose the capacity to orientate ourselves toward what was, what is and what is to come. And with it, we not only lose “utopia as an ideal end, but historical time itself in its continuity and its unfolding” (Baudrillard, 1997: 452). Far from escaping the social malaise, then, we supplement it with a temporal one.

Where does this leave us? And, perhaps more importantly, *when*? It is as if we have slipped into a zone of interminability. Haunted by endless crises, the only permanency

we recognize is that of an impasse. As temporality fades, each “crisis flows in reverse, signposting individuals through constant threats without a way out” (Almeida, 2020: 4). We exist in a state of perpetual indecision, unable to come to terms with the present, on which we appear to have no purchase.

We have lost history and have also, as a result, lost the end of history. [. . .] And this is serious, for the end signifies that something has really taken place. Whereas we, at the height of reality – and with information at its peak – no longer know whether anything has taken place or not. (Baudrillard, 1997: 450–451)

Temporal malaise deprives us not only of memory and imagination, but the very ability to *experience* the present as present. History is no longer made—it is beyond us, beyond our understanding. Hence, when faced with the threat of the looming ecological apocalypse, that of an actual end of history as we know it, we react with either disbelief, denial and/or fatalism. Glued to the smartphone screens, we are stuck in a twilight zone, like spectral spectators, barely able to acknowledge reality even when it does, literally, hit us in the face, because we walk into a lamppost.

Crucially, this *problematique* of the fading of temporality is not new. Neither is it beyond understanding. In fact, it has got a history of its own—a trajectory that can point to other, hitherto unexplored, paths and, therefore, also, to potential ways out of our seemingly hopeless predicament. This paper sets out to sketch just a few moments of this historical trajectory. To this end, it explores our current (a)temporal whereabouts (“whenabouts”?) by revisiting the work of André Gorz—a thinker whose contributions, it contends, equip us with the insights needed to effectively confront time out of joint and embrace the idea of future.

The interminability of crisis

“Warning as hundreds of dogs fall sick after beach walks on Yorkshire coast”—January 2022, *The Guardian* (Wolfe-Robinson, 2022)

“Attacks on Ukraine part of “initial phase” of a “large-scale” Russian invasion, US defense official says”—February 2022, *CNN* (Kaufman, 2022)

“North Korea claims successful launch of “monster missile” Hwasong-17”—March 2022, *BBC* (BBC, 2022)

“Extreme heat impacting millions across India and Pakistan”—April 2022, *UN News* (*UN News*, 2022)

“22 weeks into the year, America has already seen at least 246 mass shootings”—May 2022, *NPR* (Ahmed, 2022)

“As the Great Salt Lake Dries Up, Utah Faces An “Environmental Nuclear Bomb””—June 2022, *The New York Times* (Flavelle, 2022)

We live in times where the “ominous” has become quotidian. Take any one of the headlines from the “snapshot” presented above. Doesn’t it read like something straight out of

an apocalyptic sci-fi movie? Think of one of these all too familiar opening scenes: everyone is just going about their daily lives (commuting to work, having lunch in a café, doing housework, etc.) and, in the background, there is this latest breaking news story (played out on the screen, announced on the radio, printed in a newspaper left laying about). Save for some weird tertiary character (who will, no doubt, be killed off about midway through the plot) and perhaps the protagonist (a child or a scientist), the story is more or less ignored. We, the audience, however, know what comes next. The news item is but a sign, a knell of a disastrous chain of events that had already been set into motion: an alien invasion, a nuclear Armageddon, an Earth core that stopped spinning, an outbreak of a killer virus pandemic, an environmental apocalypse. . . The plot accelerates quickly, there is never enough time, the panic takes over and then—circa 90–120 minutes of action-filled drama later—it is all over. The closing credits roll on the screen.

This, however, is not how today's catastrophes play out. Not for most of us, anyway. Acting as spectators of the present, we scan through the ominous headlines every day, living less in the end times and more in a time beyond the end. Ominous has, quite simply, lost its meaning. Or, rather, its meaning is lost on us. Accustomed to instantaneity, an ecstatic, extreme version of the present that is "more present than the present" (Baudrillard, 1997: 451), we take the interminability of crises as given. So, when we are told that

Life on Earth is in crisis. Our climate is changing faster than scientists predicted and the stakes are high. Biodiversity loss. Crop failure. Social and ecological collapse. Mass extinction. We are running out of time, and our governments have failed to act. (Extinction Rebellion, 2022)

we swap the channel or scroll to another story. It is as if we were only capable of realizing the gravity of the predicament if the scenario were to follow the blockbuster format. Another headline, 2 hours have passed, and we are still here—ergo, it was just a false alarm! Oscillating between over-stimulation and sheer boredom, we stare at the screens in the hope of some entertaining special effects. Black snow in Siberia—a bit eerie, but saw the pictures now, let's move on. Wildfires—pretty spectacular, but it gets tedious after a while. Shall we watch some dinosaurs instead. . . ?

Click, tap, scroll, scroll. . . Like the proverbial boiling frog, we seem unable to register the gradual, yet undisputedly life-threatening, changes to our environment. It comes as no surprise then, that those who do, see it as their utmost priority to shake us out of this atemporal stupor. "I don't want your hope," stated Greta Thunberg, addressing the World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2019, "I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I do every day. And I want you to act. I want you to behave like our house is on fire. Because it is" (quoted in Workman, 2019). But, save for those in the western U.S.A., northern Siberia, central India, and eastern Australia, whose houses have actually been consumed by fire, we do not.

Indeed, the belief in the interminability of crisis is so great that any attempt at meaningful intervention into the current state of affairs is, at best, met with ridicule. Let us recall, for instance, the remarks of Stuart Kirk, the Head of Responsible Investment at HSBC Asset Management, who dismissed climate action advocacy, stating that during the course of his career there has always been "some nutjob telling [him] about the end of the world" (quoted in Vetter, 2022). Except for the jibe, he is, of course, right. The

efforts to employ apocalyptic imagery as a means of mass mobilization are far from new. Perhaps the most pertinent example here is that of the Doomsday Clock. Launched in 1947, it was meant to symbolize “the destruction that awaited if no one took action to stop it” (Benedict, 2013). Its original setting was 7 minutes to midnight. In January 2022, in what has been described as “a clear warning to the world” (Mecklin, 2022), the clock was set at 100 seconds to midnight, the closest it has even been. The 2022 Statement released by the Science and Security Board of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists included a set of “immediate, practical steps to protect humanity from the major global threats,” and the following appeal:

We need to back away from the doorstep of doom. [. . .] Without swift and focused action, truly catastrophic events – events that could end civilization as we know it – are more likely. When the Clock stands at 100 seconds to midnight, we are all threatened. The moment is both perilous and unsustainable, and the time to act is now (Mecklin, 2022).

The message could not be clearer. Alas, paradoxically, it reinforces our experience of time as beyond the end. “In the countdown,” argues Baudrillard (1997), “the time remaining is already past” (p. 448). The (non)experience of the doorstep of doom is, by the very definition, atemporal.

Today, we face perhaps the biggest aporia yet. Blinded by the belief in the eternity of crisis, we become trapped in, to borrow Derrida’s (1992) formulation, the apocalypse of apocalypse itself, “a closure without end, an end without end” (p. 67). This is an apocalypse so busy with trying to announce and reveal itself that it exhausts itself in this process and is no longer able to actualize *as apocalypse*. It is the apocalypse that no one recognizes, and that, therefore, cannot convey any truth. Atemporal apocalypse, acted-out on the big screens, but unable to actually make a transformative mark on the present. Apocalypse, in short, reduced to the status of interminable crisis.

Economicization of time

Crucially, the crisis of temporality that renders us impotent by encumbering our critical memory, experience of the present, and imagination of the future, has a history. Following Gorz’s writings (see 1983, 1985, 1989), its origins can be traced back to the beginning of the industrial era. To be more specific, they are situated in the advent of the dictatorship of economic reason that, exceeding its own ontological and existential limits, colonized social activities and relations, ones with which, by its very design, it was incompatible (see Gorz, 1989). Gorz’s (1989) profound analysis in his *Critique of Economic Reason* shows how the inherent limits of “economicization” were crossed by means of ideological “pseudorationalizations” (p. 2) that set humanity on a fundamentally irrational, and disastrous, course. In what follows, we shall revisit a few of the key insights of his analysis in an attempt to shed some light on our contemporary predicament.

Gorz (1989) argues that economic rationality “was, for a long time, held in check not only by tradition, but also by other types of rationality, other goals and interests which set limits that were not to be exceeded” (p. 18). This was necessary, for the principle of limitation is completely alien to economic reason. Economic rationality economizes: it

quantifies, calculates and plans, in order to maximize “the type of efficiency that it knows how to measure arithmetically” (Gorz, 1989: 114). As such, it ‘is familiar with the categories of “more” and of “less” but doesn’t know that of “enough” (Gorz, 1989: 112). In essence, economic rationality is a purely technical procedure of quantification—one incapable of value judgments and thus in need of circumscription within specifically designated areas where it can be of use.

These days, however, we tend to take economicization for granted, to the point of very rarely questioning the reign exerted by the economic mode of rationality over nearly all dimensions of life. We even go as far as to defer to it as *the* solution to structural problems, as if we could somehow beat economics at its own game. Think, for instance, of the bizarre efforts of unionized academics, who devote so much of their time and energy to haggling with management over the extra hours, roles and categories to be recorded in their institutional workload models. As admirable as their intentions are, their actions are counterproductive. The problem of unmanageable workloads is rooted in the loss of autonomy—autonomy that cannot be regained through further self-economicization. Quantification is not the route to curtailment; economic reason can only be limited by a logic from without.

Indeed, one of the key problems we encounter today seems to be our inability to think outside economic rationality. Even if we doubt the desirability of total economicization, we do not question its supposed inevitability. Yet, as Gorz (1989) stresses, the dictatorship of economic reason is not the outcome of a rational progression, but the consequence of very particular normative choices, which were imposed by the few on the many. As such, therefore, there is nothing inexorable about economicization of life. In fact, historically, the breaking of the limits imposed on economic rationality by existing value systems was a very onerous endeavor—one that required extreme foul play and violence (see Gorz, 1989: 20–21). Drawing on Marx, Gorz speaks of “resistance, for a long time insurmountable” to the economization of work, showing that the latter “was by far the most difficult task industrial capitalism had to accomplish” (Gorz, 1989: 20; see also Gorz, 1993: 61–62).

Here, we encounter a crucial question, namely, whence did this resistance come from? Gorz provides an edifying answer: from a time-honored rationality of a rhythm of life. The separation of “labour, as a quantifiable economic category, from the workers themselves” took such an immense effort for its logic was incompatible with the culture of living (Gorz, 1989: 21). Lifeworld had a pace, and was based on a simple premise: “it takes the time that it takes to do what there is to do, and when the necessary work has been done, work can give way to leisure” (Gorz, 1989: 109). Economic rationality forcefully jarred with this logic of being “at one with the time, movement, and rhythm of life” (Gorz, 1989: 109). It therefore had no appeal. Indeed, people had no interest whatsoever in “intensifying and prolonging their efforts in order to earn more” (Gorz, 1989: 21). They would work just enough to earn the wage that would cover their basic needs. What mattered was living *their* lives, not serving “goals which were not their own and, moreover, meant nothing to them” (Gorz, 1989: 20). In short, the rationality of the autonomous experience of their lifeworld, of an unheralded but deep-rooted “politics of time” (see Gorz, 1982), rendered them impervious to the economic imperative.

As the first factories went bankrupt, more and more aggressive methods were employed, including “practical solutions” such as the use of child labor, which was much less resistant to economicization (see Gorz, 1989: 21). The transition to industrial capitalism, therefore, was by no means a natural step in social history. Economicization was a brutal process, which did not “consist merely in making pre-existent productive activities more methodical and better adapted to their object” (Gorz, 1989: 21).

It was a revolution, a subversion of the way of life, the values, the social relations and relation to Nature, the *invention* in the full sense of the word of something which had never existed before. (Gorz, 1989: 21)

Fundamentally disuniting time for working from time for living, economic rationalization hurled workers into the sphere of heteronomy, effectively putting an end to their collective experience of the self-governing rhythm of life. By replacing the rationality of “enough is enough” with that of “more is better,” it eliminated the principle of self-limitation of needs that constituted “an obstacle to economic rationality” (Gorz, 1989: 111). Crucially, however, through this, in the most irrational of moves, it subordinated life, along with its temporality, to the economy. Let us make no mistake here: it was the objective of economic growth, not the principle of a self-regulated culture of living, that propelled the course of economicization. As the pre-programmed rhythm of productivism eclipsed the autonomous rhythm of life, existing social relations became substituted by capitalist economic relations. From that point onward, the economy ceased to exist for our sake, and we began to exist for the sake of the economy.

This brings us to another of Gorz’s (1989) key insights: the value ascribed to growth, contrary to common belief, “is not the product of reasoning but of an a priori, normative judgement” (p. 121). Indeed, “Reasoning would, in fact, allow for controversy over the advantages and disadvantages of continuous, accelerated, slowed or negative growth” (Gorz, 1989: 121). Such considerations are, however, beyond question. The desirability of growth is completely taken for granted. Perpetual growth is essential, we are told, and the more of it, the better. This cult of productivism, Gorz points out, is not exclusive to capitalism. He shows that the pursuit of accumulation and economic growth also constituted the principal goals of Soviet-style socialism (see Gorz, 1989: 42). To be sure, both systems were so deeply entrenched in the industrialist logic, so normatively economicized, that their very understanding of social progress became synonymous with growth. The conception of a future thus became circumscribed within the vision of the industrialist utopia, which promised:

that the development of the forces of production and the expansion of the economic sphere would liberate humanity from scarcity, injustice and misery; that these developments would bestow on humanity the sovereign power to dominate Nature, and with this the sovereign power of self-determination; and that they would turn work into a demiurgic and *auto-poietic* activity in which the incomparably individual fulfilment of each was recognized – as both right and duty – as serving the emancipation of all (Gorz, 1989: 8).

The process of the economicization of temporality was thereby complete. History itself was turned into the history of the economy, its course equated with the amplification of

economicization. Imagination gave way to economic determinism. Consequently, the future—understood as not simply “the direction of time,” but our “psychological perception”—came to embody a cultural expectation of an “ever progressing development” (Berardi, 2011: 13). Its expressions varied:

the Hegelo-Marxist mythology of *Aufhebung* and instauration of the new totality of Communism; the bourgeois mythology of a linear development of welfare and democracy; the technocratic mythology of the all encompassing power of scientific knowledge, and so on (Berardi, 2011: 13).

Nevertheless, what they all held in common was the belief in a deliverance via productivism.

Cancellation of the future

We are familiar with the major events that followed. As their recounting is well-beyond the scope of this paper, let us simply point to the undisputable fact that the cult of growth has failed to deliver on its promises. Unbridled economicization has brought about injustices and inequalities on an unprecedented scale. Our “domination” of nature has exposed itself for what it always was—forms of exploitation and manipulation leading to environmental disasters. The all-pervading automatization, has, ironically, swallowed up the very “leisure” time that it was supposed to enable, turning us into mere servants of capital round the clock. “Everyday life has splintered into isolated pockets of time and space, a succession of excessive, aggressive demands, dead periods and periods of routine activity” (Gorz, 1989: 91). Lifeworld, as we knew it, has given way to “a (non-)culture of everyday life, made up of thrills, transitory fashions, spectacular entertainment and fragments of news” (Gorz, 1989: 91). The rationality of a rhythm of life has been replaced by the absurd cacophony of “prosumption.”

By the 1970s, in what Gorz (1989) proclaimed to be the crisis “more fundamental than any economic or social crises” (p. 8), the industrialist utopia has, at last, completely disintegrated. “When a utopia collapses in this way,” he argued, “it indicates that the entire circulation of values which regulates the social dynamic and the meaning of our activities is in crisis” (Gorz, 1989: 8). As the meaning of present development becomes confused, and the “meaning of history suspended” (Gorz, 1985: 1), we find ourselves in an atemporal void. This, Gorz emphasized, means that the time of ultimate crisis is also a time of great possibility (see Gorz, 1985). It is *the* time of decision, the time “to discern the unrealized opportunities which lie dormant in the recesses of the present” and “to take possession of the changes that are occurring” (Gorz, 1999: 1). The time where, at last, “advocating greater well-being through the inversion of growth and the subversion of the prevailing way of life” can no longer be simply dismissed as a lack of realism (Gorz, 1983: 14).

“Several ‘ways out’ remain possible,” Gorz (1985) stressed, “several kinds of post-capitalist, post-socialist society” (p. 1). Whilst assiduously advocating the investment of history with a new meaning, he was, however, well-aware of the challenges that lay ahead. One of the key ones was, of course, the common realization of the significance of

the crisis—the realization that, Gorz pointed out, the status quo so desperately wanted to keep at bay:

All dominant ideologies combine to prevent us seeing this crisis as the end of the industrialist era and the possible beginning of another, founded on a different rationale, different values and relationships, a different life (Gorz, 1985: 2).

“We must be bold enough to choose the Exodus,” he urged (Gorz, 1999:1). Alas, we did not. Gorz judiciously explored the general coordinates of the dominant anti-capitalist mobilization tactics. Not only did he uncover many of their decisive flaws, but he also proposed practical solutions (see, for instance, Gorz, 1968). We will turn to a few of these shortly. First, however, let us briefly point to the impact that our failure to seize the crisis exerted on temporality.

“Moderns,” argues Berardi (2011), “are those who live time as the sphere of a progress towards perfection, or at least towards improvement, enrichment, and rightness” (p. 18). Moderns, in short, are the ones who trust (in) the future. With the collapse of the industrialist utopia, we have lost our vision of the future. We were not, however, ready to give up our trust in the future just yet. Indeed, as Berardi shows, the last two decades of the 20th century saw the emergence of the “ultimate” utopia (see Berardi, 2011: 19). Haunted by the idea of future, but unable to conceive it outside the logic of economic rationality, we brought the latter to its full extension by placing our hopes in cyberculture. We thus “turned history into a code-generated world” (Berardi, 2011: 18), that is, the realm of a complete automatization where nothing can escape the grasp of instrumental calculation. The *modus operandi* of the industrialist utopia thereby endured, albeit in a spectral form—that is to say, it remained “effective as a virtuality,” as “the traumatic ‘compulsion to repeat’, a fatal pattern” (Fisher, 2014). Our trust in the future of the economy wherefore metamorphized into trust in the economy of simulation.

Importantly, this trust in the economy of simulation is nothing but trust in the economy without (a) future. Gorz saw this coming. In *Farewell to the Working Class*, originally published in 1980, he pointed to the temporal malaise that came to be, some 30 years later, identified by Berardi (2011) as the beginning of “the slow cancellation of the future”:

There is nothing to be hoped from history, and no reason to sacrifice anything to that idol. No longer can we give ourselves to a transcendent cause, expecting that it will repay our suffering and reward our sacrifice with interest (Gorz, 1982: 74).

The ultimate utopia of cyberculture has brought about the ultimate in “one-dimensionality” (see Marcuse, 2007), wherein our inability to countermand economicization pathologized time itself. We thus arrived at the economy of instantaneity where the future can only designate a threat.

This is exactly what we encounter today: a double haunting. On the one hand, the utopia of the past, on the other, the anticipation of a dystopia. These two specters convey the same economic imperative; working together to ensure that we remain transfixed in an atemporal void by way of willing to prolong the past whilst concomitantly deferring the future. Ghosts, as we tend to think of them, always want something. What is peculiar

about these is that they haunt our present precisely in order to prevent us from intervening in it. These are the ghosts without any unfinished business. They haunt to preserve “business as usual,” functioning, in essence, as the means of securing the persistence of the economy of simulation. It is through their hauntings that we come to perceive the interminability of crisis as not only axiomatic, but desirable. As such, they are the spirit(s) of, to borrow Lasch’s (1991) expression, “the worldview of the resigned” (p. 50).

Temporal intervention

“Time is in the mind.” (Berardi, 2011: 104)

If the future, as Berardi posits, is essentially a matter of psychological perception—a culturally determined one—then, what is fundamentally at stake today is the question of expectations. Earlier, following Gorz, it was argued that there is nothing inexorable about the dictatorship of economic reason. Likewise, our collective mental shift from utopia to dystopia should not be presumed to be irreversible. It is always possible to be haunted by different ghosts. The chief task today is precisely the conjuring of such non-growthist virtualities. Crucially, this precludes the use of the apocalyptic discourse. As we have seen, the attempts to mobilize through the imagery of doom merely boost the atemporal malaise. “The environmentally apocalyptic future, forever postponed, neither promises redemption nor does it possess a name; it is pure negativity” (Swyngedouw, 2010: 219). The specters that we need are those of possible utopias.

Whence are we, however, to source such new visions of the future? “Society cannot be reconstructed by decree,” argues Gorz (1982), “and a comprehensive vision has no meaning or purchase unless it is an extension of an already developing process” (p. 75). “Mobilization for the conquest of power” is but an abstract term (Gorz, 1968: 11), one as silent today, as history itself. Revolution, Gorz (1968) stresses, cannot be powered by vacuous slogans and general discontent—it needs “perspectives” and “positive accomplishments” (p. 5). It follows that what is required is an intervention into time itself. “Instead of dichotomizing the future and the present – future power and present impotence, like Good and Evil – what must be done is to bring the future into the present” (Gorz, 1968: 11).

It should be clear by now that, if it is to succeed, this temporal intervention must countermand the productivist rationality. It must, therefore, in essence, derive its perspective from without the economic relations. The seeds of such a viewpoint, according to Gorz (1982), can be found within the free subjectivity of the neo-proletariat, that is, the “non-class” birthed by “the crisis of capitalism and the dissolution of the social relations of capitalist production” (p. 68).

While the industrial proletariat derived an objective power from the transformation of matter, so that it perceived itself as a material force underpinning the whole course of society, the neo-proletariat can be defined as a non-force, without objective social importance, excluded from society. Since it plays no part in the production of society, it envisages society’s development as something external, akin to a spectacle or a show. It sees no point in taking over the machinelike structure which, as it sees it, defines contemporary society, nor of placing anything whatsoever under its control. (Gorz, 1982: 73)

Unlike the Moderns, this non-class does not trust (in) the future. Neither does it, however, trust the past or the present. And it is precisely this lack of trust that gives it its radical potential. As Gorz shows, the non-class wants to exit the dominant rationality, “to appropriate areas of autonomy outside of, and in opposition to, the logic of society” (1982: 73). As such, it demands nothing of the economy or the society, seeing both for what they really are, that is, simulations. Put simply, its subjectivity poses such a fundamental challenge to the status quo because it is animated by the logic of subtraction.

Here, however, we encounter another crucial question, namely, how are these subjective dispositions to be translated into an effective temporal intervention? Gorz (1968) maintains that the notion of utopia as “a living reality already at work” (p. 11) can be actualized if we challenge another historical dichotomy: that between revolution and reform. The non-class has no interest in either. It does not believe in collective consciousness, being itself “no more than a vague area made of constantly changing individuals” who want to “regain power over their own lives” (Gorz, 1982: 75). Based on a fundamental rejection of both the economy and the society, their demand for “an area of individual sovereignty beyond economic rationality and external constraint” (Gorz, 1982: 75) cannot be met by either. Therefore, it calls for a different format—one capable of disrupting the binary opposition between revolution and reform.

Gorz’s radical proposals offer just this, outlining a notion of a non-reformist—that is, anti-capitalist—reform: “one which does not base its validity and its right to exist on capitalist needs, criteria, and rationales,” but can nevertheless be attained by “certain limiting mechanisms which will restrict and dislocate the power of the capital” (Gorz, 1968: 7–8). “Mobilization for the conquest of power,” he asserts, “must pass through the ‘mediation’ of intermediate, mobilizing objectives” (Gorz, 1968: 11). Gorz (1968) posits that it is precisely the struggle for such non-reformist reforms that, by engendering “a reality which attacks capitalism from within and which struggles for its own free development” (p. 11), activates collective imagination.

The pursuit of non-reformist reformism, Gorz (1968) stresses, should not be therefore simply dismissed as “a step backward” (p. 11). Power, he insists, cannot be seized until the definition of both the form and the content of “the workers’ potential political power” has been accomplished (Gorz, 1968: 11). Significantly, his contribution does not end there. Gorz breathes life into the notion of non-reformist reformism by depicting different ways in which the future could be brought into the present. One such vision, outlined in *Ecology and Politics*, paints a picture of the implementation process as a concrete series of structural reforms animated by non-economic rationality (see Gorz, 1983: 42–50). Gorz (1983) stated that his intention behind portraying such a possible utopia was to “liberate the imagination as to the possibilities for change” (p. 42). The appraisal of the effectiveness of his attempt is not within the remit of this paper. Neither, arguably, is the imperative call for you to read the eight pages, in which he limns an alternative. That notwithstanding, why don’t you?

Ecological rationality

At last, very briefly—perhaps more as a beginning of sorts than a conclusion—let us return to the opening *problematique* of this article. As should by now be apparent, today’s

(a)cultural perception of the interminability of crisis is fundamentally linked to the loss of autonomy. The heteronomous reign of the dictatorship of economic reason is so successful for it subordinates time—and, with it, the very notion of history—to its irrational logic. It captures and flattens our imagination, thus breeding resignation and subsuming the idea of (a) future under the vision of dystopia. Caught in an atemporal void we find ourselves unable to intervene into the present, becoming mere spectators of the disasters that unveil themselves before our eyes.

As I have argued, such a predicament can only be countered by rejecting both the fatalist agenda and the assumed interminability of capitalism; that is, through mobilizing the imagination by means of a new utopia. The creation of such a vision of a future requires subtraction, understood here as “a method of finding those lines of flight, virtual potentialities, contained within an actual state” (Diken, 2009: 169). Hence, it calls for, what may seem like an ultimately paradoxical move, namely, making a temporal intervention by, first of all, placing ourselves “extempore”—that is, “literally, ‘out of time’” (Gilloch, 2011: 30). There is a well-known old Irish joke, where a tourist’s request for directions is met with a deadpan answer: “if I were you, I wouldn’t start from here.” The same applies to us today: if we are to go somewhere, we need to find the right point of departure; we cannot proceed from the void of simulation in which we are suspended.

I would like to propose that one such potential beginning can be situated within an ecological rationality (see Gorz, 1983). Here, however, it is vital to acknowledge that the notion of ecology cannot be reduced to that of a “natural” environment. Indeed, as Gorz (1993) demonstrates, the so-called ecological movement began “long before deterioration of the environment and the quality of life raised the question of human survival” (p. 57).

It was born originally out of a spontaneous protest against the destruction of the culture of the everyday by the apparatuses of economic and administrative power. By ‘culture of the everyday’ I mean the whole self-evident collection of intuitive knowledge or vernacular know-how (in the sense given to this term by Ivan Illich), the habits, norms and modes of conduct that enable individuals to interpret, to understand, to assume responsibility for the way they inhabit the world that surrounds them. (Gorz, 1993: 57)

The concern with ecology was thus always, first and foremost, a concern with the autonomy of a lifeworld understood as “the world accessible to intuitive understanding, to practical and sensory assimilation” (Gorz, 1993: 58). In essence, the ecological movement challenged expropriation. It wanted to subtract life from the dominant rationality by seeking to reappropriate “lost areas of former autonomy and social conviviality” (Gorz, 1993: 59).

Ecological rationality has, therefore, nothing to do with expertocracy. Instead, it pertains to self-governance, championing “the right of individuals to decide for themselves how to live together, how to produce and consume” (Gorz, 1993: 58). Hence, it is not simply a matter of a one-off strategy, a grand plan to be proposed and followed. Ecological rationality is, above all, a particular form of imagination—one driven by the unquantifiable logic of the temporality of a lifeworld. As such, it demands improvisation, that is, a perpetual awareness of, and alertness to, what cannot be foreseen.

'Improvisation' – be it understood as a form of bodily performance, as a kind of material practice, as a mode of social interaction – this involves the spontaneous, the unplanned; it foregrounds the unexpected, the unrehearsed [. . .]; it involves an openness and responsiveness to contingency, happenstance and chance in the absence of provision. (Gilloch, 2011: 30)

This is where we need to begin. Not with a blueprint, or a threat of doom, but with a development of a mode of imagination that demands an unending affective involvement from us all. Sounds like a struggle? Such is life.

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