

Affinities

Essays in Honour of Professor Tadeusz Rachwał

Edited by Agnieszka Pantuchowicz
and Sławomir Masłoń

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Rafał Majka

SWPS: University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Warsaw

The Paranoid Mind: The (Im)possibility of Radical Change

It seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism; perhaps that is due to some weakness in our imaginations.

Fredric Jameson (1996, xi)

[T]o change our understanding *is* to change the world, in small and sometimes major ways.

Law and Urry (2004, 391)

Radical, Marxism-inspired, theorists and activists will consider the times of global economic crisis a proper conjuncture for the trial of the institutional tools, social practices and program the radical Left's political imagination has forged to effect a system change into a more egalitarian and democratic lifeworld. Today, with the crisis being read in the (neo)liberal and leftist mainstream politics as the greatest in the history of modern capitalism, religious fundamentalisms sweeping and fascist right-wing tendencies growing stronger across the countries of the Euro-Atlantic geopolitical region, or experts predicting an imminent global climate catastrophe unless humankind switches to a radical green policy and reorganises its libidinal investments, there is enormous pressure on the radical Left to (be able to) effectively reconfigure the *global* modern world-system,¹ mending it away

1 The "modern world-system" (see Immanuel Wallerstein's *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction*), although it has also been referred to in neo-Marxism as the capitalist world-economy, is not a monolithically capitalist system but a space abundant in a large number of capitalocentric and non-capitalist discourses cohabiting, merging and overlapping one another. It is a space where the hegemonic binding has been done by the discourse of the capitalist political economy, subordinating a diverse array of economies, (re)narrativising the social as dependent upon capitalism (see J.K. Gibson-Graham, 2006a, 2006b). However, the hegemonic capitalocentric binding could be destabilised and dissolved, and finally replaced by another binding (see Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxism, 2001).

from the neoliberal teleology of nightmare scenarios.² In Marxism-originated political and social theories the present crisis is constructed as a most important socio-political and economic event of the century due to not only the moral issues it has produced (e.g. the widespread deepening of global poverty and structural inequalities), but also the historical and structural “evidence”; for example, neo-Marxist world-system theories claim that the present historical moment is a temporary period in between the capitalist world-system, which cannot function any longer within the former parameters, and other world-system(s) that might not be founded upon democratic and egalitarian principles (see Wallerstein, 1998, 2004). Hence the dominant (socialism-originated) strains of radical political philosophy are expected to provide both an effective *anticapitalist* politics, furnishing practical instruments through which it will be possible to stop the capitalist project from unfolding further, and a viable *postcapitalist* politics, which is to hold a positive,³ detailed utopian agenda according to which a new society is going to either get structured (as in leadership- and/ or vanguard-oriented Marxism-influenced projects) or structure itself (as in new conservative anarchist projects disavowing new social movements and poststructuralism-influenced perspectives and/ or practices). Such an imagining of the duty of radical leftist politics is motivated by the conviction that it is possible, and historically essential, to cut ourselves off, both ontologically and epistemologically, from the status quo; to cleanse ourselves from the corrupted and the mismanaged; and to enter the new world order unencumbered. This particular conviction is either anchored in an ideological position, thus not really read as a constructed one, or critically and consciously followed as a methodological premise. In this kind of political vision one grand project (Capitalism) in all its totality is positioned *against* another grand project (which is most often Socialism, or Communism), again – in all its totality (see, for example, Hardt and Negri, 2000).

In a lot of leftist thought and activism, both modernism-originated Marxisms and anarchisms and their contemporary political echoes, there has for a long time been great (affective and emotional) investment in such theoretical routes and activist contestations that think capitalism as essentialist, organismic and/ or metaphysical⁴; as a Totality that has been swallowing all there is in the social and economic world so that everything makes sense, works and can be described in (binary) relation to the capitalist Behemoth (which, in a such a political imaginary, functions as Master-Signifier).⁵ Thus (ethical and “practical”) value has been

2 Such as war restoring capitalism, privatisation of global water supplies, further precarization of labour and everyday living, gentrification and nuclear conflicts.

3 Here: having a specified content.

4 See J.K. Gibson-Graham’s *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy* for a critique of particular ways in which capitalism is imagined.

5 See, for example, David Graeber’s “The Sadness of Post-Workerism or ‘The Art and Immaterial Labour’ Conference A Sort of Review (Tate Britain, Saturday 19 January, 2008)” for the extent to which Capitalism has weighed down on the

attributed to such ways of fighting Capitalism that prefer to invest in the “thinking globally” imaginary whereas acting “on a local scale,” investing in place-based alternatives has been looked at as not really worth time and energy, since it is already (neoliberally) co-opted, and always already weak because of its assumed inability to build up strong opposition at the international level.⁶ J.K. Gibson-Graham remarks that by subscribing to such ways of conceptualizing capitalism (and at the same time the social and system change), the radical Left surrenders to the capitalocentric organisation of the world. They point out that even popular social or/ and political theories fail to go outside of the Capitalism as Master-Signifier narrative even though the theories show perfect skill in using critical and poststructuralist tools to deconstruct and rethink such concepts as “society” or “gender” that were previously taken for granted as “stable” and “ahistorical” constructs. And the deployment and use of

organicism social conceptions, heroic historical narratives, evolutionary scenarios of social development, and essentialist, phallogocentric, or binary patterns of thinking ... [through which] capitalism is constituted as large, powerful, persistent, active, expansive, progressive, transformative; penetrating, disciplining, colonizing, constraining; systemic, self-reproducing, rational, lawful, self-rectifying; organized and organizing, centered and centering; originating, creative, protean; victorious and ascendant; self-identical, self-expressive, full, definite, real, positive, and capable of conferring identity and meaning (Gibson-Graham 2006a, 4);

contribute to, as Gibson-Graham claims, “the hegemony of hegemonic formation” (2006b, xl), installing the social representation of capitalism as an omniscient and omnipotent Totality. This particular conceptualization of Capitalism, however, *does* influence the (social and political) thinking of what may constitute a successful political intervention and/ or the imagining of possible social and system change.⁷

If we critically take into account the affects being produced, we, however, will have to – somewhat perversely – remark that even though on the ideological or political level the revolutionary subject may be completely set on abolishing

political imagination of such Italian post-Workerist theorists as Negri, Lazzarato, Berardi or Revel. Gibson-Graham, in turn, points out in *The End of Capitalism...* that even some critical and poststructuralist, Marxism-influenced or Marxism-based, theories internalized the totalizing logics of Capitalism – see the passages on: Laclau and Mouffe, pp. 37–39; Deleuze and Guattari, pp. 9, 89; Derrida, pp. 242–243.

6 See, for example, J.K. Gibson-Graham’s “Remarx” and “The Violence of Development: Two Political Imaginaries.”

7 On the prospects of a radical politics that contests the Capitalism as Master-Signifier narrative, see Majka “Perspektywy radykalnej wyobraźni politycznej. Refleksje dotyczące praktyk oporu i utopii w czasach kryzysu.” *Ściegna konsumpcyjne. Próby z kulturoznawstwa krytycznego*. Ed. W.J. Burszta and M. Czubał. Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Katedra, 2013. 289–308.

capitalism, on the emotional level his [sic!] vitality and courage as a revolutionary subject depend on the emotions, feelings and affects which *the* Capitalism he [sic!] seeks to destroy arouses deep down inside. The dominant anticapitalist imaginaries strive to keep us “attuned to social narratives and images in which capitalism constitutes a powerful and pervasive presence, one whose social and economic ramifications are largely malign. Such representatives [of “capitalist totality”] call forth intense feelings and interpellate us as revolutionary antagonists to a capitalist economic system,” and – paradoxically – “we may ‘desire’ the ‘capitalist totality’ because of the powerful antagonistic sentiments we feel in its vicinity” (Gibson-Graham 2006a, 21). Thinking from the gender studies perspective, I would imagine these global-oriented discourses on fighting the Capitalism total as masculinist heroic knight’s tales where the protagonist(s) stand face to face with a mortal Danger, mightier than themselves. In this case the emphasis is put on those feelings and emotions of awe, might and power that arise from the sheer positioning of oneself, and the (affective) awareness of this particular position – against Capitalism. Psychoanalytically speaking, it would be then this (to use Foucault) fascist desire for submission or rather for such a political positioning that would be most productive of (masculinist and heroic) affects.

What is more, this enshrining of the global and depreciation of the local can also be considered as stemming from an Enlightenment strand of thinking which favours grand narratives or big projects of social change, founded on Reason and Logic, with the emotional, the affective and the libidinal cut off and denied any or little agency or influence. Enlightenment-originated, so-far dominant left and liberal political imaginaries have tended both to construct detailed (scientific and rational) utopias, which are to be meticulously installed within the social, and to prioritize the global over the local, that is place-based activism. However, it is not at all about returning to, or re-forming, the local vs. global binary, but a theoretical and activist practice that “views the local as a site of power and counter-power in the context of global capitalism” (Wainwright, e-text), with localities being “a distinctive constellation of social relations and therefore relations of power, which themselves spread around the world” (Massey in Wainwright, e-text). Such an understanding of localities finds its application in new revolutionary imaginaries that come with the social and political workings of the World Social Forums and the postcapitalist politics where the “goal is not to wrest control but to create autonomous zones of counter-power” (Gibson-Graham 2008a, 660); as Michal Osterweil claims, “[b]y asserting and creating multiple other ways of being in the world, these movements rob capital [or the state] of its monopoly and singular definitions of time, space and value, thereby destroying its hegemony, while at the same time furnishing new tools to address the complex set of problematic power relations it confronts us with from particular and embedded locations” (Osterweil in Gibson-Graham 2008a, 660). Gibson-Graham challenges us to re-imagine the figure of the locality/ place which tends to be constructed in the normative anticapitalist imaginary as a “node in a global capitalist system” (2008a, 662), a passive space, always already conquered by ubiquitous and almighty Capitalism; replicating the capitalist logics and the power

relations. Instead, a place can be looked at as a “potentiality ... ‘event in space,’ operating as a ‘dislocation’ with respect to familiar structures and narratives ... the site and spur of becoming, the opening for politics” (662). Pointing at the global successes of “feminist politics [which] did not involve formal organisation at the *global* scale to challenge *global* structures of patriarchal power;”⁸ Gibson-Graham remarks that “small-scale changes can be transformative and that place-based politics can be a revolutionary force when replicated across a global terrain” (662).

The Enlightenment-originated, Reason-driven perspective that the normative anticapitalist imagination subscribes to trains us, as Jack Halberstam notices, “[to stay] in well-lit territories [and to] know exactly which way to go before [we] set out” (6). This sets the political context for the Reason-able mind⁹ that does Sedgwickian paranoid reading of the world, “want[ing] to know everything in advance to protect itself against surprises ... attempt[ing] to show intricately and at great length how everything adds up, how it all means the same thing ... extend[ing] the terrain of the predictable, casting its hypervigilant gaze over the entire world, marshaling every site and event into the same fearful order” (Gibson-Graham 2006b, 4). This, I shall call it, Paranoid Mind of the normative anticapitalist politics through the totalizing and essentializing logics falls into the trap of what Saul Newman calls “the place of power” (2007, 2), that is – instead of critically deconstructing and going beyond the normative *episteme* of knowledge production, in its task of thinking “other, better world(s)” it plays out, to borrow Halberstam’s phrase, “the logic of superiority of orderliness” (9) and complies with the dominant modes of “productivity,” “rigor” and “success” with regard to the processes of the building of politics and sustaining of resistance. The Paranoid Mind then tends to research emergent revolutionary events, projects and imaginaries for whether they constitute “coherent” and “feasible” wholes with a *positive* programme the particular parts of which – practices and institutions, remain interlocked in a “logical” way. What such a paranoid position does is shun uncertainties, surprises or potentialities; or, at best, it re-narrativises them as either part and parcel of the flexible capitalist rush onwards, these postmodern phenomena fathered by the “logics” of late capitalism, or carnivalesque temporaries lacking range or strength, thus sooner or later hollowed and remodelled according to the neoliberal parameters of consumerism. In its compulsive rationalizing and bureaucratizing of Capitalism as well as emerging revolutionary imaginaries, the Paranoid Mind leaves the radical Left’s political imagination little or no room for experiments, becomings or examinations of the transformative possibilities of the present (alternative, or noncapitalist, or postcapitalist) social practices and institutions. It produces a negative affective “strong theory” which, according to Sedgwick, has “powerfully ranging and reductive force” (75) and its contemporary example is, as

8 Italics mine.

9 Which as a mechanism operates the way Claude Lévi-Strauss’s Savage Mind and Monique Wittig’s Straight Mind do.

Gibson-Graham notices (2006b, 4), the narrative of neoliberalism where the social, the economic and the political get constructed as neoliberally refashioned with the ways out for the radical Left's political imagination neutralized or cauterized. Instead, building on Sedgwick's discussion of strong and weak theories, Gibson-Graham speak for discarding "masterful knowing or moralistic detachment" (2008b, 619) and turning to doing the "[w]eak theory [that] could not know that social experiments are doomed to fail or destined to reinforce dominance; it could not tell us that the world economy will never be transformed by the disorganized proliferation of local projects. Strong theory has produced our powerlessness by positing unfolding logics and structures that limit politics" (619). Such a shift in doing political theory and practice enables the self to open themselves to what Halberstam identifies as "knowledge from below" (11) and Foucault as "subjugated knowledges," which are "naive knowledges, hierarchically inferior knowledges, knowledges that are below the required level of erudition and scientificity" (7); and to slip from the disciplining regimes of the normative knowledge production¹⁰ and value. These knowledges, that is "alternative possibilities" (Halberstam, 19), have been overshadowed, marginalised or overcoded by the hegemonic theoretical practice, and "the job of the subversive intellectual is to trace the lines of the worlds they conjured and left behind" (Halberstam, 19). This pulls us down from the Enlightenment-influenced bird-eye view upon grand, global, total, or meticulously organised projects-wholes unfolding in a linear and teleological manner, to "a political perspective that emphasizes the local, intersecting, and contingent nature of political relationships" (May, 112).

Furthermore, the ideological position organised around strong theory, essentializing and totalizing logics and masculinist affects that I have called the Paranoid Mind has a tendency to overemphasize "the politics of the possible" and to underestimate "the politics of the actual."¹¹ Greater investment in the politics of the possible, which is also, as Thomas Nail suggests (2010), a chief characteristic of contemporary radical theories, means that a great deal of effort is channelled into analyzing and deconstructing power, reading 'the world' of the contemporary conjuncture carefully for familiar patterns and inherent structures, and the critical emphasis is placed on finding out and musing on potential times, stages of capitalism, or ways in which the people could finally come together to realize and materialize the revolutionary potential that will sweep capitalism away and lead us into that "another world." The politics of the actual, on the other hand, would involve, according to Nail, taking into critical consideration such issues as

what is to be said of the actually existing infrastructure of worker cooperatives, free schools, local exchange trading systems, equalitarian kinship models, consensus community councils, land trusts, etc. beyond the monological affirmation of their

10 Knowledge that is "rational," "logical" and "all-encompassing."

11 I am referring here to Thomas Nail's distinction between two ways of understanding the obligations of radical politics.

ontological "difference" in a possible "world to come"? What kinds of concrete practices are they effectuating in their decision-making, self-management, exchange, and conflict resolution and how do such practices work? What are the new conditions, elements, and agencies that are emerging and how are they viable alternatives to parliamentary capitalism? (78–79)

And while poststructuralist radical theories and political philosophies might be able to rethink and restructure their commitments to particular theoretical positions, those philosophies sceptical, ignorant or simply disdainful of deconstruction and poststructuralism – those orthodox or new conservative Marxisms and anarchisms, will actually continue to prioritize the politics of the possible over the prefigurative political transformations anchored in now and here. With Capitalism seen not as a political economy discourse that in a favourable political climate has happened to, in a post-Marxist sense, enact the hegemonic binding, setting the capitalocentric configuration, breeding material institutions that would aid its self-preservation, but as a structural matrix of the political, the social and the economic, the Paranoid Mind is more interested in attempting to look for and decipher the signs of the (historically inevitable) crash of Capitalism and a new (communist or socialist, or anarchist) world to come. There is this Enlightenment-originated, yet metaphysical, logic of stagism, or division into stages, working here, according to which at a certain point when the foundations of a new world have been ready enough to be put in place and the (post)revolutionary subjects have grown 'mature' enough, the system gets changed. What is more, the whole imaginary is underpinned by a liberal assumption that one can quite effortlessly shake off their contemporary self and leave the liberal-capitalist symbolic and materialist order, and, epistemologically and ontologically unencumbered, enter a brand new (utopian) world order. Reading the present for the foundations, already in place or budding, of a future postcapitalist world order would not really be an option for the Paranoid Mind because, cultivating economic monism, it does not read the status quo for socio-economic difference.

Tendencies to objectivise, totalize and narrativise as natural the economic and social system dominant at a particular moment in history, that are displayed in traditional political philosophies and their neos, can be put down to the Platonic metaphors which, as Shoshana Felman remarks, have come to dominate the Western philosophy. "[T]he privilege of 'oneness,' of the reproduction of likeness, of the repetition of sameness, of literal meaning, analogy, symmetry, dichotomous oppositions, teleological projects" (119), organizes the Western Mind around binary and linear thinking, which also conditions the political imagination making it impossible for it to politically conceptualize the socio-economic space through the figures of (non-binary) difference, multiplicity, or variety. The mainstream (neo)liberal and (neo)conservative strands of political philosophy share the logic that makes the capitalist order a *natural* outcome of the workings of history, narrativising it as the highest and perfect (at least at this particular point of the development of the imperial West) stadium of the development of humanity.

Radical anticapitalist activists and theoreticians (of major socialist philosophies such as anarchism, anarcho-syndicalism, Marxism, neo-Marxism or even post-Marxism), however – although they are aware of the historicity of capitalism, totalize it, producing the representation of Capitalism “as a central and organizing feature of modern social experience” (Gibson-Graham 2006a, 2), with the non-capitalist or alternative practices and discourses – the Others of capitalism, thought subsumed to Capitalism in a binary opposition. In this way, “capitalism’s others fail to measure up to it as the true form of economy: its feminized other, the household economy, may be seen to lack its efficiency and rationality; its humane other, socialism, may be seen to lack its productivity; other forms of economy lack its global extensiveness, or its inherent tendency to dominance and expansion” (Gibson-Graham 2006a, 7). The neo-Marxist objectivising of the status quo lies in constructing a structural (and also structuralist) capitalist matrix that generates the social. Wallersteinian neo-Marxism maintains that the modern world-system has entered the stage of its twilight, coming to wither, breaking down, producing more and more bifurcation points; however, this imminent collapse of the structure that for a few centuries have determined the social and the political is not at all an accidental and historical event, but a structural must-happen and the only possible (objective) horizon that the radical Left’s political imagination faces. The narrative of an inevitable and impending collapse of the system as we know it (which is, as Wallerstein claims (1998, 69), to happen in several dozen years) results in the condensing, or shortening, of revolutionary temporality, that is the period when new social movements, protest groups and political philosophies are expected to rework the materialist and symbolic order of the status quo, providing both the effective ways out and a positive programme of the new socio-economic order to come. The constructing of capitalism as an impenetrable, homogenous system or organism, as a singularity which has no equals to undermine its superior position, or as a Totality, results in – critically speaking – actually one radical anti-capitalist strategy: to build (both in theory and in practice) “symmetrical” Totality¹² with social and economic institutions and practices thought up in detail. With such a route to politically proceed along, the awareness of the necessity of philosophical and activist acceleration, which is motivated by the figure of the inevitable end now nearer than ever before, and also the idea that it is all about a thorough structural reorganisation of the *global* system, become fertile grounds for negative affects (such as doubt, sense of helplessness or impotence, or even failure) to develop, and they in turn might bring the stagnation of the radical political thought in those socialist strands which totalize and objectivise the dominant socio-economic paradigm; or they might cause some of the strands (like social democracy or left-leaning liberalism) to “correct” capitalism through the tools worked out by the traditional and contemporary socialist practices, with no challenging of

12 Which is often imagined as a Socialist/ Communist State or a federation of autonomous anarchist collectives.

the capitalocentric regime. Socio-democratic or left-leaning liberal attempts at “correcting” capitalism, or hiding it beneath the so-called “human face,” are founded upon a defeatist (mis)conception that there are no possible, or actually existing, alternatives, such as diverse economy projects that are not fixated on generating the profit for its own sake or the idea of the developmental growth. They include, for example, the institution of Basic Income Guarantee, non-profit enterprises or cooperatives. These valorised both institutionally and symbolically at the level of a nation-state or the European Union, treated not as institutions installed *within* capitalism and harnessed *by* new versions of Capitalism but as alternative matrixes able to generate new social formations, would denaturalize and question the dominant narrative of development and only one Future organised around Capital and Work. Such a positioning would bring in difference into the normative Enlightenment paradigm of thinking the socio-economic system, rooted in “oneness” and characterised by monistic and totalising logics; this particular way of introducing difference might constitute a (somehow strategically poststructuralist) gesture inaugurating the process of local economic practices and discourses of the social emancipating into the global dimension. Furthermore, the multitude, variety and diversity of economic practices, constructed institutionally as legitimate equals at the level of a nation-state or a larger system – each fostering its own different social (power) relations, would create space for a constructive polylogue among particular discourses or/ and creative modifications, flows and movements, which would in turn result in a consistent generating of new socio-economic formation.

Within the context that I have delineated, and the political imagination of the Paranoid Mind, the quotation from Fredric Jameson I deliver at the beginning of the article does make sense; because if one happens to live the narrative that interprets the Capital/ Capitalism as the backbone of the (post)modernity – the Master-Signifier, their political imagination cannot arrange the alternative, non-capitalist and anti-capitalist socio-economic discourses and practices in any way other than as subsumed and feasible *only* when set in a binary opposition to Capitalism. As a result, one has great difficulties imagining the world *after* capitalism. With the hegemonic (Reason-driven, masculinist) political imagination – which is set on completeness and (rational) predictability of utopian projects; which fetishizes struggling on the global level; which totalizes Capitalism, constructing it as the Master-Signifier – still going strong within major radical Left’s political theories, the post- or non-capitalist utopia(s) the radical Left wishes to materialize seem(s) to be world(s) impossible to inhabit in our lifetime. Although it may seem that investing in the politics of the possible, learning the mechanics of the processes taking place in the “body” of Capitalism, or trying to design a benign anti-capitalist system, symmetrical to Capitalism in its scope and breadth, are all theoretical and activist interventions anchored in the present, oriented towards the future, geared towards abolition of Capitalism and its normative regimes and installation of a (socialist, communist, or anarchist) Utopia, after careful critical examination we will be inclined to see that the tools the Paranoid Mind utilizes and the imaginaries

through which it thinks the social and system change are rather past-born patterns, fashioned *in* and *according to* (the needs of) different materialist-historical and socio-cultural period(s). Hence, ironically, to support and to let the dominant Enlightenment-originated anticapitalist (and also anti-poststructuralist) political imagination unfold would be to let the past conquer and claim the future and, as a result, to make us re-live the past (affects, attitudes, strategies, identities, trains of critical thought and modes of political action). We can put this past-oriented stance to what in 1931 Walter Benjamin termed “left-wing melancholy,” which is, as Wendy Brown remarks, an attitude adopted by “the revolutionary hack who is ... attached 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” and “[i]t signifies ... a certain narcissism with regard to one’s past political attachments and identity that exceeds any contemporary investment in political mobilization, alliance, or transformation” (19). Gibson-Graham adds that “[m]elancholia conserves and preserves, turning its hatred toward the new and blaming those – including poststructuralists and practitioners of identity politics – who betray the old ideals” (2006b, 5), in this way maintaining the separation on the Left, deepened even further by the neoliberal agenda.

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