

DISENCHANTED ENGAGEMENT

The Philosophy and Political Praxis of
Massimo Cacciari

Daniel Lavenda
Merton College



Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Politics

University of Oxford

Trinity Term
2015

I expect to be available for the viva at my examiners' convenience during the next few months.

Daniel Lavenda
9 October 2015

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ABSTRACT

Several commentators have argued that the focus within political theory in recent decades on abstraction rather than ‘reality’ has left it with has nothing to say to political actors. On these grounds, some have even expressed concern regarding the discipline’s future. As a reply to these concerns, I introduce in this thesis the scholarship and political career of the Italian philosopher Massimo Cacciari. Cacciari shares many goals with Anglophone political theorists, but neither his scholarship nor his practice have engaged in the kind of intellectual abstraction which they now find so troubling. Drawing from Cacciari’s philosophy, political career, and interventions as a public intellectual, I show how his understanding of real-world conflicts and contradictions begins with a commitment to what I call his ‘geophilosophy of the archipelago’, which regards the foundations of human knowledge to be irreducibly plural. A commitment to irreducibly plural foundations means that philosophers and political actors must discard what Cacciari views as ‘enchantment’ with the possibility of ultimate or absolute resolution of all political discord. In return, however, he argues that hopeful political engagement is still possible, because political actors remain able to cope in material and semiotic terms with the complex realities they face. I suggest that serious consideration of Cacciari’s example of recognising irreducible plurality, coupled with a disenchanted engagement with both the material and the semiotic dimensions of political life, offers a compelling alternative orientation to the world that may suggest new ways forward in political theory.

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As the product of an academic family, the scholarly endeavour is, for better and for worse, the foundation and background to my entire life. This foundation has, at various times, imposed certain uncomfortable burdens upon me; however, with this formal foray into the 'family business', I have come to appreciate the boon these burdens also afford. The limitless empathetic support my family has provided me has not just borne me through the vicissitudes of dissertation writing, it has also been an invaluable source of supplementary constructive criticism, helping me learn to curtail my flights of intellectual fancy and restrain my investigative whims. Most genially, it has been manifest in the countless conversations, discussions, and arguments we have had in relation to the discoveries I have made during this project and the questions my research has raised. It is with great satisfaction that I can now, at long last, participate in dinner table conversations as an equal rather than just a student.

The singular experience an opportunity to study at Oxford offers is, in my opinion, not one to be neglected. I am therefore very grateful to the fellows, staff, and my many friends at Merton College who made it possible for me to enjoy my time here as thoroughly as I have. It is one of the great pleasures of my life that I have come to feel very much at home as both a member of college and of the university, as opposed to a foreign student merely passing through on his way to something else.

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To my father and mother.

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INTRODUCTION

Social Weightlessness and Irrelevance in Anglophone Political Theory

Much recent scholarship in political theory is focused on the relationship of the discipline's philosophical and methodological orientation to 'reality', indicating intensifying concern among some scholars not only about the relevance of the discipline to those involved in political action, but also about its future as a scholarly endeavour. It is striking to note that, despite a distinguished disciplinary tradition of methodological critique and rejection of universalising or otherwise totalising forms of political discourse and practice, several commentators have noted that the discipline's intense engagement in recent decades with moral and analytic philosophy has transformed the disciplinary centre of gravity from critical reflection and commentary on socio-political realities to reflection and commentary on the metaphysics of abstract political being. Lois McNay, for example regards this contemporary understanding of the discipline as narrowly essentialist and reductionist. Following Pierre Bourdieu, she argues that this estrangement has produced a 'socially weightless mode of thought...an abstract way of thinking about the world that is so far removed from the actual practices of everyday life that, ultimately, its own analytical relevance and normative validity are thrown into question'.¹ This is a problem in her view because abstract theories about thinking may produce theories with significant intellectual 'mass', but their lack of social 'weight' undermines their effectiveness in real world political activity. This is because 'the constructive element of political theory resides in the extent to which it inspires individuals to *intervene in the world to change conditions of collective existence*'.²

McNay has drawn attention to the way radical democratic, 'agonist' theorists seek to remind their colleagues of an analytic, normative inclination that 'thought about emancipatory norms cannot be disconnected from an account of existing social inequalities, either with regard to the kind of presuppositions upon which it rests or with regard to its potential political

¹ Lois McNay: *The Misguided Search for the Political: Social Weightlessness in Radical Democratic Theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 2014); p. 4.

² Op. cit. McNay, p. 214. Emphasis added.

entailments'.³ In a similar vein, Bonnie Honig and Marc Stears argue that many political theorists 'calling themselves realists, have seen in political theory's interests in canonical texts, critical inquiry, system building, and norm-generation a fool's errand that tells us nothing about the real world, and indeed, takes "flight from reality"'.⁴ In their view, political theory must get its head out of the clouds of ideological abstraction and reground itself upon the grubby *terra firma* of political reality if it is to have anything to say to real people concerned with real politics.

Likewise, the 'radical realist' Raymond Geuss argues that political theorists must attempt to move away from the normative abstraction found in 'the mainstream of contemporary analytic political philosophy'⁵ because '[a]ny attempt to think seriously about the relation between politics and ethics must remain cognitively sensitive to the fact that people's beliefs, values, desires, moral conceptions, etc., are usually half-baked (in every sense), are almost certain to be both indeterminate and, to the extent to which they are determinate, grossly inconsistent in any but the most local, highly formalised contexts, and are constantly changing'.⁶ In this vein he argues that 'if political philosophy wishes to be at all connected with a serious understanding of politics, and thus to become an effective source of orientation or a guide to action, it needs to return from the present reactionary forms of neo-Kantianism to something like the "realist" view'.... Geuss defines this view as

starting from and be[ing] concerned in the first instance not with how people ought ideally (or ought "rationally") to act, what they ought to desire, or value, the kind of people they ought to be, etc., but, rather, with the way the social, economic, political, etc., institutions actually operate in some society at some given time, and what really does move human beings to act in given circumstances.⁷

Common to these arguments is the contention that the discipline of political theory needs to begin doing its work differently in order to be relevant to anyone other than academics with, to paraphrase Geuss, the 'luxury' of isolated ivory tower debate. To begin working differently,

³ Op. cit. McNay, p. 6.

⁴ Bonnie Honig and Marc Stears: 'The New Realism: From Modus Vivendi to Justice', *Political Philosophy versus History?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); p. 178.

⁵ Raymond Geuss: *Philosophy and Real Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); p. 18.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 3-4.

⁷ Ibid., p. 9.

therefore, it must reground itself firmly in reality by engaging with real political actors in real circumstances as well with the consequences of real political action. If such a regrounding does not happen, Mark Philp warns, political theory's future is in jeopardy: '[i]f the division of labour within the discipline is too heavily weighted to [Rawlsian] political philosophy, matters of substantial importance to political theorists are certainly likely to be ignored or marginalised', dividing the discipline and leaving the next generation of political theorists '...without anything comprehensible to say about or to people who practice politics'. Philp therefore considers the central concern of realism to be '...disturbing our established intellectual practices by its attention to the exigencies of political rule that remain unattended to by most analytical political theory', something he recognises as a difficult—if not a paradoxical—task, because while most political theorists are well equipped to *theorise* an abstract disturbance of general disciplinary intellectual practices, few are able to materially affect any such disturbance of specific practices 'because this calls for specific proposals, and that demand runs against political theory's tendency towards abstraction and generalisation'.⁸ However, if the responses to perceived excesses in abstract analysis are ultimately attempts to shake the foundations of the wider discipline of political theory, what will happen once the foundations have been shaken? As Galston points out, even so-called 'realist' political theory has little in the way of empirical, material evidence to distinguish its 'realism' as anything more than an abstract theory of an 'ideal' real.⁹ For example, he writes that '[w]hile realists offer a number of compelling criticisms of ideal theory, there are some lacunae in their stance. It is not clear yet whether realism constitutes a coherent affirmative alternative to idealism. Nor have realists clarified the extent of conflict that is consistent with political order as such'.¹⁰ In Galston's view, the existence of such lacunae are not reason to dismiss realism; on the contrary, the general or abstract disturbance they have caused is compelling enough to justify further investigation. Geuss, however,

⁸ Mark Philp: 'The emergence of "realism" in political theory has the potential to change how we think about the real world of politics' *EUROPP [European Politics and Policy]* (LSE Blog) [<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2013/04/15/mark-philp-realism-political-theory-philosophy/#more-13894>].

⁹ William A. Galston: 'Realism in Political Theory', in *The European Journal of Political Theory* (9:4, 2010); p. 384.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 408.

rejects Galston's demand for a 'coherent affirmative alternative to idealism' because he considers that such a demand typify the 'tendency' of a status quo—(liberal) idealism in this case—

to try to mobilise human inertia in order to protect itself as much as possible from radical change, and one main way in which this can be done is through the effort to impose the requirement of "positivity" or "constructiveness" on potential critics: you can't criticise the police system, the system of labour law, the organisation of the health services, etc., unless you have a completely elaborated, positive alternative to propose.¹¹

But how can political theorists proceed if, as Philp suggests, they lack the skills and experience to undertake the further investigation that any such 'return' would require? Philp supplies uncomfortable, critical support to McNay's observation that radical democratic theory's 'failure to build into itself...a responsiveness to the asymmetrical social relations from which it arises and which form the basis of many of its presuppositions as well as its normative proposals'¹² leads radical democratic theorists to '[fall] back into precisely the type of political formalism that it appears they explicitly reject'.¹³

Taken together, I contend that the concerns of Philp, Galston, Geuss, and McNay outline the boundaries of a recursive entanglement that philosophers call an *aporia*—something that is *aporos*, without a way out. That is, though 'realist' and 'radical' democratic political theory aims to be practical, the traditional disciplinary apparatus of political theory lacks the tools that could help those theorists create new and different spaces in which to begin theorising in new and different ways about matters of disciplinary concern.

Philp's concern therefore becomes an alarming one: if political theorists are not equipped to escape this recursive, 'socially weightless' commitment to the abstract concerns of moral and analytic philosophy, then the discipline, or at the very least its Anglophone branch, is running the risk of sealing itself into an echo chamber atop an ivory tower.

I find Philp's concern compelling, supported by the disciplinary critiques mentioned above, but I do not think the problem is that political theorists *lack* something, exactly. Beginning

¹¹ Op. cit. Geuss, p. 96.

¹² Op. cit. McNay, p. 7.

¹³ Ibid., p. 8.

with the insights from contemporary social and physical sciences, I contend that the problem is actually that political theorists *retain* something they should have long ago set aside: a foundational assumption that causation is a one-way cognitive procedure that begins with intellectual ‘theory’ and ends with material ‘practice’. Put more simply, it is the assumption that if individuals are first persuaded to change the ideas in their heads, appropriately changed individual behaviour will automatically follow. However, this assumption has been consistently challenged by wave after wave of physical and social scientific scholarship. I argue, therefore, that political theorists’ continued reliance on this assumption as the necessary foundation for their work contributes to the disciplinary aporia whose existence they themselves have identified. That is, when faced with evidence that efforts at cognitive persuasion—at convincing people to change their ideas—have failed to deliver the liberation, emancipation, or equality they promise, political theorists have nowhere to turn, short of violent coercion. And if they reject violent coercion, the only option they have is to return to efforts at cognitive persuasion whilst hoping for a different outcome. These efforts produce work whose social weightlessness and practical irrelevance serve only to strengthen and further entrench the aporia from which they are trying to escape. I argue in this thesis, however, that it is possible to find ways out of the aporia by expanding beyond exclusively cognitive concerns and criticising reflexively the practical foundations upon which both the aporia and disciplinary methodology rely.

To make this case, I will introduce Massimo Cacciari’s political praxis as a striking example of how political theorists might incorporate both meaningful and material components into their analyses. I will show how Cacciari is able to make this move by exchanging the almost exclusively semiotic, dialectic foundations of political theory for what he identifies as irreducibly plural, ‘archipelago’ foundations. Cacciari is an interesting figure for many reasons. In the first place, he is an important philosopher who served as mayor of Venice for more than a decade. Second, while political theory is very familiar with the critiques levelled at universalising and totalising discourse by Northern European and North American thinkers such as John Gray and

Richard Rorty, it is less familiar with its Italian counterparts. Even though Cacciari is heavily influenced by German philosophy (particularly the line of ‘negative thinkers’ from Hegel to Wittgenstein I will discuss in Chapter Two), I will explain how the particularity of the postwar Italian experience places him at odds with many of his northern European colleagues, particularly those associated with French post-structuralism and post-modernism. While it is undeniably the case that their concerns are comparable to his, Cacciari has insisted for decades that, though they may *begin* with similar concerns, the direction in which he has pursued his concerns is foundationally distinct from theirs—he has, thus, been highly critical of Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari on the one hand,¹⁴ and *nouveaux philosophes* like André Glucksmann on the other.¹⁵ In Italy, he has famously distanced himself from Negri—something I will discuss in Chapter One—and he has also long sought to distinguish himself from Gianni Vattimo’s *pensiero debole* (‘weak thought’).¹⁶ Cacciari has never been particularly sympathetic to Anglo-Saxon philosophy, considering its schools too steeped in bourgeois ‘common sense’ to be capable of foundationally radical thought.¹⁷ This makes him very difficult to locate within any particular scholarly tradition, especially since he does not engage, even apophatically, with this scholarship in his own work.¹⁸

A thoroughgoing comparative analysis of Cacciari’s claims and philosophy with an appropriate range of philosophers and theorists whose work bears a family resemblance with his would be very interesting, but is clearly beyond the limits of this thesis.¹⁹ I have therefore restricted myself to introducing Cacciari to an audience unfamiliar with his work and his history. I have sought to situate him within the debate about the foundations of political theory as a way to emphasise what it is in Cacciari’s work that is foundationally distinct, both theoretically and pre-

¹⁴ C.f. Massimo Cacciari: ‘Poder, teoría y deseo’, *Cuadernos Políticos* (27/1979); pp. 1-16 (my numbering).

¹⁵ C.f. *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism* (London: Pluto Press, 2002); p. 114.

¹⁶ C.f. Luca Nannipieri: ‘Il punto debole del pensiero debole’ *Europa Quotidiano*, 29 febbraio, 2012 [<http://www.europaquotidiano.it/2012/02/29/il-punto-debole-del-pensiero-debole/>].

¹⁷ Massimo Cacciari: ‘Poïēsis e le forme del fare’, lecture given at the Poïēsis Festival – Fabriano, 3a edizione, 2010.

¹⁸ When he does, it is almost always in a book review or an interview.

¹⁹ Such a comparison might make an interesting follow-up project.

theoretically, from that of his better-known colleagues. In this process, I show why he is a potentially valuable interlocutor for those within the discipline who share such concerns.

To do this, I will first describe Cacciari's 'disenchantment' with totalising political discourses that promise utopian outcomes, and how this disenchantment pushed him to acknowledge that the foundations upon which political analysis begins must be viewed as irreducibly plural, dialogic and material-semiotic rather than individualistic, linear and primarily semiotic. Second, I show how the critical methodology he develops on the basis of these insights directs his attention beyond a preoccupation with cognitive processes alone to a consideration of the relationships between meaningful thought and material practice. Third, I will show how he draws these matters together to articulate the alternative foundations of his 'archipelago geophilosophy', and finally, I will show how this geophilosophy is reflected in his political praxis.

Key to Cacciari's work, as is befitting a Venetian, is experience of the archipelago. Though I will discuss his geophilosophy of the archipelago in detail later in the thesis, it is important to introduce this leitmotif now, briefly, during this discussion of foundations. He argues that whereas one can think of a person as an individual island, that individuality is not absolute in any physical or cognitive sense: the identity of any individual island is mediated by the other islands in the sea of humanity; all are part of an archipelago. That is, whereas individual islands may have their own ideas, needs, and resources, they can only make sense of them and articulate them in relation to those of the islands that surround them. Thus, in Cacciari's view, though they possess a partial *auto-nomos*, the islands of an archipelago are not autonomous.²⁰ Rather, all islands are reciprocally interdependent; though the sea may separate them, it also provides the means of their interconnection. For Cacciari, politics consists in the ways in which 'singularities' navigate towards other 'singularities' in their attempt to negotiate and organise common 'directions' of travel. It is

²⁰ As I will discuss later in the thesis, Cacciari argues that

...the space of the Archipelago is, by nature, averse to subordination and hierarchical succession; no island constitutes a fixed axis in and of itself... the singularities of the Archipelago belong to one another because none of them possess their own Centre, because the Centre is, in reality, nothing but that impetus which obliges each of them to "transcend themselves", navigating towards the others, and all of them towards the absent [common] Homeland. [ibid., p. 20].

this foundationally distinct model of the archipelago that readers must keep in mind in this discussion of Cacciari and his work. There are no rational, autonomous individuals in Cacciari's existential lagoon; rather, individual cognition and rationality are decentred in order to confront the ways in which irreducibly plural archipelagos of reflexive human beings seek out possibilities and negotiate decisions in the specific social and material circumstances in which they live. The archipelago is open, therefore, to the wider world, to *expansion* and *transformation* rather than requiring constant ideological reduction. Put differently, though the positions of islands within an archipelago may be geologically defined, the shape of the relationships among them—which must necessarily take into account the moderating influence of their geological limitations—are irreducibly plural: they are constantly defined, expanded, and transformed by the reflexive material and meaningful praxis of their inhabitants. Cacciari's archipelago resonates very strongly with wider discourses of dialogical subjectivity, particularly that of Mikhail Bakhtin, who evokes the 'dialogic imagination' to criticise standard discussions of speech and debate. These discussions assume that atomised subjects have no intrinsic ties to one another and that individuals' thoughts draw upon the same foundational logic. Like Bakhtin, Cacciari rejects this view, arguing that the individual's voice emerges out of conversations where meanings have to be negotiated because foundational assumptions cannot be presumed to be universal.

To begin this discussion, I will define several terms key to this thesis that have been developed outside the colloquial discourse of political theory. Then, since Cacciari and his work are virtually unknown to Anglophone political theory, I will provide a brief personal and scholarly biography. I will then conclude by comparing his 'archipelagic', material-semiotic foundational approach to politics and its praxis with the semiotic foundational approach of political theory. In this comparison I will draw attention to cases where even allegedly 'radical', 'realist', or otherwise 'heterodox' political theorists like Isaiah Berlin, Michael Freeden, Raymond Geuss, and Bonnie Honig nevertheless appear to take for granted that human political activity is causally determined by the ideas (or 'beliefs', 'concepts', 'desires' or 'values') which autonomous, individual human

beings possess in their heads—that is, that politics is ultimately, and perhaps exclusively, a semiotic process.

Though I will argue that these theorists ultimately contribute to the aporia they seek to escape, I will insist that this in no way invalidates or annihilates the insights or critiques they have provided in their work. Indeed, I have selected these theorists as examples because their work is well established and highly regarded; by criticising the *foundational assumptions* upon which their work is based, I seek to show how their (not inconsiderable) critical insights can be resituated and re-approached, via Cacciari, on more socially and scientifically ‘weighty’ foundations—the irreducibly plural, material-semiotic foundations of the archipelago.

Defining Terms

One encounters the first example of Cacciari’s alternative approach in the vocabulary his work demands. On the one hand, this means that—beyond the trite observation that he uses (almost exclusively) Italian words to express himself—one must also have one’s dictionaries of ancient Greek, Latin, and German at the ready. At the same time, one must also become familiar with the discourses of academic philosophy and the various other disciplines (like literary criticism, aesthetics, architecture, and music) upon which Cacciari frequently draws.

On the other hand, this also means where the words used are the same—particularly via translation—Cacciari frequently understands their meaning quite differently than an Anglophone reader would. To cope with this gap, I have adopted terminology from scholarship that resonates with Cacciari’s discourse, and makes it possible to highlight how (and why) Cacciari’s work differs from much Anglophone political theory.²¹

The four most important terms to have in mind are ‘reflexivity’, ‘material-semiotic’, ‘disenchantment’, and ‘praxis’. The term ‘reflexivity’ is generally understood by philosophers to refer to either a Cartesian recognition of self-identity or, after Hegel, the self-conscious introspection through which an autonomous individual recognises that it is one ‘one’ among *other*

²¹ These terms will be discussed and developed more thoroughly as they emerge in the thesis itself.

‘ones’ who are equally self-conscious and aware. In this thesis, however, I deploy the term in its more recent social scientific understanding according to which it refers to testing critically the hypotheses one holds about oneself or the world. Whereas in philosophy this reflection is usually limited to ideas within the mind of a self-contained individual, the social scientific understanding of reflexivity is much more radical, expanding the *radix*—the root—of meaning to include reflection on the material world and other people as well as on one’s own ideas.

Material-Semiotic: I use this term to emphasise the way in which Cacciari challenges assumptions regarding the ‘rational’, ‘autonomous’, ‘possessive’ ‘individual’ and the notion that individual cognition—the ideas such individuals possess in their heads—directly produce specific behaviour. As conceived by the sociologist John Law, material-semiotic defines ‘a sensibility to the messy practices of relationality and materiality of the world. Along with this sensibility comes wariness of the large-scale claims common in social theory: these usually seem too simple’.²² By contrast, he argues that a material-semiotic approach is one which seeks to ‘[describe] the enactment of materially and discursively heterogeneous relations that produce and reshuffle all kinds of actors including objects, subjects, human beings, machines, animals, “nature”, ideas, organisations, inequalities, scale and sizes, and geographical arrangements’.²³

Defined this way, the term ‘material-semiotic’ provides an acute illustration of Cacciari’s archipelago, because it rejects any foundational dichotomy between subject and object, or material and semiotic, and assumes that both the material world and the semiotic mind are heterogeneous, irreducible, and inextricably reflexive aspects of each other. Similarly, Cacciari’s orientation to the world can be considered material-semiotic because of the ways in which it rejects any dichotomy between individual body and mind, between ‘ideas’ and ‘reality’, or between an individual mind/body and the material circumstances in which they exist, something illustrated by his view of islanders and their islands in relation to other islanders and other islands within an archipelago.

²² John Law: ‘Actor Network Theory and Material Semiotics’ *The New Blackwell Companion to Social Theory*, Bryan S. Turner, ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009); pp. 141-158. Also, cf. Timothy Lenoir: ‘Was That Last Turn a Right Turn?: The Semiotic Turn and A.J. Greimas’, *Configurations* (2:1994), pp. 119-136.

²³ *Ibid* (Law).

These too are heterogeneous, irreducible, and inextricably reflexive aspects of one another.

Cacciari's views about boundaries resonate with those of Donna Haraway: 'boundaries are drawn by mapping practices; "objects" do not preexist as such. Objects are boundary projects. But boundaries shift from within; boundaries are very tricky. What boundaries provisionally contain remains generative, productive of meanings and bodies. Siting (sighting) boundaries is a risky practice'.²⁴

The ability to identify the materialisation of boundaries around objects of knowledge and the ways in which they shift, and to take risks in siting (or sighting) them requires *disenchantment*. As I use the term, 'disenchantment'—and, indeed, 'enchantment'—are material-semiotic terms: neither refers to a non-reflexive, individual 'obsession' with a particular concept or idea by itself or for that matter any bewitchment or false consciousness. On the contrary, though ideas certainly matter, disenchantment is a form of reflexive, material-semiotic critique: it involves making decisions to behave one way rather than another, to participate in certain discourses rather than others, to participate in certain forms of hegemonic domination rather than others. Enchantment refers to the refusal or inability to undertake such critique. In this way, they are both forms of *praxis*.

Whereas *praxis* is generally understood by philosophers as the linear realisation of a self-contained idea by an autonomous individual, I use the term in a reflexive, material-semiotic sense. Put as simply as possible, reflexive, material-semiotic praxis is what one of Cacciari's forebears, the Italian early Marxist theoretician and political activist Antonio Labriola defined as the 'philosophy of praxis': 'the philosophy which is immanently present in the things about which it philosophises. From life to thought, and not from thought to life; this is the realistic process'.²⁵ As I will discuss in Chapter Three, the 'philosophy of praxis' is something Antonio Gramsci would later develop in his own work, and is an ongoing critical project Cacciari continues to this day. It is a reflexive

²⁴ Donna Haraway: 'Situated Knowledges' in *Feminist Studies*, (14, 3, 1988); pp. 575-599. Cacciari's geophilosophy of Europe and archipelago politics are precisely directed at tricky boundary projects, as I will discuss in Chapter Six.

²⁵ Antonio Labriola: 'Discorrendo di socialismo e di filosofia', *Scritti filosofici e politici*, vol. II, ed. Sbarberi (Torino: Einaudi editore, 1973); p. 702.

philosophical methodology that one employs to criticise and make sense, both of the material world in which one finds oneself and of the semiotic responses inspired by what one experiences. This is an explicit contrast with the kind of semiotic deontology that idealism suggests an individual employ in order to evaluate or pass judgement upon the world. In political terms, *reflexive, material-semiotic praxis* like Cacciari's refers to what I call, paraphrasing the historian Mary Fulbrook, 'participatory domination', or the negotiation of an agreement according to which the dominated in a particular society will *cooperate* materially and intellectually with the dominators, whether by offering active support for the regime or by agreeing not to resist as long as the regime meets certain demands. This negotiation is undertaken whether or not those being dominated 'believe' in the regime, consider it 'just', or 'legitimate' or are guided by some abstract notion of 'the good'; in this sense reflexive, material-semiotic praxis is the unsentimental process according to which those with less power than those who do or would dominate them mobilise the intellectual and material resources they have in order to negotiate the terms of their survival.

Cacciari and Method in Political Theory

Because it rests on different, irreducibly plural archipelago foundations, I argue that Cacciari's work is able to develop a critique of dialectical, semiotic foundational discourse. Furthermore, I will demonstrate that Cacciari's critical methodological praxis has grown, reflexively, out of his own practical political experience. This enables him to establish a 'different' third, hybrid, irreducibly plural archipelago foundation upon which to begin his work. Cacciari's understanding of the job of a philosopher can also be described as material-semiotic. To him, the job of philosophers is to provide immanent, reflexive critique of the material circumstances in which they live: 'critical labour is the only labour that everyone should recognise as proper to philosophy'.²⁶ Imperative as cognition, intellectual reflection, and the imagination are to human activity, Cacciari joins philosophers like Hegel, Husserl, and their intellectual descendants in

²⁶ Bruno Giurato: 'Massimo Cacciari: "L'antiberlusconismo? Un antidoto del c..."', *Il giornale Off* (2 dicembre, 2014).

arguing that intellectuals cannot be considered apart from, independent of, or unaffected by the material circumstances they encounter—from the living and non-living physical world to the built environment, to the social relations of power of which one lives. This is because the consistencies and contradictions provided by these material encounters furnish the mind with the substantive raw material it needs in order to function. By no means, in Cacciari's view, should a philosopher ever retreat to an ivory tower to think about thinking. As he sees it, the philosopher's job involves participant engagement—to study one's own society by engaging with it directly, reflecting upon that engagement, and then presenting that reflection to society as commentary and criticism.

In this way, Cacciari's critique of semiotic modernist foundations can be seen to emerge as much from his own involvement in Italian politics as from his philosophical studies. Taken together, they led him to conclude that some contradictions cannot be synthesised. However, the outcome for him is neither anarchy nor despair because he contends there are always means of *coping* with irresolvable contradictions, or 'irreducible plurality'. As I will show, even in the midst of crisis he is able to find pragmatic possibilities for alternative forms of praxis within the material resources available to political actors. These material resources are local, rather than universal, but they still offer a contingently remade, material-semiotic set of pragmatic resources on which to build ongoing political action. Cacciari has thus been active in Italian politics not despite, but *because of* his disenchantment with the possibility of utopian outcomes. This led one scholar to describe Cacciari's political orientation as 'disenchanted activism'.²⁷ In Chapter Four, I will argue, however, that Cacciari's philosophical study of beginnings and becoming *as material-semiotic praxis* influenced his approach to *political* beginnings and becoming, leading to a more accurate description of his position as one, of disenchanted *engagement*, of creative coping, rather than ideologically partisan activism as such.

Cacciari's own work as a philosopher and politician can make significant contributions to contemporary methodological debates in political theory by providing fresh 'archipelagic'

²⁷ The term was aptly coined by Alessandro Carrera: 'Introduction: On Massimo Cacciari's Disenchanted Activism', *The Unpolitical: On the Radical Critique of Political Reason* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), pp. 1-44.

foundational and methodological tools the discipline currently lacks. From his perspective, intellectual creation and material creation occur simultaneously, in reaction to what we observe, encounter, and learn, experience, or feel. They are phenomenological rather than universal, contingent rather than absolute, and shared rather than purely individual. The reciprocity of this creation is expressed materially in aesthetic discourse and praxis: intellectual creation and material creation cannot, therefore, be considered as separate from one another. Put differently, if one begins one's analysis located within a foundational archipelago, it becomes easier to see that *praxis* cannot be understood as the mere enactment of cognitive propositions or the direct, outward 'performance' of interior feelings.

In Cacciari's view, we affect and experience *Bildung* by building. In the thesis I will therefore engage with the way Cacciari understands the interaction of politics and aesthetics as *in situ* phenomenological praxes constructed on the irreducibly plural foundations of an archipelago. This requires drawing not only on his discussions of the philosophical and historical concepts of the Metropolis and the Archipelago, but also on his involvement in the politics of Venice, his work on Italian republicanism and the federalist alternative he proposes. As I will explain in Chapter Six, for example, his 'Geophilosophy of Europe',²⁸ focuses on the historical struggles to create (or impose) a political harmony in Europe, from ancient city-states, to supranational organisations like the European Union, rethinking the relation of harmony to struggle, in both intellectual and material terms. For Cacciari, harmony cannot be imposed and always is achieved through struggle. Moreover, the struggle for harmony in politics is no different from the struggle for harmony in any other context:

No struggle begins without harmony in mind. It is necessary solely as [a] search for the ways and forms whereby a harmony can be produced, be revealed. The meaning of the *agon* consists in the *aletheúein* of harmony: in manifesting harmony as its own truth.²⁹ [t]he struggle is, in its essence, a *conatus* [an *attempt*] at harmony; no struggle begins without victory in sight, but to win means "to harmonise" the enemy to oneself. Struggles and conflicts are only of use as research into the modes and forms from which a harmony

²⁸ Massimo Cacciari: *Geofilosofia dell'Europa* (Milano: Adelphi, 1994). The essay from which the book takes its name has been translated into English and appears in Cacciari: *The Unpolitical: On the Radical Critique of Political Reason* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009); pp. 197-206.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

can be produced or revealed. The meaning of the *agòn* consists precisely in the *aletheúein*, in the bringing forth [*pro-durre*], the bringing of harmony to light.³⁰

As a critic of political practice who has also practiced politics, and who has struggled with the ‘crisis of foundations’ that follows challenges to the semiotic foundations of post-Enlightenment philosophy as well as the crises of the Italian state, Cacciari is uniquely placed to discuss how to articulate and build political hope when universalism and the existential foundations that support it have been shown incapable of delivering the resolutions they promise.

Massimo Cacciari

Born in Venice in 1944, Cacciari is founder and former Dean of the Philosophy Department at the Università Vita-Salute San Raffaele in Milan, where he is now professor emeritus. Cacciari has also been actively involved for over forty years in electoral politics. He began his political activity as a radical left-wing activist with Antonio Negri and *Potere Operaio* in the 1960s, and went on to serve in the Italian Chamber of Deputies from 1976-1983 as a member of the Italian Communist Party, and as the centre-left³¹ mayor of Venice from 1993-2000 and 2005-2010. He also served briefly in the European Parliament (1999-2000).

Although he is virtually unknown outside of Italy, Cacciari is a significant figure for at least two reasons. First, he may quite possibly be one of the few important contemporary political philosophers who has experience of how politics is practiced in the ‘real world’. Second, Cacciari is also one of very few contemporary politicians who is familiar with—and has contributed significantly to—‘high’ philosophical theory. The outcome is an unusual body of work in which the scholarly and the political enjoy a reflexive, reciprocal relationship. Third, however, the reader must not take for granted that Cacciari accepts Enlightenment assumptions uncritically, which would be to reject in advance precisely the original element of Cacciari’s work that offers political

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ From 1993-2007 he represented the centre-left *Margherita* (*Daisy*) umbrella party; from 2007-2010 he represented the *Partito Democratico*, into which the *Margherita* had merged. One of Cacciari’s better-known political idiosyncrasies is his lack of consistent party allegiance—even by the standards of Italy’s fractious (and factionalised) party compositions..

theorists a way to puncture the aporetic bubble in which they are trapped. Cacciari's work must, therefore, be examined critically rather than analytically: in juxtaposition to liberal or realist accounts, rather than deontologically. It is a mistake to seek in his work—or indeed in this thesis—a 'theory' of 'disenchantment'. Cacciari offers no 'principles' or 'propositions' specific to any matrix of disenchanted cognition; he lists no 'duties' or 'virtues' proper to a disenchanted subject; he proposed no *a priori* cognitive, psychological, metaphysical, or biological origin for disenchantment. To assume that he does, or that he ought to do so, is to reinforce from within the discipline the aporia under criticism by Cacciari, and by this thesis.

It is out of concern that the unfamiliar grounding of Cacciari's work will be misrecognised by Anglophone political theorists that I have been careful to reproduce the complexity of Cacciari's arguments, rather than trying to reduce or regularise his argumentation into streamlined, self-contained 'principles' or 'propositions' that are universally 'valid' or will always yield the same intellectual or cognitive results. His key arguments can, however, be summarised as suggestions or as tools for practical theoretical political work. First, his work suggests that political theorists need to decentre the cognitive and pay greater attention to reflexive, material-semiotic praxis in political life; that they will be helped if they think of theory and practice not as exterior to one another, but rather as intertwined features of what I have called material-semiotic praxis. Second, his work suggests that political theorists set aside projects aiming toward universal synthesis in favour of engaging in immanently critical 'projects of crisis'. These projects involve 'throwing' foundational theoretical assumptions 'into crisis' by testing their assumptions against specific cases of actual material-semiotic political praxis; analysing how well they hold up to such scrutiny; and refurbishing, refounding, or replacing those assumptions based on this analysis. Practical experience with such projects of crisis might further lead political theorists to conclude, as Cacciari does, that dissonant political contradictions provide practical as well as theoretical resources for political solutions, and need not be regarded as aberrant interruptions of ideal political harmony. Cacciari rejects the notion that logical propositions can be reconciled with political praxis in a way

that is finalistic—that is, that can lead linearly towards the production of a specific end or outcome. Political praxis, for Cacciari, is about *beginning* an open-ended, non-linear project: examining the materials at hand and deciding to take action without knowing exactly what the outcomes of that action are going to be. His work offers political theorists ways of undertaking what McNay has called ‘a more open-ended and exploratory approach to theorising’.³² At the same time, Cacciari’s discursive *praxis*—*how* he articulates his ideas and *how* he makes his arguments—is as important to his arguments as the arguments themselves, making clear the irreducibly plural archipelago foundations of the perspective from which he begins. Again, it is a mistake to overlook these details, or to dismiss them as being of little importance to the overall argument (his, or indeed, mine).

It must be said, however, that Cacciari does not make this an easy task for his readers: his discussions are labyrinthine, his prose is dense, and expository waypoints are few and far between. Though this may be standard discourse among Italian philosophers, it does not make for easy going amongst non-Italian philosophers or other non-professionals. As a reader interested in the relationship between his politics and his philosophy, I often wish he buffered his philosophy with examples from his own experience—or that he engaged more directly with more specifically political theory and political science. Nonetheless, he is a philosopher doing philosophy. Moreover, Cacciari has long balanced his scholarly prose with his popular interventions, not just in politics but also in the media. At first blush, his position as one of Italy’s leading public intellectuals may suggest that he is merely a pundit, an intellectual gadfly, or dilettante. Indeed, he has been accused of as much—of being a *tuttologo* (an ‘everythingist’)³³—but, having completed this study, I find that this line of critique is shortsighted. It is, ironically, to make what Goethe called the ‘dilettante’s

³² Op. cit. McNay, p. 218.

³³ E.g. Matteo Sacchi: ‘Il doge dei “tuttologi” Vita, opere e disastri di Massimo Cacciari’, *Il Giornale* 19 luglio 2013 [<http://www.ilgiornale.it/news/cultura/doge-dei-tuttologi-vita-opere-e-disastri-massimo-cacciari-936878.html>].

mistake', an attempt to 'combine imagination and technique immediately',³⁴ without sufficient research.

The commitment Cacciari's work demands of its readers surely contributes to such criticism, particularly in the popular media. Yet, an acquaintance with the full breadth of his work suggests a great richness that goes much deeper than might be expected. However, to a non-Italian or non-speaker of Italian, the latter is wholly inaccessible because it is not translated—something I have tried to mitigate by linking his 'informal' interventions with his scholarship. This does not, however, help foreign scholars wishing to engage with his work, or to any translator attempting to facilitate such engagement. Given the challenges of translating his work, it is no surprise that so little of it has been translated in to English—or, for that matter, that the quality of many of these translations fail to convey the nuance of his arguments. In addition to all these obstacles, Cacciari's work also requires that readers begin to think in radically different ways. Not only must we begin to think in terms of irreducible plurality, we must also familiarise ourselves with Italian political and philosophical history, new terms, concepts, and data, as well as the intricacies of everyday Venetian life.

This thesis is thus intended as an invitation to political theorists to make use of Cacciari's work, considering ways of incorporating new, alternative disciplinary praxes that might allow them to slowly move beyond the discipline's aporetic cul-de-sac. Cacciari's work (and this thesis) provides an expanded and enriched context within which to consider the sort of abstraction, deliberation, deduction, and deontology on which Anglophone political theory traditionally focuses. Cacciari's work (and this thesis) provides the tools with which political theorists can engage in immanent and reflexive critique of specific instances of material political praxis, and to join the search for non-

³⁴ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: 'Maximen und Reflexionen 1127', in Ernst Lautenbach, ed., *Lexikon Goethe-Zitate: Auslese für das 21. Jahrhundert aus Werk und Leben* (München: IUDICIUM Verlag, 2004) p. 153. [„Fehler der Dilettanten: Phantasie und Technik unmittelbar verbinden zu wollen”. (“The dilettante's mistake: trying to combine imagination and technique immediately”).

binary, dialogic agreements in an irreducibly plural material-semiotic world.³⁵ Before proceeding to the body of the thesis, however, it is important to consider in greater detail three remaining issues in contemporary political theory that are relevant to a proper understanding of Cacciari's contributions, particularly to discourses of agonism. Unlike other political theorists, agonists argue that no ideas are universally 'right' or 'wrong' because different people come legitimately to different ideas in different circumstances. Yet, if political activity—or, for that matter, any other human activity—is understood in predominantly semiotic terms, it becomes possible to dismiss ideas that conflict with one's own on the grounds that they lack a sound moral, ethical, or logical foundation upon which to justify themselves. Though agonists may reject discursive 'relativism', the spectre of 'relativism' nevertheless re-emerges at a foundational level. This is because agonists tend not to reflexively criticise the corollary assumption that any challenge to semiotic *foundations* (whatever they may be) entails a cognitive 'acceptance' of either indeterminate semiotic foundations or of no foundations at all. But Cacciari's work, informed by the aforementioned physical and social scientific research, has long challenged this assumption, arguing that it forecloses upon any possibility of the reflexive 'dialogic agreements' forged by real people on a daily basis within irreducible, *material-semiotic* plurality.

Second is a closer look at work by two political theorists who seem to be poised on the brink of a Cacciarian threshold, but who refuse to cross. Most significant is the work of the agonist Bonnie Honig, whose differences from Cacciari are most clearly laid bare by comparing her and his interpretation of the classic Greek tragedy *Antigone*. This comparison exposes the limits of semiotic agonism, and demonstrates the nuance Cacciari's material-semiotic, archipelago foundations can contribute to discussions of agonism and its foundations. Finally, I offer a

³⁵ As I will discuss later in the thesis, these non-binary possibilities are called *tertia*—'thirds'—by the philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, who explains that,

While traditional logic stands or falls with the dictum *tertium non datur* (there is no third option between yes and no), everyday thinking has always found ways to reach precisely such a *tertium datur*. The universal procedure in this field is the de-radicalisation of alternatives: if one confronts something with an *either/or* they consider unwelcome, one will observe how they remodel it into a *both-and* sooner or later.

[Peter Sloterdijk: *God's Zeal* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009); pp. 111-112.]

consideration of the work of Chantal Mouffe, whose work has the most in common with Cacciari, but who also remains poised on the threshold.

Irreducibly Plural Foundations and the Spectre of Relativism

I suggested above that the problem is not simply that Anglophone political theorists are not paying enough attention to reality or that they lack any particular *skills* with which they might engage it. Rather, from Cacciari's perspective, the problem is that Anglophone political theorists *retain* a demonstrably inadequate foundational understanding of human beings, the human mind, and human activity. That is, there is a tendency to presume that the political must be conceived as primarily a semiotic or theoretical phenomenon, located in the mind. Thus, political principles are to be identified and then measured against a contextually transcendent, normative deontology—a set of absolute rules according to which the 'rightness' or 'wrongness' of an action or an idea can be calculated before any action is taken. Alternatively, a prophylactic ideology can be applied in order to pass 'appropriate' judgement on reality, such that this ideology may displace 'relativism'. The spectre of 'relativism' thus constitutes a demonstrably 'weightless' notional taboo at the heart of semiotic philosophy, political and otherwise. 'Relativism'—the purported moral anarchy according to which 'anything goes'—allegedly emerges when, in the absence of any such deontology, individuals allegedly 'accept' existential 'indeterminacy' (irreducible plural foundations) rather than a normatively determinate 'belief system'. To do so is alleged to be no different from 'affirming' that, because no opinion is better than any other, no 'correct' decisions can ever be made. Many have criticised this view of 'relativism': Isaiah Berlin, for example, argued that 'relativism is not the only alternative to universalism'.³⁶ But Berlin, for his considerable insight, did not go beyond irreducibly plural *semiotic* foundations, consisting of intellectual 'values'. Nevertheless, even those who criticise the concept still take for granted its existential possibility and worry about the threat of absolute theoretical incommensurability.

³⁶ Isaiah Berlin: *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013); p. 88.

Although ‘relativism’ may not be of paramount concern to all contemporary political theorists, it continues to cast a shadow over philosophers and theorists who, like Berlin, have a semiotic focus. For example, ‘in political thought’, Michael Freeden states, ‘indeterminacy is a basal property of language and thinking. That observation confirms the empirical fluidity and mutability of political thought, mediated through subjective and often transitory understandings superimposed on indeterminacy’.³⁷ Indeterminacy, in his view, is an unavoidable by-product of plural semiosis, linguistics, and cognition. He argues, therefore, that

to accept indeterminacy is not to put one’s signature to a manifesto for the extreme kind of relativism in which “anything goes”. It implies rather that “a number of things go”. That constrained relativism is limited by human experience of what might create more (or less) beneficial or reasonable, or acceptable results for individuals and collectivities—although those assessments might well be modified over time and space.³⁸

Cacciari finds that determining and deciding what ‘goes’ and what ‘does not go’ is *not* a purely semiotic question. Indeed, he makes the very Bakhtinian argument that ‘[c]ogitatus ergo est is not valid’, because language does not constitute a unitary distribution system for discrete units of information: ‘[a] thing does not really exist just because we think it’.³⁹ And this ‘thing’ can be a meaning as much as it can be a physical object.

To Cacciari there are neither *Dinge an sich* nor are there *Bedeutungen an sich*—both things (*Dinge*) and meanings (*Bedeutungen*) are dialogic, reflexive, and contingent. Negotiations between specific human beings in specific communities regarding what should, should not, will or will not ‘go’ in that community are, in his view, irreducibly plural and *heteroglossic*: these negotiations involve a chorus of voices using sounds according to irreducibly plural syntactic foundations to express *incompletely, but as best they can*, their individual conjecture and hypothesis to other human beings who then respond in kind. Real people frequently discover that they agree with one another despite their differences; we also manage to find common ground, forge alliances, and behave accordingly to those alliances, even when our ideas are not identical with those of our interlocutors. Cacciari’s

³⁷ Michael Freeden: *The Political Theory of Political Thinking: The Anatomy of a Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); p. 71.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

³⁹ Bruno Giurato: ‘Massimo Cacciari: “L’antiberlusconismo? Un antidoto del c...”’, *Il giornale Off* (2 dicembre, 2014).

view is that the material-semiotic medium is the material-semiotic message:⁴⁰ linguistic expression is *not* part of a universal mechanism that operates according to a universal syntax: rather, it is individually and socially reflexive material-semiotic *praxis*. From this perspective, the *discourse* of ‘relativism’ is inseparable from the ‘*concept*’ of ‘relativism’. To claim that the determination of what ‘goes’ or does not ‘go’ in any particular circumstances is, ultimately, an entirely semiotic affair is to engage in a ‘psychosemiotic’⁴¹ reductionism rather than open-ended material-semiotic analysis.

Donna Haraway argues that scholars must find ways to cope with the reality that ‘the alternative to relativism is not totalisation and single vision, which is always finally the unmarked category whose power depends on systematic narrowing and obscuring. The alternative to relativism is partial, locatable, critical knowledges sustaining the possibility of webs of connections called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology’.⁴² Thus the existence of a foundational aporia in political theory indicates that, unmarked, the narrow and obscuring foundational disciplinary assumptions have escaped critical review. However, contemporary disciplinary practice insists that political theorists, if they are to be taken seriously, must refuse any irreducibly plural ‘foundational’ alternatives. The result is that vernacular disciplinary practice perpetuates the very aporia with whose consequences it is struggling.

To illustrate this phenomenon, I turn in the next section to the work of Bonnie Honig. In my opinion, she comes very far indeed in coping with the aporia, yet still refuses to give up on traditional foundations. I will in each case show how Cacciari’s material-semiotic orientation, recognition of irreducibly plural foundations, and use of the ‘project of crisis’ allows alternatives to come into view that their approaches block.

Stopping Points in Political Theory

In the preceding section, I argued that to invoke the concept of ‘relativism’ in political theory is, itself, a political act. This is because it shifts focus from the merits of an argument in its

⁴⁰ Marshall MacLuhan and Quentin Fiore: *The Medium is the Message* (London: Penguin, 1967).

⁴¹ I will discuss this term in more detail below in relation to the work of Chantal Mouffe.

⁴² *op. cit.* Haraway.

own terms to a different, very specific deontological argument: is this argument an example of 'relativism' or is it not? This move polices political discourse, by refusing engagement with any argument that calls into question the Cartesian and Kantian *foundational* premises of traditional political theory. To invoke 'relativism' is also a way to pre-emptively neutralise any contradictory argumentation: if what social or physical scientists have to say cannot be proven to *not* be 'relativism', their arguments, no matter how compelling, can be dismissed. However, thanks in no small part to political theorists studying marginalisation and the marginalised, some members of the discipline have begun to push back by incorporating more contemporary, social scientific understandings of reflexivity (see definition above).

Feminist political theory, for example, has made great and necessary strides by increasing the scope of subjective definitions of identity and agency by political participants. One way it has done this is by reflecting on the history of Western political *thought*, identified masculine perspectives that thinkers like Descartes or Kant took for granted, and sought to transform them in order to include feminist perspectives. This undertaking has led to struggles with the material implications of embodiment and sexual morphology on the one hand, and of violence, inequality, and public presentation (such as the politics of veiling women in Muslim societies), and much else in between. And yet, to the extent that it remains thinking about thinking rather than an investigation of the relationships between material circumstances and reflexive subjectivity, this work undermines its own significance. Though rousing prose might, as McNay puts it, '[inspire] individuals to intervene in the world to change conditions of collective existence', the primarily semiotic tools this work provides for effecting such change are few and of limited reach. This is because, no matter the perspective from which these theorists begin ('feminist', 'radical', 'realist', and so on), and whatever their intentions may be, feminist political theorists never question the foundational assumption that human activity ultimately and exclusively originates in individual, semiotic cognition and that political action in the world is the product of that cognition. By reducing the complex subjective, social and material reflexivities exposed by their work to an

semiotic reflexivity rather than expanding to include material praxis as a critical element in that reflexivity, one could argue that feminist political theory is actually strengthening the very foundational dichotomy it seeks to eliminate.

To criticise political theory in this way is neither to scold individual theorists nor is it to denounce the entire discipline. However, although the contents of much contemporary political theory at least gestures towards the ‘socially weighty’, the assumptions with which this work begins and concludes are socially weightless. The weightless assumption about the exclusive importance of the ideas people (allegedly) have in their heads sends these theorists and their readers spiralling dizzily down a path of paradoxical deontology: if thinking is the problem, we must think about the way we think about thinking in order to think about thinking so that we think thoughts differently, think different thoughts and so thinking, behave differently. In disciplinary terms, this means that political theorists can do nothing other than start all over again from whence they began, reapplying what they know in the hope that this time the results will be different. Bonnie Honig, for example, asks

What choice do we have, in such instances, but to repeat and redeploy our critiques? [...] If we repeat our concerns always in new ways with new resources in relation to new texts or new political events, we do so not in order to win the argument but rather in order to illustrate again and again the stakes of winning or losing it and to reshape ourselves as subjects into its proper bearers.⁴³

Honig is not wrong that old arguments resonate differently in new, different circumstances. But she overlooks the reality that neither *how* they will *sound* nor *how* they will be *heard* can be predicted in advance. As I will show in this thesis, many people, Cacciari especially, would therefore find such a counsel of ‘biopowerful’ despair⁴⁴ bewildering. What, for example, happens when evidence suggests that one’s taken-for-granted assumptions about the world may be flawed? The answer, it seems to me, is that risk emerges. Clearly, to throw one’s own existential foundations into crisis is to risk discovering that they are not as solid as one hoped they were.

⁴³ Bonnie Honig: *Emergency Politics: Paradox, Law, Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); p. 137.

⁴⁴ And, indeed, the ‘politics of lamentation’ she discusses in *Antigone, Interrupted* [Ead. *Antigone, Interrupted* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013)].

Equally, of course, one might also discover that they are stronger than one feared them to be. In either case, such an evaluation identifies areas where maintenance, repair, transformation, or substitution are required. Surely political theorists, however they define themselves, are not so ethnocentric as to truly believe that Enlightenment foundations are either the only foundations capable of sustaining democratic human life, or that they are the only foundations capable of providing a life worth living. But if so, then why are so many political theorists reluctant to risk a self-reflexive, reckoning with their own epistemological and ontological foundations?

Responding to Risk

As Cacciari shows, risk entails discomfort and disquiet, but he argues that critiques declare themselves to be not worth repeating when they continually produce the same aporia over and over again. To him, this suggests that they are doing more damage to society than any critical, self-reflexive foundational critique could possibly bring about. In his view, to embrace this risk is not to embrace despair, because—to paraphrase Sartre—material existence precedes semiotic essence: neither the world nor the mind will disappear if foundations are challenged; new foundations will be transformed and people will cope with the transformation. In contrast to the ‘known’ there is only the ‘unknown’, which like a ‘foreigner’ is knowable, and, once known, is no longer foreign.

As long as political theorists assume the primacy of abstract intellectual logic and reason over real world social interaction in human activities, their theories will remain ‘weightless’ because they resist engaging with material *and* reflexive political or scholarly practice. As Chantal Mouffe suggests, this weightlessness prevents the theories of agonists like Honig, William Connolly, or James Tully from being of relevance to anyone engaged in political praxis. This irrelevance is unfortunate, because these agonists offer acute and insightful socio-political *critique*, but because they do not engage with reflexive, material-semiotic praxis, the narrowness of their *foundations*

produces socially weightless *conclusions*. This dilemma touches not only agonists, but also affects work which challenges political theories relying on deontological homogeneity.

Cacciari, by contrast, begins his analysis from the point of view provided by different foundations—archipelago foundations—which are irreducibly plural from the outset. These are foundations that have been expanded beyond the limits of individual cognition to take into consideration the body, other bodies, the material world, the structures we create, artefacts and so on; the things that shape the contexts in which our political actions work themselves out. Rather than substituting material factors for individual cognition, Cacciari (and his antecedents) realise that not only does semiotic cognition not take place in a vacuum, but that it is not uniquely responsible for specific behaviours. This realisation has led them to conclude that, in addition to the semiotic, many more factors—living and non-living—need to be taken into consideration in order to adequately confront the relationships between the material and the semiotic.

Beginning with archipelago foundations, Cacciari argues that to search for a monistic point of origin is to begin once again the cycle of aporia such a monistic foundation for subsequent deontological evaluation is meant to overcome. This is the case, he argues, because it infinitely defers any need to decide between alternative praxes; or as he puts it, to *de-side*⁴⁵—to stop doing things one way in order to begin doing alternative, different things—to begin alternative praxes of coping without any monistic or deontological security. And, as I will demonstrate throughout this thesis, social and physical science have shown repeatedly that the existential foundations upon which this dichotomy and the aporias it nourishes rely are inadequate for anything more than a narrowly ideological and essentialist description of reality. Similar arguments have been made against monistic reductionism of one kind or another in many other disciplines.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Cacciari frequently reminds readers that a ‘decision’ is the act of de-cision—to ‘tear away’ or ‘cede’ from something [*de-cedere*] in favour of something else. ‘To decide’, therefore, is to renounce one’s affiliation with one thing in order to affiliate instead with something else; to ‘de-side’ from one group in order to ‘side with’ another.

⁴⁶ E.g. Bruno Latour: *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), *inter alia*.

In political theory, I will argue that the best abutment can be found in Chantal Mouffe's agonistics. In the next section, I will therefore look at Mouffe's work, arguing that she comes closest to Cacciari's disenchanted, material-semiotic position regarding political praxis—a proximity of which she herself is aware.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, this foundational juxtaposition of Mouffe's work with Cacciari draws critical attention to the fundamental incongruity between their work: that whereas Cacciari engages with reflexive, *material*-semiotic praxis, Mouffe remains psychosemiotically⁴⁸ oriented.

Mouffe, Cacciari and Political Theory

Cacciari's work illuminates wider disciplinary discussions of agonistic democracy, particularly Mouffe's discussion of *agonistic pluralism* (or *agonistics*, as she has recently restyled it). First, I argue that the Italian Hegelian and Gramscian foundations of Cacciari's work draw attention to the understated and overlooked Gramscian aspects of her work. These are aspects which, when brought to the fore, force a re-evaluation and resituation of Mouffe's work. As I argue in Chapter Three, Gramsci's concepts of hegemony, historical blocs, and wars of position—concepts central to agonistics—are routinely missed, or are misrecognised, marginalised, or dismissed by many of Mouffe's critics. This is not to suggest that agonistics is not beyond criticism; however, I argue that it cannot be criticised accurately without an adequate understanding of its Gramscian character, particularly regarding the role played by hegemony and hegemonic *praxis*. In Gramsci, hegemony is a process of negotiation in which those-who-would-dominate a community must negotiate the terms according to which they will dominate with the members of that community. Hegemony is therefore reflexive, dialogic, and participatory rather than purely cognitive or purely corporeal: to

⁴⁷ Cf. Chantal Mouffe: *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London: Verso, 2013); pp. 52-53.

⁴⁸ Whereas 'psychosomatic' refers to the relationship between mind and body within the boundaries of a closed, monolithic system (the mind of an individual subject and the body that houses it) 'psychosemiotic' expands the margins of influence on individual minds and bodies to include external influences. [Cf. e.g.: Howard A. Smith: 'Psychosemiotics and its Peircean Foundations' [<http://www.digitalpeirce.fee.unicamp.br/PsychosemioticsandPeirce.pdf>]; 'Peircean Theory, Psychosemiotics, and Education', *Educational Philosophy and Theory* (37/2, 2005); pp. 191–206; Birgit Nordtug: 'Subjectivity as an Unlimited Semiosis: Lacan and Peirce', *Studies in Philosophy and Education* (23/2-3, 2004); pp. 87-102; Umberto Eco: *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), particularly chapter two, 'Unlimited Semiosis: 'Pragmaticism' vs. Pragmatism', pp. 23-44].

dominate, the would-be dominators must enlist the cooperative praxis of community members *as active participants in their own domination*. That is, the dominated have to agree to material-semiotic conditions under which they will not challenge their domination. The terms of this agreement are established in exchange for certain concessions from their dominators (freedom to do *x*, punishment for *y*, protection from *z*, and so on). As a whole, Cacciari's 'disenchanted engagement' provides a more 'socially weighty' way of engaging with the agonistic aspects of political practice than is available in the rather rarefied paradigms that currently abound.

Second, central to Mouffe's agonistics is the way her analysis expands beyond the traditional philosophical focus on rational calculation to include emotions as well as reason in accounting for political action. Once human rational action is decentred in this way, she argues, human consciousness becomes reflexive: that is, it becomes aware of its own situatedness in a network of other factors, both within the human organism itself (i.e., reason and emotion/sentimentality) and outside itself (i.e., other individuals or institutions). If emotion and reason are always in play in political struggles, which of the two will win out is not given in advance. This means that *psychosemiotic* political actors can begin to negotiate modest changes in people's behaviour, for the time being, as they initiate a broader, ongoing political process, in order to work out together a developing version of their desired outcomes. As a consequence, Mouffe insists that any political regime is always a hegemonic achievement. She thus understands hegemony as always the *consequence of negotiation*, whether with oneself, with others, or with institutions. And the reflexive awareness of political actors equips them to negotiate their conflicting emotional and rational commitments in terms of *praxis*.

I argue that Mouffe's project intersects with Cacciari's most significantly in their shared, Gramscian understanding of hegemonic discourses and how to challenge them. Both agree that hegemony is based on a foundational, praxis-oriented epistemology which refuses master narratives promising utopian outcomes. 'Wittgenstein', she says, 'has taught us [that] signification is always

dependent on context, and it is use which determines meaning',⁴⁹ a statement with which Cacciari would surely agree. As a result, they share an epistemological outlook which recognises antagonism as irreducible. This means that all political orders are hegemonic, and therefore vulnerable to counterhegemonic challenge. *How* one challenges a particular hegemonic order, however, is something Mouffe does not address directly. Indeed, McNay has argued that Mouffe—like other radical democratic thinkers—'fails to think through how [the] ontological political dynamics [she theorises] are played out in the social realm and, in particular, in asymmetrical relations of power'.⁵⁰ Cacciari, however, has been challenging discursive and material hegemonic orders within those very conditions since the late 1960s. Like Gramsci, he has challenged hegemonic orders by means of material praxis rather than by means of reason alone. Yet whereas Mouffe continues to rely on an abstract theory of 'the political', Cacciari's philosophising and theorising is based on historical political *praxis* (including his own) rather than historical political theory alone. At the same time, the path Mouffe hews makes significant use of Gramscian tools, though perhaps she has not signalled this fact clearly or often enough to her readers.⁵¹

Though Mouffe's Gramscian foundations make it possible for her to recognise the foundational shortcomings of mainstream political theory in ways distinct from her colleagues, her *agonistics* does not have much to say about what follows from this recognition. To be sure, Mouffe adds emotion to reason, and discusses the emergence of new psychosemiotic political identities in terms of (Gramscian) material, hegemonic praxis, but Mouffe's work remains thinking about thinking.⁵² Therefore the tools Cacciari's work provides make it possible to fill in some of the gaps in Mouffe's work by providing examples and evidence from his own work of what 'agonistics' looks

⁴⁹ Op. cit. *Agonistics*, p. 101.

⁵⁰ Op. cit. McNay, p. 12. In addition to Mouffe, McNay's critique addresses the work of Wendy Brown, Linda Zerilli, Jacques Rancière, William E. Connolly, and James Tully.

⁵¹ In fairness to Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, they do state at the beginning of their 1985 book, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, that Gramsci is of 'capital importance' to their understanding of hegemony, and explain that importance throughout. [*Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London: Verso, 1985); p. 4. Especially pp. 65-71, 'The Gramscian Watershed'].

⁵² Indeed, the title of her most recent book is *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically*. (London: Verso, 2013). Emphasis added.

like in practice. This, in turn, makes it possible to stabilise *agonistics* as the abutment for the bridge from the semiotic to the material-semiotic.

Chapter Layout

CHAPTER ONE focuses on Cacciari's intellectual and political *Bildung* within Italian radical politics of the 1960s. After summarising the emergence of the *operaista* (*workerist*) movement in response to Italian industrialisation and its critique of capitalist foundational epistemology, it discusses Cacciari's involvement with the 'heretical communist' scholars Mario Tronti and Antonio Negri and his involvement within their radical group, *Potere Operaio* (*Workers Power*). It then discusses Cacciari's decision to break with the increasingly extremist group in 1968, and his foundation of the journal *Contropiano* (*Counterplan*), which became a focal point for a less extreme and highly influential wing of *operaista* thought. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the architectural historian Manfredo Tafuri, one of Cacciari's most important influences, interlocutors, and collaborators.

CHAPTER TWO begins with a discussion of Cacciari's early work on *negative thought*, a pluralistic critique of dualistic idealism, which exposes the centrality of material praxis within human interaction, revealing the possibility of alternative material *praxes* obscured by primarily semiotic bourgeois discourse. To describe 'negative thought,' and to properly situate it as a foundational element in Cacciari's own work, I will focus first on Cacciari's discussion of how Hegel's philosophy (and its critical development by Nietzsche, Marx, and others) both paved the way for the emergence of 'negative thought,' and also demonstrated its immediate importance to material political praxis. Next, I present Cacciari's radical reconception of the 'negative,' based on Hegel's analysis of the emergence of bourgeois capitalism and its material consequences. I then analyse three aspects of Hegelian philosophy on which Cacciari draws to develop his own understanding of negative thought.

CHAPTER THREE explains how Cacciari's work continues the longstanding relationship between radical Italian philosophers and German negative philosophy, and how this relationship was epitomised by the Marxist Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci, I argue, contributes to the discussion of material-semiotic political praxis, as a crucial foundational element in Cacciari's work as well as in Mouffe's 'agonistics'. As a common ancestor to both Cacciari and Mouffe, Gramsci's work is therefore a vital tool for the material-semiotic renovation of socially weightless, predominantly semiotic existential foundations. I will also argue that Mouffe's recent neglect of the Gramscian influence in her own work has hindered its interpretation by her readers, sympathetic and critical alike.

CHAPTER FOUR In this chapter, I explore Cacciari's understanding of the term *praxis*, situating his discussion within the history of philosophical 'disenchantment' inspired by Hegelian negative thought. In particular, I show how Cacciari uses the concepts of *poiēsis* (Ancient Greek, [ποίησις]: 'bringing forth', 'bringing to light'; 'creation') and *fare* (Italian: 'to make', 'to do') to develop his understanding of praxis, thereby demonstrating why disenchantment need not lead inevitably to apathy, despair, or annihilation. Finally, referring to Cacciari's discussion of Tocqueville's *Homo democraticus* I will explain how, by dismantling abstract theories that lack empirical, evidentiary support, Cacciari's disenchanted methodology *begins* the process of assembling alternative material-semiotic political praxis on different, disenchanted, materially persuasive ('evidence based') foundations.

CHAPTER FIVE In this chapter, I introduce what I have termed Cacciari's 'geophilosophy of the archipelago', that is, his understanding of the reflexive, material-semiotic relationships between the one and the many in an irreducibly plural, hegemonically negotiated world. Cacciari's geophilosophy is based on 'disenchanted' foundations. It provides a reflexive tool for building bridges across irreducible plurality rather than authorising dialectic liberation at any cost. I illustrate this with Cacciari's response to the Negri-led *Autonomia Operaia* call for recognising armed parties as legitimate political actors. I then turn to Cacciari's discussion of the

emergence and development of the bourgeois, industrial 'Metropolitan City', arguing that his disenchanted, archipelago-based understanding of the Metropolis provides a 'socially weighty' approach for engaging with urban life as the reflexive, material-semiotic praxis. Finally, I offer a small case study regarding the construction of a new bridge in Venice between 1999 and 2008, which also provides an example of how Cacciari's geophilosophy influenced his political practice as mayor of an archipelago.

CHAPTER SIX demonstrates the consistent reciprocity linking Cacciari's philosophy to his political praxis. I use an emblematic case study which illustrates Cacciari's disenchanted, differently foundational engagement with what is perhaps the preeminent concern for all contemporary Venetian mayors: 'saving' Venice. This examines Cacciari's disenchanted engagement with the question of protecting Venice and its cultural patrimony from global warming and tourism, and involves the controversial MOSE mobile flood barriers on the one hand, and material conservation on the other. The chapter's epilogue, written after the revelation in the summer of 2014 of extensive institutional and political corruption regarding the MOSE project, provides persuasive material vindication of Cacciari's political praxis as mayor of Venice, providing support for the disenchanted philosophical foundations upon which that praxis was built as well.

The CONCLUSION makes the case that Cacciari's reflexive, disenchanted, and material-semiotic work provides Anglophone political theorists with an example of how to overcome the social weightlessness produced by the discipline's primarily semiotic foundations. I argue that Cacciari's commitment to irreducibly plural archipelago foundations provides an attractive alternative, because it demystifies the enchanted intellectual commitments upon which this disciplinary isolationism has been justified.

CHAPTER ONE

THE LESSONS OF OPERAISMO

This chapter outlines the significant early influences on both Cacciari's philosophical thought and his political activism by focussing on what he learnt as a young intellectual and political activist within the *operaismo* ('workerism') movement of the 1960s. I will first review *operaismo* ('workerism'), paying particular attention to how the young Cacciari was influenced by the material, *praxis*-based political theory of *operaista* scholars Mario Tronti and Antonio Negri, by their reorganisation of participatory, democratic working class political institutions, and by their militant activities in Venice.

Next, I will discuss Cacciari's decision in 1968 to leave *Potere Operaio* without abandoning the overall *operaista* movement, and to found (with the literary critic Alberto Asor Rosa) the journal *Contropiano: Materiali Marxist* ('Counterplan: Marxist Materials'). I will then describe the centrality of this journal to the coalescence of a 'radically moderate' stream of *operaista* thought. More interested in practical 'refoundation' than ideological revolution, members of the *Contropiano* 'circle' reflected critically on the lessons of the labour struggles in Porto Marghera, exploring ways in which a *counterplan* could be assembled that would more effectively challenge crisis-prone, profit-driven 'plans' of postwar Italian capitalism. One important product of this critical reflection was the work of the architectural historian Manfredo Tafuri, whom Cacciari met in 1968 and invited to join *Contropiano*. I argue that Tafuri's influence and collaboration were indispensable in the development of Cacciari's critical and disenchanted methodological praxis. I will highlight three areas in which Tafuri's influence is clearest: Cacciari's interdisciplinary intellectual orientation; his understanding of the methodological project of material criticism (the 'project of crisis') within political praxis; and his emphasis on the relationship between politics and aesthetics, particularly in terms of urban planning and the built environment.

The Marxist Heretics

The ‘heretical Marxist’ scholars who most directly influenced Cacciari laid the intellectual groundwork for *operaismo* in three ways. First, they questioned the foundational universalism—whether Kantian precognitive *apriorism*, Hegelian postcognitive *aposteriorism*, or Marxist dialectical teleology—of post-Enlightenment epistemology, developing alternative foundations for political action. Second, these alternative foundations enabled new forms of political practice, the most important of which was the ‘archipelagic’ *general assembly*, a body which brought political actors together based on overlapping interests, rather than according to any formal ‘partisan’ structure in order to negotiate dialogic agreements on courses of political action. Finally, reflections on the success of these practices led them to develop new methodological praxes, such as the *project of crisis*, for confronting political questions. These new methodologies offered fresh approaches to the challenges posed by Italian capitalism.

Following World War II and throughout the 1950s, thinkers, scholars, and political activists like Raniero Panzieri and Mario Tronti—the radical founders of the ‘heretical Marxist’⁵³ *operaista* (‘workerist’) movement—concluded that political theorising as a deontological⁵⁴ exercise—that is, of ratifying one’s duty in accord with universal moral truths—was inadequate for grappling with the political and material challenges they were experiencing in postwar Italy. Instead, Panzieri, Tronti, and their followers like Antonio Negri, felt obliged to reformulate an understanding of material existence and experience which they could use as a fresh beginning for further reflexive, critical analysis and action. They were not after a ‘realist’ (in the wider sense of the term) ideology as such; they were ‘radical radicals’, claiming an alternative ground on which to

⁵³ Like Gramsci, Lukács, and Benjamin, *operaisti* were frequently considered heretical Marxists because they felt that they had to revolutionise Marxism and its discourse in order to accurately criticise contemporary capitalism. [Cf. Tronti: ‘Italy’ in Musto, ed: *Karl Marx’s Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy 150 Years Later* (Oxford: Routledge, 2008); p. 232. Also, Nicholas Thoburn: *Deleuze, Marx, and Politics* (London, Routledge, 2003);p. 73.]

⁵⁴ ‘The word deontology derives from the Greek words for duty (*deon*) and science (or study) of (*logos*). In contemporary moral philosophy, deontology is one of those kinds of normative theories regarding which choices are morally required, forbidden, or permitted’. [<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-deontological/>]

refound⁵⁵ not just ideology, but also discourse and material political practice in order to ‘do’ politics differently.

The theoretical and practical cases *operaista* thinkers made for these alternative grounds have been well documented, and they were crucial for the development of Cacciari’s own political and philosophical orientation. It is important to keep in mind, however, that, the history of *operaismo* as told today focuses almost entirely on the Negri-led *Autonomia operaia* (*Workers’ Autonomy*) movement of the mid-1970s. Razmig Keucheyan, for example, states that ‘[t]he emergence of *operaismo* must be conceived in relation to the “leaden years”, which is to say the revolts by Italian students and workers in the 1970s and their repression by the State, particularly during the “hot autumn” of 1969.’⁵⁶ This is incorrect. As noted above, *operaismo* began to emerge in the late 1940s as a critical response to postwar industrial capitalism in Italy. It was not until two decades later that the *Autonomia Operaia* movement developed in reaction to the ‘hot autumn’ and became active during the ‘leaden years’ (*anni di piombo*).

While Negri’s relationship with *operaismo*⁵⁷ is an important one, to proceed as if his is the only history of *operaismo* neglects the intellectual and practical diversity within the *operaista* movement before the violent upheaval of the 1970s.⁵⁸ Neglecting these details leaves the impression that autonomist Marxism and the *Autonomia Operaia* movement were one and the same. In the early years, however, there was no unifying ideology to which all *operaisti* subscribed. True, they may have shared a foundational *critique* of capitalist society, and may have agreed that

⁵⁵ The word and concept of *rifondazione* (‘refoundation’) appears frequently in the discourse of this era, often representing calls for a disenchanted overhaul of *foundational* theory and praxis rather than subtle practical modifications within the limits of existing foundational structures.

⁵⁶ Razmig Keucheyan: *Hémisphère gauche: Cartographie des nouvelles pensées critiques* (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 2010); no page number (section: *L’opéraïsme*) [online: http://www.editions-zones.fr/spip.php?page=lyberplayer&id_article=108#tit21]. This book was recently published in English as *The Left Hemisphere: Mapping Critical Theory Today* (London: Verso, 2013).

⁵⁷ Which began in the late 1950s rather than the late 60s. Cf. Hans Ulrich Obrist (trans. Gat): In Conversation with Antonio Negri, *e-flux* (18: 2010). [<http://www.e-flux.com/journal/in-conversation-with-antonio-negri/>]

⁵⁸ As I will discuss below, the journal *Contropiano: Materiali Marxist* (*Counterplan: Marxist Materials*) was founded to explore this very diversity. Further, *Potere Operaio* alone had many ‘sub’-groups across Italy whose militancy and strategy involved local circumstances. A contributing factor to the movements’ ultimate dissolution involved an attempt to ‘homogenise’ their ideologies and strategies. Cf. Steve Wright: *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism* (London: Pluto Press, 2002); Chapter 6, particularly his summary of the group’s dissolution on p. 151.

workers had to assert their own autonomy in order to overthrow capitalist relations of production, but there was no consensus on how this was to be done. Indeed, a central understanding of *operaismo* was that the immediate material conditions experienced by particular workers determined the character of their struggle, which meant that an accurate analysis of each particular situation would lead to different conclusions about which tactics were most appropriate in different cases.⁵⁹ This made it impossible to synthesise their demands in aggregate: they were equivalently, albeit differently, legitimate.

Lack of consensus was also true at a philosophical level: some, like Negri, wanted to homogenise *operaista* thought and practice, while others like Cacciari, resisted such homogenisation. As a consequence, although *autonomisti* were *operaisti*, not all *operaisti* were *autonomisti*. The significance of this detail has been overlooked in published discussions of Cacciari, who left *Potere Operaio* in 1968 without abandoning *operaista* philosophy. I will therefore emphasise the fact that he (and others) left, not because they had given up on *operaismo*, but because of their concerns that other, more extreme members of the movement had transformed (and limited) the discussion of what *operaismo* might or should achieve. Indeed, as the 1970s progressed, Cacciari became a strong critic of *Autonomia*, on *operaista* grounds.⁶⁰ It is important, therefore, to focus on ‘early’ alternative *operaista* thinkers such as the architectural historian Manfredo Tafuri, whose work heavily influenced Cacciari’s philosophical and political orientation. As I will show, close attention must be paid to a nearly decade-long period during which Cacciari’s *foundational* outlook—the epistemological and ontological grounds from which his subsequent

⁵⁹ For example, autoworkers at FIAT in Turin and petrochemical workers in Venice might share a general critique of working conditions and the overall relations of production in Italy (or the world). Nevertheless, their specific, material experiences in very different industries led to differing—sometimes contradictory—conclusions about how to improve their situation, because the specific demands by autoworkers in relation to the details of their industry would differ from those demands specific to the experience of petrochemical workers and their industry. [op. cit. Wright, p. 110].

⁶⁰ As Alessandro Carrera has noted, ‘Suffice it to say that Cacciari’s writings of the 1970s could hardly be appreciated without knowing that at times that they must be understood as answers to Negri’s most provocative statements’. (op. cit. *The Unpolitical*, p. 8). For a direct critique by Cacciari in English, see Massimo Cacciari: ‘Sorry, It’s Exactly the Opposite’ in Lotringer and Marazzi (eds) *Autonomia: Post-Political Politics* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007); pp. 244-245. As I will argue later, Cacciari’s later political activity as mayor can be considered foundationally *operaista*, albeit expanded beyond the working class.

theory and his practice emerge—were *refounded* along alternative *operaista* lines, due to the influence of Tafuri, who developed the aforementioned ‘project of crisis’.⁶¹

Finally, published accounts of Cacciari’s history⁶² say little, if anything, about his decision to leave *Potere Operaio* in 1968. I will argue that this decision was, in many ways, more significant than his decision to join the Italian Communist Party (*Partito Comunista Italiano*; PCI) in 1976. This is because Cacciari’s decision to break with the group was, as mentioned above, not motivated just by ideological differences, but was based on a rejection of the philosophical and practical *justifications* for the ideologies on offer. At the same time, the move made by Cacciari and his allies is not a rejection of all foundations; based on the postwar Italian experience, Cacciari may be described as having moved sideways from traditional foundations, in order to seek out and establish alternative foundations from which to better observe and criticise bourgeois ontology.

Around 1960,⁶³ while still in secondary school, the industrial unrest in northern Italy motivated Cacciari to become involved in the workers’ struggle. He travelled to the nearby University of Padua and became involved in the radical political circles in which the Neomarxist philosopher Antonio Negri was a leader. It was Negri who introduced him in the early 1960s to the ‘fundamental books’⁶⁴ of Kant and Hegel;⁶⁵ of Cacciari, Negri stated that ‘[i]t was incredible to see a kid struggling with Walter Benjamin when the intellectuals of the era had no idea who he was’.⁶⁶ Benjamin’s work on the relationship of aesthetics, philosophy, and power had a definitive effect on Cacciari’s intellectual development. After leaving school he matriculated at the University of Padua where, rather than studying politics or political philosophy, he studied Greek literature and philosophy, and aesthetics and the history of art. In 1964, he co-founded the journal *Angelus*

⁶¹ Cacciari’s influence on Tafuri, however, has been well documented in the work (on architecture) of Pier Vittorio Aureli, Marco Biraghi, Gail Day, and Andrew Leach, among others.

⁶² Because Cacciari is a prominent public figure, many versions of his biography can be found on the internet. Scholarly sources include Biraghi; Carrera; Day; Leach; Lombardo; Wright, and so on.

⁶³ I have not found an accurate date for his first involvement. Some sources suggest 1959, others 1960 or ‘61.

⁶⁴ interview with Barbara Romano, *Liberio*, reposted online 5 May 2009 at [<http://www.dagospia.com/rubrica-3/politica/i-panni-sporchi-si-lavano-in-casa-ma-il-cav-sul-piano-del-gusto-5767.htm>]

⁶⁵ Gail Day: *Dialectical Passions: Negation in Postwar Art Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); p. 110.

⁶⁶ op. cit. *Cinquantamila Giorni*

Novus, dedicated to 'Benjaminian' aesthetics and criticism, with which he was involved until 1968. He graduated in 1967, having written his thesis on the problem of aesthetics in Kant's *Critique of Judgement*. Upon graduation he stayed at the University of Padua, working as an assistant to Dino Formaggio, an eminent philosopher of art and aesthetics.

In the late 1960s, northern Italy had become an epicentre of tensions between organised labour and factory owners (whether in private firms or in state-owned institutions). Although protests and strikes had occurred intermittently since the end of the war, it was in the summer of 1968 that working class militancy exploded, inspired by the *événements* in France of a few months earlier. Across the lagoon from Venice, petrochemical workers in Porto Marghera took to the streets, protesting both the dangerous, toxic working conditions inside the factories, and the expensive, inconvenient living conditions outside them. At the heart of this agitation was *Potere Operaio* ('Workers' Power'; *PO*), a loose federation of radical, Neomarxist groups organised around Italy between 1963 and 1967, primarily by the philosophers Antonio Negri and Mario Tronti, and the literary critic Alberto Asor Rosa. Cacciari was a founding member of *Potere Operaio*, so it is important to understand the role *PO* played in his political and theoretical development without overlooking the circumstances in which he left the group, disenchanted, in 1968.⁶⁷

Potere Operaio was part of the larger *operaista* ('workerist') response to postwar capitalism in Italy. In the late 1940s, philosopher and Socialist activist Raniero Panzieri became dissatisfied with forms of political analysis which limited political struggles to the realm of ideology alone. Panzieri and his allies sought to focus attention on struggles waged by workers who engaged with the material practices and structures of governmental and industrial institutions. In 1961, Panzieri and Tronti founded the journal *Quaderni rossi* ('Red Notebooks') dedicated to rereading and reapplying Marx within the context of postwar Italian capitalism and post-1956 Soviet politics. Cacciari, who had become involved with *Quaderni rossi* in Padua, followed Tronti and Asor Rosa

⁶⁷ It is important to reiterate that Cacciari left before the emergence of the more extreme *Autonomia* movement (with which Negri was closely associated) and the violence of the *strategia della tensione* ('Strategy of Tension') and the *anni di piombo* ('Leadern Years').

in 1963, when they left *Quaderni rossi* to found *Classe operaia* ('Working Class'), a new journal.

Whereas *Quaderni rossi* had made a case for *operaista theory*, *Classe operaia* was intended put forward strategies for *operaista practice*. As Tronti reflected recently, *operaismo* ('workerism')

...reworked Marx's brilliant phrase—the proletariat attaining its own emancipation will free all humanity—to read: the working class, by following *its own partial interests*, creates a general crisis in the relations of capital. *Operaismo* marked a way of thinking politically. Thought and history encountered each other in a direct, immediate, and frontal clash. *What is had to be exposed to analysis, reflection, criticism, and judgement. What had been said and written on it came later.*⁶⁸

Tronti provided the intellectual basis for *PO* by transforming the nineteenth-century discourse of Marxism to suit the material conditions of twentieth-century postwar Italy. By articulating the 'autonomy of the political'⁶⁹ Tronti highlighted the differences separating the political representatives of the working class (i.e., unions, political parties) from the workers themselves. In his view, unions and political parties had become bureaucratic organisations which operated *between* the workers and management (and the government) rather than *amongst* and *for* the workers themselves.⁷⁰ According to Tronti, these bureaucratic institutions did not respond to the particular needs of particular workers in particular factories, but instead pursued *political* agreements achievable within the limits of capitalist social structures, all the while safeguarding their own position as the powerful (and indispensable) intermediaries between labour and capital.⁷¹ Tronti therefore concluded that unions and political parties had, over time, become *complicit* with capital's interest in maintaining the stability of capitalist hegemonic structures and practices, thereby affirming and reinforcing the exploitation of the workers rather than struggling towards their emancipation.

⁶⁸ Mario Tronti: 'Memories of Operaismo', *New Left Review* (73, 2012), p. 120. Emphasis added.

⁶⁹ Tronti introduced this concept and the idea of reading Marx in terms of the material, postwar working class subject in *Operai e Capitale (Workers and Capital)* (Torino: Einaudi Editore 1966/Roma: DeriveApprodi, 2013).

⁷⁰ Because so many factories were nationally owned, the boundaries between unions, political parties, and governments (local, regional, and national) were blurry at best.

⁷¹ These notions derive from Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony, which I will discuss in Chapter Three.

This foundational complicity was what *PO* sought to eliminate. Tronti concluded that the only place that workers had any *practical* control over their labour—free of any complicity with capital—was in the factories in which they worked. This, in turn led to Tronti's inversion of the orthodox Marxist narrative that labour had been subsumed under capital: to him, the experience of capitalism in postwar Italy demonstrated explicitly that *capital was actually subsumed under labour*:

Workers' struggles determine the course of capitalist development; but capitalist development will use those struggles for its own ends if no organised revolutionary process opens up, capable of changing that balance of forces.⁷²

To Tronti, it was not just because workers were the ones operating the machines in the factories that they constituted the determining factor in capitalist production. More significantly, it was because workers so outnumbered capitalists *in material terms* that it was they who determined the course of capitalism. Postwar Italian capitalism could not be seen as an instance of a universal Capitalism whose ontological foundations was the same in all places at all times. On the contrary, exposing the consequences of the role played of bureaucratic institutions like unions and political parties showed that postwar Italian capitalism was *a historically contingent, oligarchic praxis*.⁷³

It was inaccurate, therefore, for Marxists to envision the world as a universal 'industrial society'; 'the truth of modern society', Tronti claimed, 'is that it is the civilisation of labour'.⁷⁴ For Tronti, that is, to civilise is to capitalise: to create and produce more value more efficiently at greater rates. Modern capitalism had therefore domesticated society—or convinced society to domesticate *itself*—to its ends, rather than the inverse. People had been transformed from 'free' citizens into its wholly dependent workers (no matter what their occupation), and societies into capitalism's productive apparatus. Rather than any 'equilibrium' between the forces of capital and

⁷² Op. cit. 'Memories of Operaismo', p. 128.

⁷³ This is not to suggest that *operaista* philosophy was entirely indigenous to Italy. It is, however, important to emphasise that Tronti's concerns were more immediately and materially focused on the plight of Italian workers within Italian capitalism, juxtaposing the Italian reality against wider communist/anti-capitalist (and, indeed, capitalist) discourses and material realities.

⁷⁴ Mario Tronti: *Operai e Capitale (Workers and Capital)* (Torino: Einaudi Editore 1966/Roma: DeriveApprodi, 2013); p. 238.

those of labour, Tronti argued that even workers' political parties and unions had come to see themselves in foundationally capitalist terms.⁷⁵

As I will discuss in more detail below, this meant that the 'workers' vanguard' had *also* become complicit with capital. As a result of this imbalance, Tronti argued that any agreement between workers and capital that continued capitalist domination was an act of reflexive class-marginalisation: no matter how much such a concession *appeared* to help workers, it only really helped fortify the foundational hierarchies of capitalism by making the workers easier to exploit. Indeed, by demanding reforms within the existing power structures (the relationships as they then were between workers, unions, parties, factory owners, and the government), workers were itemising for capital the *very least* they would accept in return for their labour. What they should have been doing, Tronti felt, was demanding what they would need to live a life not totally dominated by labour, whether inside or outside the factory. Accepting anything less, he argued, was just the workers *instructing* capital on *how* to exploit them more efficiently.

To avoid such an outcome, Tronti argued that workers, as a class, should 'refuse' rather than simply 'suspend' labour.⁷⁶ That is, traditional strikes and work stoppages in Italy (and presumably in other capitalist societies) were generally *suspensions* of work until a particular conflict—an uncomfortable *crisis*—had been resolved. Rather than jeopardising the foundational security of the firm in question with ruinous *catastrophe*, they merely cost the firm money until the conflict was resolved. This kind of strike was a way for workers to assert power and gain concessions, but it left the overall structure of class and power relations untouched. Workers went back to work, and the capitalists they had been challenging remained in control. For Tronti, this arrangement had to end. It was no secret that workers had leverage against capital; to him, this leverage should be used to refuse the entire system of work as it then operated in Italian factories. If workers outnumbered capitalists, it was the latter that should have to entice the former into a cooperative collaboration. The workers could look after themselves.

⁷⁵ Cf. Tronti: 'Il partito come problema', *Contropiano* (2/68), pp. 297-313.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

Industrialising Italy

Making sense of Tronti's analysis requires background knowledge of the particular structure of capitalist production in postwar Italy. Because Italy did not begin to industrialise until the end of the nineteenth century—'modern' industrialisation did not begin in the Veneto until after World War I—it was decades behind the rest of the industrialised world. Although Italy experienced a postwar 'economic miracle' similar to those of France and West Germany, its character was distinct. As the Italian economist Andrea Boltho summarises:

While both France and Italy suffered occupation and destruction during the war, their immediate postwar responses differed. Both countries, of course, targeted economic reconstruction, but while France put the emphasis on the need for "modernization", Italy aimed at "industrialization", a choice of words that well reflected the two economies' levels of development. More importantly, France, from the very beginning, stressed the leading role of the state in this process through, in particular, a massive program of nationalizations and the launching of its first indicative plan (1947-52). Italy, in contrast, left a much greater degree of initiative to its industry, whose prewar organization (into major private and public groups) was barely touched by postwar reforms.⁷⁷

It is for these reasons that the question of cooperation and collaboration between labour and capital—of hegemonic parity between capital and labour—was of crucial importance in Italy. Even if the (counter-)hegemonic power of the workers had been equal to that of the capitalists, the question of material working conditions was still a pressing one. The imbalance of power was so great at the time that, in addition to the 'standard' subservience of workers to the caprice of profit and the whims of the boss—hard work, long hours, and low wages—workers were also subject to whatever the bosses thought was necessary for Italian capitalism to catch up with the rest of the capitalist world as quickly and as cheaply as possible. This added a distinctive material element to the Italian workers' struggle. Whereas other industrial countries had the resources to modernise their factories, the state of Italian factories after World War II more closely resembled the

⁷⁷ Andrea Boltho: 'Economic Policy in France and Italy since the War: Different Stances, Different Outcomes?' *Journal of Economic Issues* (35:3, 2001); p. 713.

American factories of the 1930s than those of their European contemporaries; indeed much of the equipment used in Italian factories was second-hand, prewar vintage equipment sold off by American factories when they upgraded to new and better equipment. Thus, in addition to the 'standard' complaints listed above, Italian workers were working with antiquated equipment in dangerous conditions with little or no protection, material or institutional.

Tronti felt, therefore, that workers should refuse to undertake any productive activity until they were able to work fewer hours, for more money, in conditions that did not destroy their health or lead to debilitating injury. Nothing at all should be done, he argued, until 'labour' had been redefined and reorganised in a way that broke definitively, *and foundationally*, with *both* the theory and practice of 'labour' within Italian capitalism *as well as* the orthodox—and from Tronti's point of view, anachronistic—Marxist (and Soviet) discourses of proletarian organisation and action. It was not that Tronti wanted to begin labour relations anew, *tabula rasa*; instead, he wanted to refound these concepts *tabula italiae*—within the material realities of 1960s Italy.

In Tronti's philosophy, refusing labour was as epistemological as it was material: rather than the defining and determining feature of the entirety of a worker's life, labour should become a job or an occupation *within* the wider scope of a worker's life. He developed *PO* to help the workers assert, organise, and impose their autonomy on Italian capitalist society.⁷⁸ Based on Tronti's local analysis of the structure of postwar Italian capitalism, *PO* argued that if workers were to use this autonomous leverage to achieve any local gains (let alone seizing control of the means of production), they would have to organise themselves autonomously and act politically, based on their needs as identified *within* the specific, material, Italian conditions in which they worked and lived. Tronti essentially opened an indefinite parenthesis within Marxist teleology: although the workers' overall goal remained eventual, universal revolution, the revolution could not be scheduled to take place in a certain place at a certain time. Tronti therefore focussed attention on what the

⁷⁸ That there is an obvious contradiction between 'autonomy' and 'organisation' did not escape Tronti and others in *Potere Operaio*. Ultimately, however, disagreements on how this contradiction could be managed contributed to the group's dissolution.

workers could do *within* the particular, parenthetical Italian meantime he had identified between the present day and the revolution.

Given this state of affairs, Tronti's first conclusion was that workers could not wait for their representatives to negotiate improvements of general working conditions across Italy—especially if what they negotiated was complicit with the hegemonic capitalist order. Instead, particular workers needed to refuse all labour until factory owners met their specific demands for material improvements to the particular factories in which they worked. Tronti's 'refusal of labour' (*rifiuto del lavoro*) sought to transform the relationship between workers and their representative intermediaries: in his view, it was the *workers* that should instruct the unions and the political parties rather than vice versa. Indeed, as Cristina Corradi explains, '[a]ccording to Tronti... the refusal of labour is an immediate expression of workers' autonomy, the political strategy pre-exists in the spontaneous behaviour of the workers and the task of the party is to "detect it, express it, and organise it"'.⁷⁹

Second, Tronti argued that it was morally, ethically, and materially unacceptable (and repugnant) for workers to suffer injustice and injury (or death) while an external vanguard might or might not be preparing the ground for their eventual emancipation and liberation. Of course, the workers' demonstration of power would contribute to hastening and determining the eventual character of revolution. *In the meantime*, however, *PO* argued that the working class needed to take its fate into its own hands. It had to circumvent the bureaucratic complicity of unions and political parties 'in search of a political organisation not of advanced vanguards, but of the whole, compact social mass that the working class has become'⁸⁰ in order to affect fundamental change. If nobody (or no institution) could be trusted to act in the interests of the working class, the working class

⁷⁹ Cristina Corradi: 'Neomarxismo, pensiero operaio, insubordinazione sociale: tre distinti paradigmi dell'operaismo italiano' (Neomarxism, Workerist Thought, Social Insubordination: Three Distinct Paradigms of Italian Operaismo) in P.P. Poggio (ed.), *L'altronovecento. Comunismo eretico e pensiero critico*, vol. II, *Il sistema e i movimenti-europa 1945-1989*, (Milano: Fondazione L. Micheletti-Jaca Book, 2011); pp. 223-247.

⁸⁰ Mario Tronti: 'Lenin in Inghilterra' (Lenin in England), *Classe operaia* (1, 1964). (It was also republished in *Operai e capitale* in 1966).

would have to act on its own behalf.⁸¹ In 1963, Negri and other intellectuals (including Cacciari) made contact with the workers in Marghera in order to forge common cause between workers and intellectuals,⁸² with the aim of fostering the kind of autonomous organisation Tronti had described. That same year, architecture students had been rising up and occupying buildings in Milan, Turin, Florence, and Rome, protesting what they considered to be the antiquated character of their courses of study and the laxity of the Italian education system.⁸³ By making common cause with workers against the capitalist state, the students and intellectuals hoped to gain insight into working class *praxis* while helping the workers better articulate their needs and demands.⁸⁴

It was as a result of such meetings that *PO* intellectuals learnt of the specific material conditions in Marghera with which workers had to contend,⁸⁵ and came to ‘...identif[y] the factory as a trigger of fatal diseases and as a destroyer of life’.⁸⁶ Following Tronti’s philosophical outline, this meant that two major moves were required. First, it meant *throwing into crisis* both the specific set of capitalist relations responsible for toxic or otherwise dangerous work environments inside

⁸¹ As Negri put it at the time, ‘the working class is increasingly closed and compact internally, and searches within itself to articulate its ever greater unity in organisation ... *today the whole working class in struggle is the vanguard*’. [Negri (1964), cited in op. cit. Wright, p. 77. Some emphasis added].

⁸² In the early days these were mainly academics. As the movement grew, however, more and more students would become involved.

⁸³ Aldo Castellano: The Milanese Architectural Culture and the Restructuring of the Faculty of Architecture in the 1950s and ’60s. (*Annali di Storia delle Università italiane* (12:2007) (Bologna: Centro Interuniversitario per la Storia delle Università Italiane).

[http://www.cisui.unibo.it/annali/12/testi/16Castellano_summary.htm] (I have cited the English-language abstract. The article itself is in Italian).

⁸⁴ According to regional historian and archivist Dolores Negrello,

Some remember Toni Negri and others, frequently leaving Padova in blue coveralls for the factories of Marghera and one of its many wild strikes or, as [Negri’s] wife [told journalist Giorgio Bocca], for “contact with the workers [...] they had evening meetings with Cacciari [...] they would read a chapter of Marx’s *Capital* and the workers would translate it for their real problems.

Similarly, Italo Sbrogiò a worker and activist leader in Marghera remembered that:

At these meetings we learned to do politics by participating in the debates, everyone at the same level. From the PCI (*Partito Comunista Italiano*; Italian Communist Party) and its centralised politics we were used to obeying orders and this kind of politics which brought us into a vanguard role was new for us.

[Dolores Negrello: *A pugno chiuso: il Partito comunista padovano dal biennio rosso alla stagione dei movimenti* [‘With Closed Fists: The Paduan Communist Party from the Red Biennium to the Season of Protests’] (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2000); p. 160 / Manuela Pellarin, director: *Porto Marghera: Gli ultimi fuochi* (*The Last Firebrands*) (60 minutes. Italy, 2004). Material accompanying film, p. 34.

[libcom.org/files/firebrands_booklet_2_horizontal.pdf].

⁸⁵ For an account of what life was like in the factories, see Gildea, Mark, and Warring (eds.): *Europe’s 1968: Voices of Revolt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); pp. 21-23.

⁸⁶ *ibid.*, p. 3.

the Marghera factories *and* the expensive, inconvenient infrastructure in the communities around the factories where the workers lived. Second, it meant *organising outside those structures*⁸⁷ in order to throw the entire system in crisis, because the workers felt that the unions and political parties were apathetic to their daily struggles.⁸⁸

Because the Italian economy was booming, *PO* and the other activist groups felt that work stoppages and blockades of the entire Marghera industrial zone would put so much profit and capital at risk that, fearing catastrophe, factory owners, unions, and the government would have no choice but to negotiate.⁸⁹ Additionally, the *Partito socialista italiano* (*Italian Socialist Party; PSI*), as a member of the governing coalition from 1963 with the centre-right *Democrazia Cristiana* (*Christian Democracy; DC*) party, had supported (and in some cases instigated⁹⁰) the economic structures and material conditions under protest. If the governing socialists were in fact complicit with capitalist exploitation of Italian workers, then there was clearly no choice but for workers—radical *and* otherwise—to assert their autonomy by joining the strikers outside the standard union/party structure. To enhance this autonomy effectively, *PO* encouraged all workers in Marghera to attend the general assemblies—wherever they worked, whatever their trade, whatever colour their collar—to support their fellow workers in their struggles. The development of a network of mutually supportive actors would ‘massify’ the struggle by depersonalising its

⁸⁷ This organisation was not a smooth, uncontested process. Though I do not have the space to address the details here, neither the parties nor the unions took kindly to groups of radical upstarts interfering with their organisations. As a result, *PO* members were expelled from the *CGIL* union. There were fights and campaigns of intimidation, isolation, and marginalisation led by loyal party and/or union members (sometimes in collusion with factory owners) against those who sided with the *operaisti*, both inside and outside the factories. Police were frequently called in to break up picket lines and occupations. The *operaisti*, in return, attempted to intimidate (physically and otherwise) those who would remain loyal to the union or party. This included marches in the factories themselves disrupting the day’s work, sabotage, destruction of property, and threats of increased violence. Cf. op. cit. Pellarin; *Porto Marghera/Montedison Estate ’68*.

⁸⁸ ‘Strikes kicked off against health damage, tough ones as well. The workers surpassed the absent union, which was contented with the mere fact that now every worker had a health pass. Not only *Potere Operaio*, but also *Lotta Continua* (‘Continuous Struggle’) and other groups acted against the apathy of the union, and against the apathy of the left-wing parties. The institutions were nearly absent’. [Op. cit. Pellarin, p. 40].

⁸⁹ The *operaisti* also broke with precedent by threatening to forbid skeleton crews from remaining in the factories—as they were contractually obliged to do during any strike—to ensure that machinery which could be neither shut down nor left unmonitored continued to operate safely. This threatened not only the machinery itself, but the local environment: were the machines to stop working properly, huge quantities of toxic chemicals would be released into the air and water. [Cf. op. cit. Pellarin; Wright, p. 113].

⁹⁰ See the discussion of educational reform below.

character.⁹¹ It would refound what had been a bourgeois struggle among individual workers in individual trades in individual factories, transforming it into a common struggle, shared by the entire working class. As Tronti explained, the 'massification of the working class' was '... a process of growing the class of workers and of the internal homogenisation of industrial labour power'.⁹² But this growth could not be a purely intellectual one: in addition to thinking of oneself as a part of the larger working class, there needed to be something material 'worth fighting for'.⁹³ This unifying cause became an *operaista* demand for a flat, 5000 Lire bonus (about €40 today) for all workers as opposed to the bonus schedule stipulated in the union-negotiated contract, which amounted to less than 1000 Lire. Support for *PO* surged as a result of this demand and the struggle became more massified, and as time passed began to include more and more members of the student movement. Further, in addition to the question of the production bonus, workers made larger alliances outside their factories, and began supporting one another's struggles regardless of their own place of employment.

Based on this burgeoning support, twelve different strikes were organised by *PO* in Marghera between 21 June and 2 August 1968. The denouement of these strikes was the occupation of Mestre train station and the total isolation of the Marghera industrial zone behind burning barricades on 1 August by 10,000 *PO* affiliated or allied factory workers.⁹⁴ Put concisely, the sheer size of the movements and the tenacity of the protestors was enough to force union and party leaders as well as factory owners and government officials to support and introduce more stringent workplace health and safety standards. Among other things, all petrochemical workers in Porto Marghera were to wear gas masks,⁹⁵ and higher wage rates were imposed on factory owners and operators by the government.

⁹¹ The Italian verb *massificare* (literally, 'to massify') also translates as 'depersonalise'.

⁹² Mario Tronti: 'Poscritto di Problemi', *Operai e Capitale*, 2e (Torino, 1971); pp.267-311.

⁹³ Op. cit. *Porto Marghera/Montedison Estate '68*, p. 16.

⁹⁴ Potere Operaio di Porto Marghera: *Porto Marghera/Montedison Estate '68* (Firenze: Centro G. Francovitch, 1968); pp. 9-10. Because this is *Potere Operaio's* own account of these events, a critical scepticism of the numbers claimed is not unwarranted.

⁹⁵ Op. cit. Pellarin, p. 41.

For some in *Potere Operaio*, these gains demonstrated that the groundwork was being laid for an autonomous revolution. More extreme members of *PO* like Negri had begun to argue that all workers everywhere had to resist all attempts at formal organisation and representation in favour of total revolution based on *ad hoc* self-organisation and self-management. By contrast, Tronti and Cacciari felt that, though productive, the strikes' achievements did not constitute the beginning of total revolution. This divergence was soon made material when Tronti, Cacciari, and Asor Rosa left *PO* and parted intellectual company with Negri. For example, by the end of 1968, Cacciari wrote that he found it more appropriate to focus attention on achieving contingent goals politically within Italy, from inside the class conflict. This meant reflecting philosophically and politically within events as they unfolded rather than pretending that political theorising and analysis could be somehow detached from political action. As he explained,

The "political" is born *inside* the material conditions of the conflict. Organisation can only be achieved in homogenous terms: that is, as resolvable problems only *within* the conflict between capital and labour, inside the fundamental contradiction, and thus, as mass organisation.⁹⁶

In contrast to Negri's revolutionary enthusiasm, Cacciari wrote in early 1969 that the workers were still in the revolutionary 'waiting room':⁹⁷ use still needed to be made of intermediary institutions, because there was not yet a class-wide revolutionary party. As Cacciari had learnt in the factories, workers were not upset with the fact that unions existed, but with the *ways in which* they were organised and were operating. What mattered, therefore, was *how* these intermediary institutions negotiated, an insight that would become central to his developing analysis of what I term his 'material-semiotic' political praxis. *Potere Operaio's* report on the strikes in Marghera of 1968, attributed to Cacciari, states that a particular problem with the (then) current union organisation was its aversion to any tactics beyond the limits of the political *status quo*. In practice, this meant, for example, that the unions would not allow their members to engage in any activity that would break their contracts. To the *operaisti* this was an immediate surrender to ownership

⁹⁶ Massimo Cacciari and Giannina Longobardi: Teoria e organizzazione in Francia dopo il Maggio (*Theory and Organisation in France after May '68*), *Contropiano* (2/69); pp.454-455.

⁹⁷ Cf. 'Sviluppo capitalistico e ciclo della lotte. La Montecatini-Edison di Porto Marghera' [*Capitalistic Development and The Cycle of the Struggle...*], *Contropiano* (3:1968 [1969]); pp. 579-629.

and capitalist hegemony because it prevented workers from putting the system into crisis, catalysing a direct confrontation between the workers, factory owners, and the government. This meant that the unions—and all working class political organisation—had to be radically *refounded*:

Operaia organisation, which arose in the confrontation with the unions and with the bosses, has proved insufficient against the political mediation of *riformismo*. But, Comrades, now that we are aware of it...our objective must be precise and firm: *the reconstruction of political organisation at the class level!*⁹⁸

Refoundation was necessary, in their view, because bourgeois thinking about foundations—which confines foundations to ideology alone—is too narrow to provide a basis for confronting the material political challenges they found in postwar Italy. Relying on ideology alone to chaperone them through confrontations with capital seemed utterly inadequate. It risked leaving them helpless and impotent, trapped in a paradoxical aporia: they needed to offer a practical alternative to idealism, but found that the philosophical apparatus of idealism made articulating foundations alternative to its own a material impossibility.

To cope with this paradox, Cacciari and his allies moved ‘sideways’ from ideology, in order to search for non-binary alternatives in the realm of material praxis. Indeed, the outcome of the strikes in Marghera persuaded Tronti and Cacciari that the practical leverage massified workers could bring to bear against factory owners had destabilised negotiations with unions and political parties, successfully persuading factory owners, union leaders, and the government to yield to worker demands. On this evidence, Tronti and Cacciari considered that the *operaisti* were in a position to begin developing the tools they felt this search required, but which they had theretofore been missing.

In contrast to Negri, Tronti and Cacciari felt that it was preferable to negotiate alternative practices from the bottom up through newly remodelled and refounded political channels—beginning with the general assembly—rather than demanding the wholesale overthrow of Italian capitalism. Until that moment occurred, *if workers’ goals were materially contingent (healthy*

⁹⁸ Op. cit. *Porto Marghera/Montedison Estate '68*, pp. 12-13.

work environments; living wages) rather than ideologically universal (dictatorship of the proletariat), they saw no reason that progressive, practical, outcomes could not be achieved in the meantime for all involved.

As Steve Wright notes, 'Cacciari's greatest venom was reserved for those who saw workers' management of production as the gateway to some idyll of democracy practised to its ultimate degree'.⁹⁹ In Cacciari's view, the workers' management of production was a contextual process of ongoing negotiation *within local political and material realities* rather than a world-historical transformation opening the door to revolutionary utopia. In his view, putting a prophetic spin on the workers' autonomous management of production only served to isolate the workers (and the achievements of the strikes) from the material webs and networks of alliances and praxes that had made it possible for the workers to claim and assert their autonomy in the first place. Instead of contributing to the workers' struggle, therefore, Cacciari concluded that Negri's utopian promises about the workers' management of production actually served to

... [disarm] the class: in place of the formidable instruments which it has discovered and strengthened *against* the capitalist production relation, it offers a model of 'liberation' which is objectively reactionary even in terms of the capitalist production relation itself....¹⁰⁰

By 1967, Tronti and others felt that Negri was getting too extreme—too certain of the revolution and too ready to use violence to hasten its arrival—and they left *Potere Operaio*. In 1968, following the *événements* in France and the strikes in Marghera, Cacciari also left *PO*.¹⁰¹ Having left *PO*, Tronti, Cacciari, and others like Asor Rosa joined (or ended their estrangement from) the Italian Communist Party (*PCI*), reasoning that with their influence, the party *could* function successfully as a practical intermediary between Italian labour and capital within larger, global capitalist structures. They did not have an exact blueprint for how the party or the unions should be reorganised. However, the fact that *Potere Operaio* had been able to force the *CGIL*¹⁰² to

⁹⁹ Op. cit. Wright, p. 114.

¹⁰⁰ Cacciari, cited in *ibid.*, p. 152.

¹⁰¹ Op. cit. Romano.

¹⁰² The *Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro* (Italian General Confederation of Labour) is the *PCI*-affiliated union which represented the petrochemical workers.

appropriate PO demands regarding both the health and safety rules victory¹⁰³ and a flat 1000 Lire production bonus for all workers¹⁰⁴ (rather than a bonus based upon a worker's particular job)¹⁰⁵ appeared to them to be conclusive evidence of the utility of general assemblies. Therefore, Tronti, Cacciari, and their allies thought that the institutional *praxis* of political parties and unions might be *refounded* from within the party itself.¹⁰⁶ That is, rather than annihilating unions and political parties, they wanted to find ways to incorporate them within the autonomous infrastructure of the working class prefigured by the general assemblies. Thus refounded, the party and the union might function successfully as political manifestations of the working class itself. As Tronti explained, their project was, *contra* Negri,¹⁰⁷ to *transform* rather than overthrow, annihilate, or replace wholesale the institutions of Italian democratic political organisation. Indeed, he argued that

...full use of the entirety of traditional democratic terrain should be made, and that it is the possibility of such use that will be dictated, first and foremost, to our adversary. *Organisation without institutionalisation* means autonomy and freedom of movement under [our] own power and not with the gracious permission of the constitution; it means *imposing the organised presence of an alternative political power on formal grounds without the system making it into a stabilizing element of its self-regulating mechanisms...*¹⁰⁸

Their conclusions were thus deliberately based on practical evidence of successful innovative political engagement, *not* on abstract logic or ideology. As Tronti would write in 1971, '[a]n ideology is always bourgeois—the very concept has been instrumentalised by bourgeois hegemony'.¹⁰⁹ Anyone challenging bourgeois hegemony must therefore engage in 'ruthless criticism of all that exists', whether of foundational existential assumptions or business-as-usual forms of

¹⁰³ Cf. op. cit. Wright, p. 110. Reacting to PO's early organisational success, the CGIL attempted to create 'factory councils' in order to bring workers into direct contact with each other and with management, but were considered by the workers to be cynical, opportunistic attempts to regain lost power and influence. Cf. Wright, p. 128; Sbrogiò in op. cit. Pellarin, p. 39.

¹⁰⁴ Rather than the 5000 Lire demanded. Op. cit. Pellarin, p. 35.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 113.

¹⁰⁶ PCI Secretaries Palmiro Togliatti (1927-1964), Luigi Longo (1964-1972), and Enrico Berlinguer (1972-84) all took moderate, contextual approaches to Communism, arguing that Italy would follow its own 'road to socialism'. Longo was therefore willing to engage with radical groups like *Potere Operaio* when they emerged in 1968.

¹⁰⁷ Tronti argued specifically that 'we do not wish to give credence to the illusions of the citizen guerrilla in the capitalist metropolis, or worse, to the romanticism of the semi-clandestine apparatus that forever occurs in the face of police repression'—precisely what Negri and his allies in *Autonomia Operaia* would soon attempt.

¹⁰⁸ Mario Tronti: 'Il partito come problema', *Contropiano* (2: 1968); p.305.

¹⁰⁹ I will explore Cacciari's discussion of this notion in depth in Chapter Two.

political mediation.¹¹⁰ For example, this required investigating how unions and political parties actually worked in practical, material terms, in order understand how they might be effectively changed. This ‘ruthless critique’ also demanded taking a reflexive measure of the complexity of the events that were unfolding around them and their responses to these events and their complexity. Negri felt that these events confirmed the beginning of an Italian revolution; his colleagues were not convinced. They argued that, as a response to the pre-existing political system, the importance of these events was the possibility they were revealing for beginning a refoundation of Italian political relations.

In their view, refounding the terms of political engagement was as a *work-in-progress*. It would take time and effort, and its precise outcome and degree of success could not be predicted. Political activism as a *work-in-progress* would now involve struggling to bring to the negotiating table not only workers and students and parties and unions, but all other individuals and groups and institutions with a stake in progressively working out improved industrial relations and working conditions. As I will show throughout the rest of the thesis, this is a ‘general assembly’ orientation toward political action that Cacciari has developed and employed throughout his career.

By the late 1960s, Tronti, Cacciari, and Asor Rosa were increasingly persuaded that the complex material evidence gained from the *operaista* experience demonstrated that class conflict as experienced in Italy (and Western Europe) was producing crises and contradictions precisely because attempts at unilateral synthesis (capitalist and otherwise) were failing. The only responsible way to proceed, they felt, was to use this evidence as a *beginning for more*—and more detailed—research and experimentation.¹¹¹ Finding this research increasingly blocked within *PO*, they founded the journal *Contropiano*, as a laboratory for ‘operaia science’ in which they could study the consequences of capitalist praxis and develop ways to bring ‘the multiplicity of anticapitalist and revolutionary forces (direct class forces, above all), which today are

¹¹⁰ Tronti, cited in Wright, p. 29.

¹¹¹ An exploration I will discuss in detail in Chapter Two.

dispersed...together and [direct them] towards a future *bloc* on common foundations... *For these reasons*, we refuse, we consciously refuse to impede our discourse around a sole hypothesis.¹¹²

They were careful to note that although this future *bloc* could not escape being influenced by those that preceded it, its outcome could not be predicted. Nevertheless, they argued that change was inevitable—that whatever shape this future *bloc* took, it ‘...probably will not be able to coincide with any of the organisms which exist today as they are’.¹¹³ The *Contropiano* project was, thus, an open-ended work-in-progress—an ‘attempt to contribute a sense of direction and reconsideration to those who had been pushed into the process of material movement by the class struggle’¹¹⁴—rather than a catalyst for a revolution whose outcome they had already determined.

Contropiano

In 1968, just before Cacciari left *PO*, the first edition of *Contropiano* was published. Whereas *Quaderni rossi* and *Classe operaia*, for example, had been concerned almost entirely with factory workers and their economic and political struggles, *Contropiano* sought to widen the scope of *operaista* thinking to include discussions of aesthetics and culture, publishing articles on art, literature, cinema, culture, architecture and the urban environment. Such an orientation, the editors felt, would allow *operaisti* to more effectively counter the heterogeneous and complex ensemble of capitalist institutions.

The journal’s name, *Contropiano*, was a deliberate play on words: In Italian, *Contro* translates easily as ‘counter’. *Piano*, on the other hand, has several meanings, including ‘plan’ and ‘plane’, and is used in geometrical, architectural (or design) and metaphysical senses. Instead of promoting wholesale revolution on any particular grounds, Cacciari and Asor Rosa were instead offering critical counterplans for particular ‘counterplanes’ of material existence that were foundationally *different* to those of postwar capitalism and orthodox, pre-industrial Marxism. Put differently, it is not that they were arguing for a ‘reform’ of capitalism along more equitable lines (as

¹¹² Cacciari, et al: ‘Primo Bilancio’ (*First Assessment*), *Contropiano* 2 (1968), p. 237.

¹¹³ *Idem*.

¹¹⁴ *Idem*.

the *riformismo* of the PSI attempted); they were instead arguing for a *refoundation*—on ‘non-*riformista* reforms’, to paraphrase André Gorz¹¹⁵—of capitalist praxis in Italy.

It is important to note that although he was a member of the journal’s original editorial board, Negri left before the second issue was published. As discussed above, his departure reflected the increasing disagreement between himself and the other editors about the significance of the uprisings and the workers’ achievements up to 1968. More specifically, the point of contention was an article by Tronti¹¹⁶ which examined the role of the political party within the terms of pre-existing political praxis. Tronti asserted that the party should be guided by its members, as formal manifestation of their wishes, rather than their guide.

Rather than lifelong organisations to which people become emotionally and ideologically attached, parties should function as nimble, plastic intermediaries representing workers’ actual political praxis—as manifested in general assemblies, for example—to match the demands of real, contextual circumstances rather than abstract ideology, dogma, or a set of deontological rules. They should be contingent, temporary organisations in the general assembly mould based on immediate material concerns. As described above, Tronti reasoned that ‘the working class, by following its own partial interests, creates a general crisis in the relations of capital’; it was therefore the working class that constituted ‘the new political class of the modern world’.¹¹⁷ It was the workers who controlled the direction of political outcomes. Therefore, if the workers’ political party did not embody this reality—that is, if it was not led by the workers themselves—it was complicit with relations of production and therefore was nothing more than an instrument of capitalism.

Negri did not want to publish Tronti’s article, feeling that they should drop the question of reforming or refounding the relationship between workers, party, capital, and government; their focus, in his view, needed to be on realising the revolution. The rest of the board, however, did

¹¹⁵ Cf. e.g., André Gorz on ‘non-reformist reform’: *Strategy for Labor: A Radical Proposal* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967); p. 33.

¹¹⁶ Op. cit. Tronti, *Il partito come problema*, pp. 297-317.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 315.

want it published. Negri therefore resigned from the board, and the article was duly published in the second issue. Shortly thereafter, Cacciari left *Potere Operaio* and became part of the growing number of 'Trontiist' *operaista* militants joining, rejoining, or reaffirming their alliance with the *PCI*, in an effort to affect the party's organisation and direction from within.

The Architects of Resistance

Cacciari's teenage participation in meetings of radical intellectuals and industrial workers is an example of how *operaismo* brought students and workers together as allies. There was not a new alliance, however: by the early 1960s, students and workers had already made common cause on several occasions. As intellectuals like Tronti and Negri became increasingly involved in industrial relations and organisation, student groups making common cause with the workers and the *operaisti* also began to emerge—most notably *Movimento Studentesco* (*Student Movement*). These groups shared an understanding that students and workers were exploited analogously within capitalism; indeed, they argued that postwar, industrial capitalism had so altered the material circumstances of life in Italy that all Italians had been instrumentalised in the service of capitalist profit. As *PO* put it, 'the working class had much to teach the students'.¹¹⁸ Education, they felt, had been recast as the production and development of future workers, meaning that students had become 'workerised': they were now understood as being just so much more labour-power. Analogous to the *operaista* view that workers had been alienated from and betrayed by the institutions which had traditionally advocated on their behalf was the understanding that, as Wright explains,

The student was already a proletarian by virtue of a subordinate location within the university division of labour. To the extent that existing stipends became a fully-fledged wage, she would be transformed from an "impure social figure on the margins of the valorisation process" into a fully-fledged "wage worker producing surplus value".¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Op. cit. *Porto Marghera/Montedison Estate '68*, p. 31.

¹¹⁹ Op. cit. Wright, p. 95. As I will describe in more detail below, students and workers had already made common cause during anti-fascist and workers' rights protests.

There were several reasons for this sense of betrayal. The emergent middle class had, for example, demanded and received educational reforms in the early 1960s which made education compulsory until the age of fourteen and removed some barriers for entry into university.

However, no symmetrical measures had been taken to help the educational system respond to the influx of new students it was about to receive. As a result, the educational infrastructure—both material and academic—was unable to fulfil the opportunities promised by the governments’ reforms.¹²⁰

These circumstances provided students a ground for empathy without irony for their allies in the factories. For the students, their struggle against instrumentalisation was identical to that of the workers, if only in different circumstances: ‘Professors should not be our bosses, but should participate in seminars and in research on a plane of parity’.¹²¹ Many students began to feel that, contrary to the government’s promises, higher education did not improve a student’s chances of class mobility and a better quality of life, just as workers came to feel that the jobs created by postwar Italian capitalism did not lead necessarily to more money and a better quality of life. Students came to feel that the pursuit of education led only to a more deeply entrenched dependency on the capitalist system of development.

One university had, however, been a notable exception to this definition for many years. In Venice, the *Istituto Universitario di Architettura* (Venetian University Institute of Architecture; IUAV)¹²² had been an active centre of resistance to such subordination since the late 1950s, and quickly became a nerve centre for the student movement in the early sixties.¹²³ By the time the

¹²⁰ In addition to lacking material resources like classrooms and books, the lack of professional teachers meant that experts without pedagogical training were recruited to teach the subjects of their expertise. Moreover, the ratio of students to teachers was so disproportionate that face-to-face instruction—whether in small groups or on a one-to-one basis—was impossible. Finally, the costs were so high that many students were forced to work while they studied, making it that much harder for them to attend classes and find time to study.

¹²¹ Cited in Cesco Chinello: ‘Il sessantotto operaio e studentesco a Porto Marghera’ (‘The Workers’ and Students’ ’68 in Porto Marghera’), *Centro Studi Ettore Luccini, Annale* (2: 1988); p. 197.

¹²² Readers may find it more commodious to read ‘IUAV’ as an Italian would, pronouncing the cumbersome acronym as if it were a word: ‘YOO-av’. In fact, in 2001 the university was actually renamed the *Università Iuav di Venezia*.

¹²³ Op. cit. Day, pp. 114-115; IUAV: *Breve storia dell’Università IUAV di Venezia*: [<http://www.iuav.it/Ateneo1/chi-siamo/Presentazi/la-storia/index.htm>].

larger student/*operaista* movement began to emerge in the early 1960s, therefore, discussions on university reform and refoundation had become commonplace at the IUAV.¹²⁴ In April of 1967, the IUAV was occupied once again. As with the *operaista* refusal of labour, the students were striking in response to what they considered minor ‘modifications’ to the existing university system of study. Like the workers’ refusal of labour, the students refused to study until ‘studying’ had been redefined and a definitive, foundational reorganisation of the universities had launched.¹²⁵

This strike was not, however, a demonstration of defiance for its own sake: it sought and developed alternative models of institutional organisation and praxis. As Day notes it was during this strike that the students ‘...adopted the general assembly, a form of self-government that rejected representational structures, which became the model for industrial militants’.¹²⁶ As we saw earlier, rather than maintaining systems of political organisation which divided workers or students into smaller groups based on job, trade, political (including union) affiliation or course of study—possibly without regard for whether or not the individual wished to be so organised—the purpose of the general assembly was to bring together *as a massified class* all those workers and all those students who wanted to participate in their own political organisation.¹²⁷

¹²⁴ Giuseppe Galassi: ‘L’Università e i suoi squilibri nella Storia dell’Italia Unita’ (‘The University and its Imbalances in the History of United Italy’), in D’Agostino, ed.: *Università e Territorio: Squilibri e strategie di superamento* (‘University and Purview: Imbalances and Strategies for Overcoming Them’) (Napoli: Guida editori, 1988); p. 31.

¹²⁵ Op. cit., Chinello, p. 188. The citation is from *Note per una occupazione permanente*, Venezia, 27 aprile-2 maggio 1967, cicl. in ACC, p.1.

¹²⁶ Op. cit. Day, p. 115.

¹²⁷ The pun is unavoidable, yet illustrative: the idea that students should, in addition to identifying themselves as part of the working class, see themselves as a *class* (as in, ‘the class of 1968’) rather than in narrower terms of subject was part of the argument; that the struggle of particular students is the struggle of all students.

[Guido Viale: ‘Contro l’università (‘Against the University’)’ *Quaderni piacentini* (33: 1968). Cited in Ginsborg (2003), p. 301].



Cacciari (holding the sign), the composer Luigi Nono, and the just cited Cesco Chinello (then a local councillor and *PCI* deputy) leading a march at the *Biennale* protest in 1968. The sign paraphrases the infamous aphorism found at the entrance to several Nazi concentration camps: *Polizei macht Frei* (*The Police Free You*). Instead of SS, the helmets have the initials 'PS' inscribed on them for *Partito Socialista* (*Socialist Party*).

[Source: Archivio Cesco Chinello IVESEER at www.albumdivenezia.it]

A *PO* flier from 3 July 1968 (following the occupation of the *IUAV* by students and workers)

stated that workers should

STRIKE TO IMMEDIATELY CONVENE AN ASSEMBLY where the behaviour of the unions will be discussed before all the workers, where the decision on the manner of our struggle's continuation will be decided by us based on the objectives that we desire. STRIKE for organising for ourselves amongst ourselves, for deciding together.¹²⁸

Organising a general assembly thus involved taking action to bring together a contingent collection of heterogeneous actors for the purpose of debating issues of mutual concern and then taking decisions on them, without any certainty of what the outcome would be. In *Contropiano*, Cacciari wrote that the general assembly was the place in which workers (in aggregate, *as workers* rather than as just electricians or machinists, for example) were attempting to reconstruct—and thus appropriate for themselves—the political control exercised by the unions. It is

a formidable place of encounter/confrontation of theses, requests, of workers' leanings, a formidable place for collection and catalysis of existing potentiality at the level of class—a

¹²⁸ Flyer cited in *op. cit.* *Porto Marghera/Montedison Estate '68*, p. 28.

moment in which class recognises itself as such, “reunderstands” its decisive force, its autonomy, its political perspective—and *from here* starts again.¹²⁹

The general assembly thus has features that liken it to what the historian of science Peter Galison refers to as a ‘trading zone’, in which

[t]wo [or more] cultures, distinct but living near enough to trade...can share some activities while diverging on many others. In particular, the[se] cultures may bring to...the *trading zone* objects that carry radically different significance for the donor and recipient. What is crucial is that in the highly local context of the trading zone, *despite* the differences in classification, significance, and standards of demonstration, the two groups can collaborate. They can come to a consensus about the procedure of exchange, about the mechanisms to determine when the goods are “equal” to one another. They can even both understand that the continuation of exchange is a prerequisite to the survival the larger culture of which they are a part.¹³⁰

Despite their differences, those who participated in the general assembly at the IUAV produced during the strike a ‘list of immediate demands’ based on this new self-recognition in which they articulated their newly discovered (or ‘reunderstood’) their political potentiality; they also used the assembly as a practical mechanism for bringing old (status quo) practices to an end, freeing up space in which to seek out new, non-binary foundations for the organisation and *beginning* of new, alternative praxis.¹³¹ Following Tronti’s example, Cacciari considers intermediary organisations like parties and unions to be heterogeneous assemblies of irreducibly plural people brought together by matters of mutual concern. As such, these organisations are built upon foundations of immediate material necessity, and are therefore an extension of the autonomous movement that founds them. That is, they emerge out of negotiations from within a non-compartmentalised general assembly in response to common material experiences (of students *qua* students) rather than by small groups (machinists *qua* machinists or architecture students *qua* architecture students) pursuing their own exclusive interests. They are also intended to participate within institutional democratic structures,

¹²⁹ Massimo Cacciari: ‘Sviluppo capitalistico e ciclo delle lotte. La Montedison di Porto Marghera. 2: La “fase” 1966-estate 1969’, *Contropiano* (2:1969); p. 425.

¹³⁰ Peter Galison: ‘Trading Zone’ in Biagoli ed. *The Science Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 146.

¹³¹ Incidentally, the general assembly is still used by students today. It was used, for example, at the IUAV in October 2013, during a protest about the university’s organisation. [‘Caos allo Iuav, assemblea generale degli studenti’, *La Nuova di Venezia e Mestre* (9 ottobre 2013)].

contending with a variety of other societal 'stakeholders' (parties, institutions, and so forth). As Tronti had urged, 'full use of the entirety of traditional democratic terrain should be made, and ... it is the possibility of such use that will be dictated, first and foremost, to our adversary'.¹³² As time passes and circumstances change, all must struggle together toward desired political outcomes.

Indeed, another important facet of the student movement was the *contestazione permanente* ('permanent protest') against anything that affirmed (or reaffirmed through modification) the current university structure. This, too, is a work-in-progress orientation towards struggle because, returning to Tronti's example of 'accepting organisation and refusing institutionalisation', students would participate in an open-ended, critically reflexive, material reorganisation of the university system all the while reserving the right to return to the (proverbial) barricades if they felt that institutional ossification had begun to set in. Put differently, from the students' perspective, changes in action would speak louder than changes in rhetoric: they were demanding the ongoing material verification that the negotiated changes had been made (i.e., proof of reorganisation like new syllabi, new faculty, student satisfaction, etc.) and that these changes were being carried in a timely fashion.

Students were also concerned with what they considered out-dated or irrelevant curricula, particularly within disciplines involving material praxis, like architecture, engineering, and urban planning. Because the application of what they learnt would affect many thousands of people who lived their lives in the environments they built, students in these subjects—especially those of a Marxist inclination—were desperate to learn how to avoid the planning failures that had led to the situation in which they found themselves in the late 1960s. They demanded tools capable of coping with the challenges to which they would be put. These planning failures had followed the plans of successive postwar Italian governments for the creation of new housing and new urban spaces, plans which had been grossly inadequate for the tens of thousands of people arriving to take new jobs in the newly industrial centres of the country. These failures were not blamed on the government alone: in addition to the political or ideological notions of 'planning' that had

¹³² Op. cit. 'Il partito come problema', p. 305.

contributed to this failure, many architecture and engineering students felt that architecture, as a profession, was also to blame. The 'professionalist' ideology within the discipline defined the work of architects as designing whatever their clients wanted, rather than what was needed by a particular community or society as a whole. In the activists' view, this ideology needed to be uprooted and architecture needed to be refounded outside capitalist instrumentalisation.

Although many architecture and engineering schools rejected or resisted such criticism, Day notes that, '...in Venice, the political critique of professionalist ideology in architecture chimed with the students' concerns'.¹³³ Indeed, this critique became central to the university's institutional character when the architect, historian, and critic Manfredo Tafuri arrived at the *IUAV* in 1968. Tafuri's arrival in Venice would be fateful for Cacciari's epistemological and methodological development, as the two would quickly become friends and collaborators.

Although his arrival coincided with Cacciari's decision to leave *PO*, the work they did together was still foundationally *operaista*. It was through interaction and collaboration with Tafuri that Cacciari encountered a model of how to develop an alternative methodological praxis suited to radical politics in postwar Italy. For this reason, I will use the remainder of this chapter to discuss those aspects of Tafuri's work that would be incorporated after 1968 into Cacciari's own alternatively founded political philosophy. In what follows, I will highlight—non-chronologically—three features of Tafuri's thinking that were particularly important in this regard: the perversion of architecture and urban life (intellectual *and* material) by capitalism; the need for a critical, reflexive methodological practice which throws old hypotheses into crisis; and, by extension, a rejection of utopian thinking and methodological orientation.

The first instance of Tafuri's influence on Cacciari has to do with Tafuri's argument that material politics—the politics of architecture and the urban environment—had been subsumed and instrumentalised by capitalism. Tafuri's complaint was not against architecture itself, but about what he considered the perversion of architecture by bourgeois praxis; specifically, he criticised his erstwhile allies on the Socialist Left who considered that progressive social ideology

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

could be realised materially via capitalist planning. His critique was therefore a foundationally self-reflexive one. It was, as he put it,

... a critique of the left. My own programme was to develop a critique of the ideological thought that has pervaded architectural history, art history, and history in general.... One should always address the critique of ideology towards his or her own ideology, not the ideology of his or her enemy. What needs to be de-ideologised is precisely the cultural context within which one fights.¹³⁴

As Andrew Leach noted, '[b]eginning from their model, questioning entire thought systems, [Tafuri] began a study on the construction of history, "how the history of a particular discipline could become... *histoire à part entière [a story in its own right]*".¹³⁵ Central to this study were the postwar Italian governments' plans to solve the housing problems of the 1950s, whose failure, Tafuri argued, demonstrated exactly where capitalist social and material—architectural and urban—planning had failed. What concerned Tafuri most was why the grandiose postwar plans for progressive social transformation had failed: why new suburbs like the *Quartiere Tiburtino* in Rome—specially designed as 'islands of realised utopia' within the turbulent socio-economic realities of postwar Italy—had failed to fulfil their promises of improving peoples' lives.¹³⁶ Rather than oases of pre-industrialised rural Italian life enabling workers to live as if they were still innocent, country-folk, these new developments were, in reality, expensive, isolated simulacra which contributed nothing towards the overall integration of the workers into Italian society.

Tafuri's conclusions were essentially threefold. First, the foundational ideology that supported these projects was far too abstract to be of any practical, material use. Second, the idea that peoples' happiness, satisfaction, sense of meaning, and so on could be commodified individually, 'planned' intellectually in aggregate, and then realised materially through architecture was a false utopia based on ideological dogma rather than material reality. Finally, he felt that the

¹³⁴ Manfredo Tafuri, cited in Pier Vittorio Aureli: 'Manfredo Tafuri: Archizoom, Superstudio, and the critique of architectural ideology' in (Deamer, ed.) *Architecture and Capitalism: 1845 to the Present* (Oxford: Routledge, 2014); p. 136.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

¹³⁶ As Day notes, 'Housing-reform took place in the context of rampant speculation... "rehousing" became a way to rehouse communities. Accommodation-costs went up; despite the construction of millions of new homes...the quantity of affordable housing declined. Speculation on land suitable for construction caused a tripling of building costs in the decade from 1953'. [Op. cit. Day (2012), p. 54.]

only boats raised by the 'rising tide' of economic growth were those of the developers, forcing displaced citizens to relocate in search of affordable living and jobs in industrial parts of the country, exacerbating the material inequities of Italian postwar industrialisation described earlier.

Tafuri therefore came to see Italian postwar architectural and urban 'plans' as utopian *political* manifestos rather than empirically sound *design* manifestos. As a result, the harder architects and governments tried to realise this utopia, the emptier their promises became, and the more intractable became the aporias they produced. The governments assumed that planned material intervention—building a *particular kind* of housing—would automatically affect peoples' day-to-day praxis in a particular way, thus altering their ideological perspectives in conformity with their new material reality, and thus, with the governments' plans. Building 'modern' houses would, in other words, produce 'modern' workers. As Day explains, it was Tafuri's view that this modern technocratic utopianism 'did little more than assuage the consciences of certain intellectuals, offering *them* (rather than those for whom they designed) a sense of meaning and connection, giving them impression of "roots in the peasant hearth" which ameliorated their own disorientation within, and alienation from, mass-society'.¹³⁷ In Chapter Five, we will see Cacciari level the same kind of challenge in his philosophical discussion of the city and the Metropolis.

The second of Tafuri's influences on Cacciari concerns the need for a critical, reflexive, methodological practice capable of throwing old ideologies into crisis. Tafuri felt that ideological distraction needed to be fought against; in the case of architecture, this meant that architecture needed to be studied and understood within the larger political currents of postwar reorganisation—the 'web of plans, institutions, and structural reforms'¹³⁸—if it was to improve the quality of life of anybody but the property developers. Inspired by the historiographical methodology of the *Annales* school in France, it became clear to Tafuri that *how* one engaged with this 'web' was as important as the engagement itself; the foundations of methodological practice would therefore also have to be challenged. He wanted to ensure that future architects studied the

¹³⁷ *op. cit.* Day, p. 56.

¹³⁸ Tafuri, cited in *ibid.* p. 57.

philosophical and historical relationships between epistemology, praxis, and capitalism in addition to their technical studies. He wanted his students to develop an active, reflexive and material *process* of thinking methodologically rather than a dogmatic, deontological reverence for one particular ideology or another. It was from this radically alternative foundation that Tafuri would establish himself, in the words of the architectural historian James Ackerman, as ‘...the most dynamic and innovative force in architectural history and theory of our times’.¹³⁹

In 1968, Tafuri founded the *Istituto di Storia dell’Architettura* (‘Architectural History Institute’) at the *IUAV* as a way to expand the study of architecture to include the ‘web of plans, institutions, and social reforms’ that both he and the students at the *IUAV* were demanding. He organised the institute on inter- and transdisciplinary foundations, in order to desegregate the discipline of architecture from its functionalist (or instrumentalist) isolation by situating it as an interlocutor among scholarly discourses outside the traditional intellectual scope of architecture. What made Tafuri ‘innovative’ was his refusal to foreclose upon the possibility of new discoveries, even from old materials.

Thus, the role of the critical historian for Tafuri is similar to that of a laboratory scientist who can materially test and retest old hypotheses in an attempt to test them or to reverse-engineer the original experiment. As Tafuri explained, ‘criticism, by pushing away the temptation to become an explanatory note, a literary translation, a disinterested analysis, or the depository of prophetic perspectives, takes on the role of litmus paper checking architecture’s historical validity’.¹⁴⁰ Like the critical scientist, the critical historian can only throw old hypotheses ‘into crisis’ by continually problematising them as time passes and circumstances change. The job of the critical historian is to make this ‘project of crisis’ his or her domain, observing and reporting from the ‘laboratory’ on the extent to which a particular hypothesis remains stable under rigorous challenge. Historiography is therefore an ongoing, reflexively interrogative *project of criticism* rather than summary of previously determined ‘facts’: ‘[the project is] an intermittent journey through a maze of tangled paths, one of

¹³⁹ James S Ackerman: ‘In Memoriam: Manfredo Tafuri, 1935-1994’, *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* (53: 1994); p. 137.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 236.

the many possible “provisional constructions” obtainable by starting with [particular] chosen materials’.

As I will discuss in the next chapter, Cacciari will incorporate and extend this ‘project of crisis’ within the domain of the political philosopher who is also a politician—indeed, the journal Cacciari co-founded and edited between 1981 and 1985 was called *Laboratorio politico* [‘Political Laboratory’]). Tafuri’s notion of ‘the project’ relied heavily on his collaboration with Cacciari, and vice versa:¹⁴¹ following Tafuri, Cacciari’s political praxis becomes a reflexive, evidence-based project involving intellectual problematising. The job of the political philosopher-politician is to treat old political assumptions as hypotheses that must be thrown into crisis by problematising them within contemporary circumstances. Once this is done, the political philosopher-politician must observe and report from the ‘political laboratory’ where these hypotheses have been tested what the outcome of this experimental test has been, and to treat the results as evidence. In Chapter Six, I will show how Cacciari made use of this material Tafurian ‘project of crisis’ within the general assembly-inspired trading zone he attempted to construct whilst mayor of Venice.

Tafuri’s refusal of utopian thinking is his third major influence on Cacciari. When he arrived in Venice, he became active in Cacciari’s *operaista* circles and became involved with *Contropiano* as a contributor and editor in 1969. Indeed, the first issue of the 1969 series of *Contropiano*, Tafuri asserts that it is the role of the (Marxist) historian to criticise the *foundational* ideology of modern architecture in order to ‘demystify the contingent, historical—and in no way objective or universal—realities that lie hidden behind the unifying categories of the terms “art”, “architecture”, and “city”’.¹⁴² If knowledge is never actually ‘formal’, it is up to the historian to critically juxtapose the contingent situation of knowledges relative to the larger social structures within which they emerge. Tafuri was therefore particularly critical of what he considered to be history’s mobilisation as a *post hoc* apologia for bourgeois practice: the notion that events had led, rationally and inevitably, to produce an outcome that was, in fact, a contingent hegemonic project

¹⁴¹ ‘The project’ was a central concern of their work in the 1980s, evidence of which can be seen, for example, in Cacciari’s 1981 article *Progetto* [‘Project’],¹⁴¹ and in Tafuri’s *History of Italian Architecture* (1986).

¹⁴² Op. cit. Tafuri, *Toward a Critique...*, p. 32.

rooted in bourgeois ideology. In Tafuri's view, a critical historian could reclaim the autonomy of history (or of historiography) from its instrumental objectification by capitalism by using historical evidence to smash open the black box of bourgeois justification and legitimation. Such critique would reveal the contingency of the mechanisms that had been used to keep the box closed and the mechanisms hidden.

Tafuri was thus vehemently opposed to any 'operative criticism', which, as apologia, attempted to retroactively construct the past in terms of the present.¹⁴³ To avoid such objectification, Tafuri expanded on the 'ongoing' character of past events by viewing them as open-ended *projects* rather than self-contained, completed, entities. Such a processual approach allowed him to resituate capitalism as but one human project among others which were similarly contingent. More specifically, he argued that from this perspective the discursive conventions of architecture could be identified as 'a bundle of relationships linking a complex series of "systems"'¹⁴⁴ outside any universal, synthesising teleology. As Teresa Stoppani explains, Tafuri understood this

historical "project" as an open discursive construct that reactivates past events in its reading of the present. History is redefined as a shifting, complex plurality rather than a given monolithic and comprehensive whole, as an autonomous project independent from architectural practice.¹⁴⁵

Tafuri's 'project of crisis' is therefore an attempt to remove a barrier between the intellectual and the material, criticism and maintenance. The historian could therefore only approach products of human creativity as a *critic* offering a hypothetical reconstruction of what those original 'functions and ideologies' were or how they may have been intended. This, he argued, was because, '...criticism does not allow predestined salvations or condemnations',¹⁴⁶ it can only offer a contingent, relative hypothesis based on reflexive, contemporary reengagement with the past.

¹⁴³ Ibid., p. 141.

¹⁴⁴ Manfredo Tafuri: *Theories and History of Architecture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976); p. 227.

¹⁴⁵ Teresa Stoppani: 'The Building of Tension – Manfredo Tafuri's Legacy: from Operative Criticism to Historical Project, Between Critical Practices and Material Practices in Architecture' *Reflections on Creativity: Exploring the Role of Theory in Creative Practices* (Dundee: Duncan of Jordanstone College, 2007). [<http://artanddesign.dundee.ac.uk/reflections/>].

¹⁴⁶ Manfredo Tafuri: 'Introduction to *Theories and History of Architecture*' in Joan Ockman (ed.), *Architecture Culture 1943-1968: A Documentary Anthology* (New York: Rizzoli, 1993); pp. 450-455.

Cacciari experienced this theoretical argument—and its political application—in material terms shortly after Tafuri's arrival in Venice, an event which coincided with the period after which Cacciari and others had left *Potere Operaio* but had not yet joined the *PCI*. Although it seems obvious in retrospect that Cacciari and the other former *operaisti* would join the *PCI*, Tafuri recalled that this eventuality was by no means a foregone conclusion. Utterly disenchanted with the universal ideologies and attempts to achieve moral or intellectual consensus going on around them, Cacciari, Tafuri, and their group were concerned with harnessing political *praxis* in order to affect material change in the way that *Potere Operaio* had managed to harness workers' autonomous *praxis* in the general assemblies to improve their working conditions and the distribution of production bonuses in the factories in Marghera. This meant making alliances across ideological lines where necessary, as the workers had done with the students and the intellectuals; it meant making sure that the party was led by its members and their demands rather than by intermediate managers; it meant engaging with the material realities in which they found themselves, not only with new democratic institutions like the general assembly, but also with the existing political structure of the Italian state.

They therefore set about finding allies sympathetic to their goals, where the gap between ideology and *praxis* was at its narrowest. As Tafuri explained:

I would say that we [a small group—Cacciari, Marco De Michelis and myself] thought very hard about the issues. I would say that our approach was cold, indifferent. We affected this great indifference in order to discover where we could be useful. In general, if we carried the critique of ideology to its logical conclusion, the *Democrazia cristiana* and the *Partito comunista* came to be the same thing... One tragic night [after serious debate] we decided to enrol in the *Partito comunista* after weighing the possibility of joining *Democrazia cristiana*. Those who don't have ideology don't have such problems.¹⁴⁷

By identifying architecture as what Donna Haraway refers to as a 'situated knowledge' (see FN17)—a 'partial, locatable critical [knowledge] sustaining the possibility of webs of connections called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology'¹⁴⁸—Tafuri was able to *shift* the epistemological foundation of architectural historiography and criticism from empiricist

¹⁴⁷Luisa Passerini: 'History as Project: An Interview with Manfredo Tafuri', *Any* (25-26: 2000), cited in *op. cit.* Leach, p. 31.

¹⁴⁸*op. cit.* Haraway, p. 584.

grounds to *different*, reflexive, relative, and contingent, material-semiotic grounds. He could not, however, have done it without the transdisciplinary help of Cacciari. As Leach summarises, “Tafuri notes that [Cacciari] brought to Venice a set of tools that enabled them to *negotiate* with bourgeois culture rather than to *negate* it’.

Once the critique of ideology had done its work and opened the black box of ideology and revealed the contradictions within, it became possible to confront those contradictions and negotiate a response. To paraphrase the Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector, for Tafuri ‘ideology is mutilation’.¹⁴⁹ If one turns the *telos* of modernity inside out and assumes contradiction as the rule and order as the exception, to impose ideological consistency (the word Lispector used) upon disorder is to deliberately mutilate the natural. To be less melodramatic, one could say that ideology deforms contradiction: like the tornado that is spawned by the intersection of contradictory weather fronts, ideological order or harmony is a temporary and violent *exception* within an ever-fluctuating environment. Rather than hoping tornadoes never come, Tafuri argues that only by soberly accepting contradiction as normal does it become possible to construct shelters, temporary as they might be.

Tafuri did not provide any answers for what should be done once these contradictions had been identified. This was not, however, cause for despair: “[i]t should not be difficult to understand that the era of nihilism can be surpassed not with further subjective inventions” but rather with forms of interrogation, which nevertheless have “the strength to *point out the problem*, not resolve it’.¹⁵⁰ Eulogising Tafuri in 1994, Cacciari reflected on his influence, saying that

[n]o one is free from the vicissitude that which binds us all, which all of us are. And that vicissitude compels us to continuous practice, to perennial transformations. ... Of this knowledge, Manfredo was a master.... He affirms it with irony, and therefore with all the

¹⁴⁹ Clarice Lispector: ‘A partida do trem’ [‘The Departure of the Train’], *Onde estivestes de noite* [‘Where Were You at Night?’] (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Rocca, 1974). In the original text, the phrase is ‘consistency is mutilation’: *A coerência, não a quero mais. Coerência é mutilação. Quero a desordem. Só adivinHO através de uma veemente incoerência*. [‘I don’t want consistency anymore. Consistency is mutilation. I want disorder. I only sense through vehement incoherence’.]

¹⁵⁰ Tafuri, cited in *op. cit.* Biraghi, p. 140.

more rigour: because irony means insistence of inquiry and detachment and moderation of pathos.¹⁵¹

In conclusion, Cacciari's involvement with *Potere Operaio* was a pragmatic engagement with a group whose approach to political realities he considered suitably grounded in philosophical and material evidence. He remained involved not because he was a 'true believer' in *PO* or its goals, but rather because it was achieving results that satisfied those demanding change (in this case, the workers in Marghera) rather than satisfying Cacciari *himself* and *his own* views—at least not in the first instance.¹⁵² His allegiance continued as long as the group helped workers, regardless of his personal analysis of what was right, wrong, or necessary *in abstracto*. Thus, Cacciari stayed with *PO* as it overcame the control of unions and political parties in 1966, secured workplace improvements and salary increases in 1968, and developed methodological praxes like Tafuri's 'project of crisis' for gathering and analysing data. However, Cacciari's decision to leave *PO* was based in no small part on his conclusion that, under Negri's leadership, *PO's* approach to the problems with which it was confronted was becoming more dogmatically revolutionary and less openly pragmatic regarding matters of immanent concern. This decision to leave when a party's *approach* becomes too focused on ideological piety and insufficiently practical—when it gets trapped in an aporia of its own making—is something Cacciari has repeated consistently throughout his career. For example, Cacciari states that he decided to leave the *PCI* in 1983 because he had become 'a walrus outside the herd' (*[un] tricheco fuori dal branco*). In his view, the *PCI* mainstream 'herd' and its leadership had lost their 'ideas, strategies, [and] appeal'.¹⁵³ Finding no reasons to remain a member, Cacciari quit the *PCI* and aligned himself with the mainstream centre-left—which he would ultimately abandon for similar reasons.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵¹ Cacciari, cited in *ibid.*, p. 175.

¹⁵² This does not mean that he was not, himself, satisfied with these outcomes. It means only that he was open to the possibility that an outcome *he* did not like could be considered satisfactory by those whom the outcome most directly affected.

¹⁵³ *Op. cit.* Cacciari, p. 175.

¹⁵⁴ I do not discuss Cacciari's time in the *PCI* here. On the one hand, it is too complicated to address in the space available; on the other, it is a comparatively less instructive period of his career. The *compromesso storico* ('historic compromise') makes a very interesting subject of analysis—that is, can it be viewed as an attempt by Prime Minister Aldo Moro (*DC*) and Enrico Berlinguer (*PCI*) to realise a non-binary 'third' option in a time

The introduction to *Potere Operaio*'s report on the strikes of 1968 ends with the words, *BEN SCAVATO, VECCHIA TALPA!* ('Well burrowed, old mole!').¹⁵⁵ The phrase repeats Marx's famous paraphrasing of Hamlet (and Hegel¹⁵⁶), who compliments the ghost of his father, who is hidden beneath a stage: 'well said, old mole'.¹⁵⁷ This paraphrase can be reappropriated once again to effectively summarise the overall lesson learnt by Cacciari from his experience with *operaismo*. From the factories and streets of Marghera to the pages of *Contropiano* he learnt how, like the mole, to *burrow well*, 'working i' th' earth' to reveal the complexity of what boils beneath its crust, and to explore that complexity in its entirety. Rather than trying to subsume this complexity within an abstract and exclusively semiotic self-contained ideology, Cacciari engaged in the pragmatic and reflexive exploration of a 'worthy pioneer', burrowing *hic et ubique* into the complexity of material-semiotic reality. This he did by going into the factories in Marghera to study how the relationship between workers, unions, political parties, ownership and government worked in practice—and experimenting with the data gathered—organising the workers outside the unions, adopting the general assembly, and calling the strikes in Marghera in the summer of 1968. To burrow was to unearth and shake loose the material possibilities with which new, alternative foundations for political and social praxis could be founded.

In this chapter I have introduced Massimo Cacciari and presented a contextual summary of his 'formative years', beginning with his involvement in *Potere Operaio* with Tronti and Negri in the early 1960s, to his decision to leave the group, the cofounding of the highly influential journal *Contropiano* and his arrival at the IUAV at the end of that decade. It is upon the lessons learnt during this decade that he will found his subsequent political and philosophical activity, which I will begin discussing in the following chapter.

of crisis, or was it merely an antecedent to the 'Third Way' politics of Giddens, et al. Unfortunately, it is an analysis beyond the scope of the present work.

¹⁵⁵ Op. cit. *Porto Marghera/Montedison Estate '68*, p. 7.

¹⁵⁶ In *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* (1805-6) and *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, (1852), respectively.

¹⁵⁷ William Shakespeare: *Hamlet*, Act I, Scene 5. [<http://shakespeare.mit.edu/hamlet/full.html>]

CHAPTER TWO

NEGATIVE THOUGHT

*The Hegelian Beginning of Cacciari's
Disenchanted Engagement*

In this chapter I will show how a young Cacciari made use of Hegel's concept of *Aufhebung* ('sublation') and the subsequent emergence of 'negative thought' in German philosophy to challenge the Cold War Italian Marxism and Western bourgeois capitalism. Specifically, I will show how Cacciari began in his early work to 'decentre' the role of abstract, intellectual principles within philosophical and political praxis in Hegel's work in order to 'centre' attention on concrete material praxis itself. He does this, I argue, by drawing attention to the material, capitalist political praxis Hegel himself experienced and reflected upon during his lifetime. Cacciari's reason for making this move is to situate Hegel as a self-reflexive agent whose philosophy is a response to the practical, material-semiotic struggles produced by the new social, economic, and political forms emerging around him. This approach to Hegel led Cacciari to reflect deeply on the reflexive relationships between the material, the imminent, and the subjective dimensions of political praxis, and to develop an approach to human agency that probed the practical possibilities of imminent negation. As we will see in the rest of the thesis, Cacciari continues to use and improve the methodological tools this approach makes available in the development of his own foundationally disenchanted, material-semiotic praxis.

In the previous chapter I suggested that Cacciari abandoned *Potere Operaio* without abandoning *operaista* philosophy. That is to say that his disagreement with Negri's philosophical conclusions and political praxis did not entail an abandonment or renunciation of the group's radically alternative approach to the foundational critique of bourgeois capitalism and its praxis. On the contrary, from Cacciari's or Tronti's perspective, it was Negri who was becoming increasingly divergent from an *operaismo* that sought to refound and rearticulate the hegemonic relations of power in Italy through democratic praxis. The 'early' *operaisti* attempted to do this by decoupling

their material, phenomenological criticism from the Marxist ideological dogma that had been forced upon them by the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and by Moscow. By standing Hegel back on his feet, and reading Marx outside any Marxist/Leninist/Soviet deontological hermeneutic, they sought to reconceptualise binary options as endpoints on a continuum of possibility rather than as discrete absolutes. This is to say that the conflict between Communism and the free market, for example, was not a Manichean one: Communism and Western free market economics (as they then were) were among any number of many possible alternatives (Trotskyism or Social Market Economics, say); the crucial difference was that these had gained power rather than others. This understanding made it possible for them to locate alternative options at any point between those endpoints, and to recognise that there may be more than one such point between the endpoints of the continuum.

In what follows, I will explain how Cacciari continued this *operaista* project of decoupling/disenchanting critical praxis from ideology and dogma by investigating his exploration of the emergence and development of the phenomenological critique of capitalism. Beginning with Cacciari's discussion of Hegel and 'negative thought', I will show how Cacciari sought to recover from purely intellectual interpretations the *material* aspect of Hegel's phenomenology—the *praxis* of *Aufhebung*—as an apparatus that might be used to further reflexive, material-semiotic critique. From Cacciari's perspective, the historical teleology Hegel appends to his immanent, material-semiotic critique—according to which the dialectic process of *Aufhebung* would end in total knowledge—obscures Hegel's valuable insights about the reflexive, everyday operation of capitalist material and political praxis. In Cacciari's reading, attention needs to be shifted away from Hegel's 'enchanted' teleological discourse and focused on his critical observations about the historically contingent material-semiotic development of capitalist(ic) praxis in the late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century European society in which he lived and worked. In particular, Cacciari emphasises Hegel's use of *Aufhebung* as a kind of material praxis; as we will see in the rest of the

thesis, Cacciari uses this understanding of *Aufhebung* to reconsider the meaning of ‘negative thought’ in the work of Nietzsche, of natural scientists, of Wittgenstein—and, indeed, he brings it to bear upon his own experiences with *Potere Operaio*. The outcome of the project which begins with his rereading of Hegel will be the development of what I have called his disenchanted, material-semiotic praxis.

Cacciari’s understanding of Hegel’s use of *Aufhebung* as a form of material praxis is a useful tool to those political theorists who aim to be practical, but whose foundationally semiotic disciplinary apparatus is proving incapable of allowing them to adequately observe and practically intervene in the political situations of interest to them. A material-semiotic reading of the ‘political Hegel’ avoids this foundational paradox by engaging political theorists with the challenges and opportunities presented by historical evidence of Hegel’s own material political praxis, rather than limiting them to abstract assessments of the veracity or possibility of Hegel’s dialectical conclusions. To undertake this reading, Cacciari followed the *operaista* example of ‘getting back’ to original texts as a way of circumventing whatever ideological exegeses had been developed and imposed upon them after their publication. His historically situated reading of Hegel is significant because it focuses squarely on the liberal-industrial-capitalist *praxis* Hegel experienced in his own society during the time he reflected and wrote, as well as on Hegel’s own critical praxis within those material conditions. Read in this way, Hegel’s phenomenological accounts of subjectivity, the dialectic and *Aufhebung* may be understood as reflexive, contextually situated material-semiotic praxis rather than as disembodied, semiotic thought alone. Such a reading makes it possible to discern in Hegel an account of capitalist praxis and attempts to cope with it (and its consequences) that is free from the sort of ‘hegemonic baggage’ that came to burden accounts of Hegel’s writings shortly after his time. In addition, by focusing more on Hegel’s reflexive, *in situ* observations than on his dialectic conclusions, Cacciari is able to reveal the source of the aporia that capitalism itself produces: namely, the impossibility of trying to reduce the irreducibly plural realities of an emerging capitalist society to any single predominantly semiotic ideological system. Indeed,

Cacciari's self-reflexive reading reveals Hegel's work to be a consummate example of the challenges faced by the self-conscious human 'spirit' struggling to reconcile itself with an irreducibly plural material reality. Concluding, as Cacciari does, that such reconciliation is impossible might seem a counsel of despair—that if there is no hope of reconciliation, people can only expect interminable exploitation and suffering. That is, once people realised that the system was incapable of delivering what it promised, there was no possibility of hope for improving their circumstances. But instead, this conclusion turns out to provide Cacciari with resources for an alternative, disenchanted methodological approach to praxis. And this approach, in turn, will point toward the possible, non-binary 'third possibility' of irreducibly plural, material semiotic foundations. In his view, it is the renunciation of one's subjective want or need for the production of a synthetic reconciliation of binary contradictions that makes disenchanted, contextually contingent hope possible, because it is reflexive disenchantment that makes it possible to discern 'third' possibilities. As I will show in the rest of this thesis, this is the 'general assembly' approach Cacciari has continued to develop and employ throughout his career.

Cacciari draws on three aspects of Hegelian philosophy to develop his own understanding of negative thought. First, in 'Subjectivity and the Negative,' I introduce Cacciari's discussion of the 'negative thought' begun by Hegel, which investigates and criticises the immanent relationships between distinct, yet interdependent, coexistent, material-semiotic entities. Second, in *Aufhebung and the Modern State-Form*, I examine Cacciari's reading of Hegel's discussion of how these relationships work in the material world. Third, in *Grand Politics and the Finitude of Freedom*, I explain how Cacciari's reading of Nietzsche's critique of Hegel's synthetic conclusions contributes to his own conclusion that capitalist *Aufhebung* negates the possibility of *any universal* liberation, emancipation, or salvation from conflict and contradiction—that is, from politics—by *any* political doctrine, itself included. Finally, I explain Cacciari's assertion that the modern State-form is

actually designed to produce, and then cope with, crises-in-progress, rather than to produce any harmonious universal emancipation from contradiction.

Subjectivity and the Negative

In this section I argue that Cacciari was able to find in Hegel an understanding of the relationship between human subjectivity and contradiction that was rather different from standard readings of Hegel. Cacciari's reading provides him with one of the keys he will use to develop his own differently foundational philosophical work: his reading of Hegel allows him to develop a distinct methodological approach to life itself based primarily on reflexively phenomenological, 'material-semiotic'¹⁵⁸ praxis rather than abstract logic and semiotic deontology. Cacciari's disenchanted, historical reading of Hegel and negative thought in terms of material political *praxis* thus takes the first step along an alternative path that can provide political theorists with a fresh approach to a canonical thinker and line of thought within the discipline. His reading shows that Cacciari is not content to propose abstract principles for use in primarily semiotic contemplation and analysis. Instead, as Cacciari himself explained, he understood his work on negative thought as

Not about a simple trans-formation of the intelligence of the given [*dell'intelligenza del dato*], but of the possibility to gather, at the end of an immanent critique of languages, the reasons for the crisis, the irreducibility of the conflict, the reality of the process of overcoming.¹⁵⁹

Cacciari's understanding of negative thought is distinctive because of the way he characterises it, as a 'language', which is a form of critical, reflexive *praxis*. That is, he views it as a methodological approach for confronting and coping with material conflict *in* the world, rather than as a purely cognitive attempt to reconcile or synthesise contradictory abstract concepts *about* the world once and for all. Cacciari began his first major philosophical project on 'negative thought' in *Contropiano*

¹⁵⁸ Cf. Timothy Lenoir: 'Was That Last Turn a Right Turn?: The Semiotic Turn and A.J. Greimas', *Configurations* (2:1994), pp. 119-136. The sociologist John Law suggests that 'material semiotics' be understood as 'a sensibility to the messy practices of relationality and materiality of the world. Along with this sensibility comes wariness of the large-scale claims common in social theory: these usually seem too simple'. [John Law: 'Actor Network Theory and Material Semiotics' *The New Blackwell Companion to Social Theory*, Bryan S. Turner, ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009); pp. 141-158.]

¹⁵⁹ Massimo Cacciari: *Dialettica e critica del politico: Saggio su Hegel* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1978); p. 63.

in 1968, and subsequently developed it in a trilogy of books *Krisis* (1976), *Pensiero negativo e razionalizzazione* (*Negative Thought and Rationalisation*, 1977), and *Dallo Steinhof* (*From the Steinhof*, 1980) and an extended essay *Dialettica e Critica del Politico: Saggio su Hegel* (*Dialectic and Critique of the Political*, 1978).¹⁶⁰ This project sought to demonstrate the emergence, and track the subsequent development of, a philosophical discourse, begun by Hegel, in which ‘the negative’ (traditionally understood as an absence, lack-of, or misunderstanding of a positive, intellectual totality) is revealed to be an alternative, contradictory positivity, a determinate negation demonstrating the irreducible plurality of human existence. In Hegel, ‘the negative’ is, as Sebastian Gardner puts it, ‘that which is different from, opposed to, or other than’.¹⁶¹ The negative is contradictory coexistence. Cacciari defines ‘negative thought’ as ‘thought that destroys its own claim to dominion over signification and transcendence—thought that understands...being-in-itself as the status of the thing as a rule...’.¹⁶²

By renouncing any claim to dominion, negative thought identifies and investigates contradictory relationships between existing things, pointing out how one particular thing is different *from*, opposed *to*, or other *than other things* by virtue of their simultaneous, mutual coexistence. In Bakhtinian terminology, these are reflexively dialogic relationships in which the individual’s voice emerges out of conversations where meanings have to be negotiated because foundational assumptions cannot be presumed to be universal.

Like Hegel and Bakhtin, Cacciari holds that no human being, for example, can define itself—or anything else—without points of phenomenological reference; no identity is possible without the presence of *others* against which one might define oneself.¹⁶³ Thus, in Cacciari’s reading of Hegel, the ‘negative’ is merely a contradiction experienced by the inquisitive, assertive

¹⁶⁰ This book was translated into English as *Posthumous People: Vienna at the Turning Point* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

¹⁶¹ Sebastian Gardner: *Hegel: Glossary* [http://www.london.ac.uk/fileadmin/documents/students/philosophy/ba_course_materials/ba_19thc_hegel_glossary_01.pdf]

¹⁶² Massimo Cacciari: ‘Negative Thought and Artistic Representation’ in Cacciari: *Architecture and Nihilism: On the Philosophy of Modern Architecture*, trans. Sartarelli, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); p. 60.

¹⁶³ For a brief contextual summary of this argument, c.f. Albert Atkin: ‘Peirce’s Theory of Signs’, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2013 Edition), ed. Zalta, [<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/peirce-semiotics>].

praxis of any particular self-conscious human living in the material world, rather than part of binary struggle in which ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ are fighting to annihilate their opposite lest they themselves be annihilated. Hegel described the reflexive, phenomenological praxis of encountering and coping with contradictions to one’s own ideas, desires, and feelings (rather than annihilating them) as the foundational function of the human mind and its ‘spirit’. That is, the *phenomenology* of the human *spirit* makes sense of the material world by experiencing, challenging (actively contradicting), and being challenged (being actively contradicted) by whatever things it happens to encounter. The emergence of negative thought in Germany in the nineteenth century threw dialectically-founded philosophy and praxis into crisis. As a materialist critique *beholden to no abstract foundational ideology*, negative thought is a ‘practical search for refoundation [*rifondazione*]¹⁶⁴ based on material-semiotic evidence. Cacciari thereby decentres dialectical *ideological abstraction* within philosophical reflection and criticism, and he refocuses attention on *material-semiotic praxis* within irreducible plurality, arguing that the praxis of negative thought is a ‘process of throwing things into crisis [*processo effettuale di crisi*], stripped of determinant contradictions’.¹⁶⁵

Cacciari’s reading of Hegel as a critical record of and reflexive commentary on the transformations being wrought by bourgeois capitalism ‘throws into crisis’ the standard philosophical reading of Hegel. By throwing it into crisis in this way, Cacciari found it possible to reveal nuances in Hegel that were usually overlooked by traditional readings. Cacciari emphasises the way in which Hegel’s work records the crisis into which ‘the classical’—classical philosophy and ways of life—had been thrown by the emergence and expansion of bourgeois praxis. Though direct references are uncommon in Cacciari’s prose, he does identify specific instances of Hegel’s recognition and measurement of the ways in which social relations and practices were being transformed before his eyes. For example, Cacciari cites Hegel’s commentary regarding the transformation of the family by bourgeois praxis:

¹⁶⁴ Massimo Cacciari: *Krisis: Saggio sulla crisi del pensiero negativo da Nietzsche a Wittgenstein*, (Milano: Feltrinelli Editore, 1976); p. 8.

¹⁶⁵ Idem.

The *economic* completely displaces the *oikos* [the ancient household or family]; the system of mediation between needs affirms itself in a dimension that completely overcomes the “power” of the family. The affirmation of civil society as the space of production-satisfaction of needs is only conceivable, therefore, on the basis of the “withdrawal” of the *oikos* of the merely “familial”. The position of the family is that of immediateness, of immediate love. That of civil society is, instead, the dimension of mediation: everyone *negates* that the other might rise up to totality—and in this reciprocal negation “a system of universal dependence” [Hegel] is *affirmed*. Hegel insists *systematically* on assuming this dialectic as the specific foundation of the modern State.¹⁶⁶

It was from this material-semiotic perspective that Hegel argued famously, *contra* Kant, that ‘what is rational is real; And what is real is rational’.¹⁶⁷ By this, Cacciari says, Hegel meant that that the development of the ‘spirit’—of subjective, human self-consciousness—occurs immanently and substantively: *within* the contradictions, antagonisms, and violence of the *material* world. We can only be conscious of what we ourselves experience as a result of our physical presence in the material world—what Heidegger would later refer to as *Dasein*, or ‘being-in-the-world’. Hegel therefore repositions the negative as an element of ontological positivity that is experienced subjectively. In standard interpretations of Hegel, the individual subjective consciousness interacts with the *Weltgeist* or ‘World Spirit’, a transcendental objective totality in order to determine objective truth and reality. In Cacciari’s ‘disenchanted’ material-semiotic reading, however, there is no transcendental, objective totality with which an individual subjective consciousness might interact.¹⁶⁸ In Cacciari’s view, Hegel’s aggregate concepts of the *Weltweisheit* (‘world wisdom’), *Weltgeist* (‘world spirit’), and *Volksgeister* (‘Folk spirits’) are neither transcendental nor intellectually universalisable, even if they overlap.¹⁶⁹ Instead, they are contingent consequences of active, subjective *Vergeistigung* [‘sublimation’ or ‘transfer’], the immanent praxis of *becoming* within the material-semiotic circumstances—the *Weltweisheit*—in which a ‘spirit’ lives. It is a consequence

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹⁶⁷ G.W.F. Hegel: *Philosophy of Right*, trans. S.W. Dyde (Kitchener: Batoche Books, 2001); p. 18.

¹⁶⁸ E.g. Massimo Cacciari: ‘Massimo Cacciari spiega *La Fenomenologia dello spirito* di Hegel’, *Terzo Anello: Damasco*, Radio RaiTre, 2004. (Available on YouTube).

¹⁶⁹ Though his disenchanted reading is a secular one, Cacciari reminds readers that for Hegel there could be no foundation of the state without ‘the *Vergeistigung* of Christianity’:

Throughout all of his work, Hegel pursues the forms of the possible *Vergeistigung* of Christianity, since if the *Geist Gottes* [the spirit of God] can become *Weltgeist*, if theo-logy can reconcile itself to the *Weltweisheit*, if reason can conclude that there is nothing arcane in the concept of God, then truly “the principle of religious consciousness and ethical consciousness become one and the same thing”. [op. cit. *Dialettica e critica...*, p. 66].

of *being-in-the-world* and cross-cultural communication. Put differently, this is *cultural praxis* and the process of *enculturation*: *Weltweisheit* constitutes the aggregate knowledge or existential narratives that specific people within a specific material-semiotic community learn and pass on from one generation to the next concerning themselves, others, and the world. The *Weltgeist* then refers to the points of commonality that members of *Weltweisheiten* actively discover amongst themselves—whether through personal (or group), ‘trading zone’¹⁷⁰ communication or similar material-semiotic observations or experiences—rather than through passive acquisition or an *a priori* cognitive disposition. *Volksgeister* are the prominent characters within that narrative whose stories are deemed worthy of retelling—heroes, villains, and so on, some of which overlap. Indeed, from Cacciari’s perspective, the fact that people continue to read Hegel today indicates that he is just such a *Volksgeist* within our national or cultural *Weltweisheiten*, which are, themselves, part of the broader Western *Weltgeist*.

And so, Cacciari tells us, Hegel argues that we find ourselves in a situation in which *many* individual human self-consciousnesses simultaneously desire to assert and affirm themselves, thereby finding themselves contradicted by many *other* individual self-consciousnesses doing the very same thing: each resists other particular individual self-affirmations in favour of its *own* self-affirmation. Such contradictions have material-phenomenological consequences: as people assert themselves in relation to others, some manage to gain power over others, and are able to affect the material circumstances of the society in which they live. Those with less power in that society will also experience these material circumstances and may respond to them in any number of ways. The relationship between those with power and those without becomes a contradiction as soon as those without power discover that that material praxis and power do not follow causally or logically from abstract, exclusively semiotic ideas. This does not imply an immediate descent to a Hobbesian state of nature of *omnium contra omnes*. Indeed, Cacciari puts a reflexive, material-semiotic twist on Hobbes’s statement that ‘all men...among themselves are by nature equal; the inequality we now

¹⁷⁰ See Chapter One.

discern, hath its spring from the Civill Law'.¹⁷¹ In Cacciari's view, 'our animal nature [*animalità*] is not naturally political, it is a construction of the *polis*, the city, that calls us to be perfectly, fully responsible'.¹⁷² Understood as reflexive and material-semiotic, this responsibility begins with the (reflexive) recognition of the *lack* of natural equivalence—of irreducible plurality—among people that pushes people to negotiate their praxis: on the one hand, this negotiation can be violent. But, as Bakhtin reminds us, this negotiation can also lead to 'dialogic agreement'; and on such negotiated and re-negotiated praxis-based agreements ('Civill Law's'), Cacciari argues, are *polies* established, maintained, and transformed over time.

For Hegel, Cacciari insists, the material 'proof' of this state of contradiction did not originate from any abstract idea of what a state, political life, or human interaction were, or were *supposed* to be. Rather, evidence of contradiction originated in the *material* character of political life within the State, as experienced by the living, breathing human beings who made up the 'body politic'. According to Cacciari, Hegel recognised that the relationship between the subjective political mind and the body politic is often a contradictory one: that the body cannot achieve all the things the mind can imagine. Put differently, a *theory* can be 'perfect'—free of all contradiction—because it is abstract and imaginary; a universal solution can be *imagined* for any contingency. When the theory is put into *practice*, however, it encounters material obstacles and limitations that were ignored or unimagined in the theory. A person can, for example, imagine him or herself leaping tall buildings in a single bound—and of developing abstract theories about what would happen if people had such an ability; in the imagination, reality is (literally and figuratively) immaterial. But any person attempting to perform such a leap in the real world will rapidly encounter material obstacles and limitations, such as the obstacle of gravity and the limitations of one's leg muscles to counteract its influence. To privilege mind over matter was, for Hegel, a serious mistake because it is based on an

¹⁷¹ Thomas Hobbes: *De Cive* (London: R. Royston, at the Angel in Ivie-Lane; 1651 / Blackmask Online; 2000.); I:iii / p. 9.

¹⁷² Ivo Nardi: 'Riflessioni sul Senso della Vita: Intervista a Massimo Cacciari' *riflessioni.it*, (dicembre 2013). [<http://www.riflessioni.it/senso-della-vita/massimo-cacciari.htm>].

inaccurate representation of that material reality. Therefore, to engage seriously with such fallacious idealism leads to not only a foundationally inaccurate understanding of the world, but produces serious material consequences *within* that world: the universal subject alienates itself by trying to overcome its alienation. This reality, says Cacciari, is the ‘secret’ of the modern, capitalist political State:

The State is the universal process and entirety of *mediations* by which the universal ultimately expresses itself concretely as a subject. ... Understanding the State as a ‘flow’ of the subject into the universal actually maintains the alienation [the State was designed to overcome].¹⁷³

According to Cacciari, Hegel could only discern this aporia because, living in the German states as they were being transformed materially and intellectually by emerging liberal-industrial-capitalist (‘bourgeois’) theory and praxis in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, he experienced it—embodied it, even. That Hegel should have reflexively recognised and asserted the presence of this aporia during his lifetime, *despite* the popular and powerful convergence of liberalism, industrialism, and capitalism, is in Cacciari’s eyes a landmark achievement. Hegel achieved this by using material *evidence* of the changes he observed being wrought by the emergence of bourgeois praxis as resources for a new material-phenomenological philosophical critique—a critique that allowed him to make a foundational break with the dominant, Kantian ontological worldview. Hegel made it possible to explore the ways in which meaning, history, and action depend on the immanent material praxis of determinate, contradictory-yet-coexisting phenomenological ‘spirits’, rather than on the deontological reason of (allegedly) autonomous, individual intellects with abstractly and transcendental *a priori* totalities.¹⁷⁴ In Cacciari’s view, Hegel had established a new and different foundation for beginning new, critical interpretations and philosophies of human existence, located within the limits of the human mind and body as it operated within the material world.

¹⁷³ Op. cit. *Dialettica e critica*... p 18.

¹⁷⁴ John E. Smith: ‘Hegel’s Critique of Kant’, *The Review of Metaphysics* (26/3, 1973), p. 444.

According to Cacciari, Hegel is misinterpreted if the abstract intellectual dialectic is identified (or sought out) as a foundational element of—or common denominator among—particular societies at particular times in particular places. This is because the abstract dialectic is an intellectual response *contingent upon* specific material contradictions experienced by specific people. Furthermore, if it is *contradiction* rather than harmony that is foundational, then the negative is *not* an equal, opposite power whose uninvited intrusion must be overcome or repelled. Instead, ‘negativity’ is the real, existing, omnipresent challenge in an irreducibly plural society to any particular discourse and attempt at praxis—particularly to those based on an intellectual notion of harmonious utopia: ‘if the negative is substantial, it cannot present itself as simply the limit-to-overcome, but will go on drawing attention to itself as the motor and nourishment of the entire process... [T]he system is nothing but the ensemble of forces which oppose themselves on the foundation of mediation by the “negative”’.¹⁷⁵

For Hegel, Cacciari insists, it is mediation by the negative—its reciprocal, dialogic challenge to any assertion of ‘positivity’ with which the positive must then cope—that makes possible the historical foundation of human societies. By itself, however, mediation does not guarantee any particular outcome. Rather, it is in the course of mediation that irreducibly plural societal forces oppose themselves, thereby influencing the nature of the outcome. As a result, relying on a narrative of primarily semiotic, universal dialectics is *but one means* of attempting to make sense of the process of mediation by the negative. This narrative, Cacciari argues, is a form of specific, situated material praxis which emerged in response to bourgeois capitalism, one which ‘consciously situates itself *after* the Enlightenment dialectic just as much as *after* the failure of Kantian and post-Kantian culture regarding an adequate understanding of the historical process through to [*fino a*] its final outcomes’.¹⁷⁶ Thus, for Cacciari, Hegel and Hegelian dialectics must first be understood as thoroughly situated—materially and intellectually—within the irreducibly plural and increasingly bourgeois capitalist world in which Hegel lived. Second, Cacciari

¹⁷⁵ Massimo Cacciari: ‘Dialettica e tradizione’ in *Contropiano* (1/68); pp. 133-134.

¹⁷⁶ I will return to this concept more directly in Chapter Four.

emphasises that Hegel experienced the irreducibly plural material realities of this world phenomenologically rather than transcendently or as abstract intellectual theory, and that he simultaneously reflected upon those realities both critically and reflexively. This is why Cacciari concludes that a purely intellectual reading of Hegel and his work is an incomplete one. A reader must pay particular attention to the material world in which Hegel lived and *how* he worked within it. This means focussing equally on the interdependent reciprocity between both phenomenology and the ‘spirit’—between the materially real *and* the rational—because Hegel’s work is an expression of and commentary on the very subjects it addresses.

To avoid making the dilettante’s mistake, Cacciari insists on examining what it was that Hegel was *doing differently* to what had been done by his predecessors like Kant; *how* Hegel was establishing a new, alternative foundation for making sense of the relationship between the human ‘spirit’ and the world. The material immanence of bourgeois praxis and its consequences—its ubiquity, technology, rapidity, production (and *pro-duction*¹⁷⁷)—reallocated political power and praxis—political *agency*—from an ‘objective’ few who governed large territories and populations by proxy from a distance (such as a monarch or the church), to individual ‘subjects’ throughout that territory. As bourgeois praxis demanded more and more labour, ordinary individuals could witness—and indeed take active part in—colossal material, societal transformations *within their lifetimes*—the sort of transformations that, until that point, had been the stuff of myth, magic, and religion. To paraphrase Cacciari, the material immanence of bourgeois praxis knocked transcendental, abstract absolutes from their metaphysical pedestal and caused them to fall among the ordinary masses in the plane of ‘historical immanence’. The power to observe and comprehend ‘truth’ and ‘falsity’ in their immanence, and the possibility of actively mediating their relationship

¹⁷⁷ Cacciari frequently writes words in this way in to emphasise etymological subtleties easily overlooked by colloquial usage (particularly in Italian, which is, of course, much closer to Latin than is English). Here, for example, I have written ‘production’ as he often has, calling attention to the fact that, in Latin, ‘production’ implies more than just material *productio* (‘to bring forth’); it is also *pro-ducere*, ‘to lead on behalf of’. By separating the prefix ‘pro-’, he also draws attention to the ancient Greek *πρό* (*pró*), meaning ‘forward’, suggesting then that ‘to produce’ implies that ‘bring forth’ is not just a way to lead on behalf of others, but that it is to lead them *forward*—crucial element of a hegemonic discourse claiming a teleological imperative. Pro-duction is therefore ‘vectored’: it can be understood as the way to lead people to ultimate satisfaction, salvation, or liberation; to produce is to resolve conflict and contradiction once and for all.

became an aspect of the *Dasein*—the *being-in-the-world*—of individual phenomenological subjects.

Cacciari argues that, when ‘absolutes’ are stripped of their metaphysical armour,

one discovers the “fiction” of [those] absolute[s], the illusory pretence of the romantic category of counting as an autonomous, free, and independent form of the self, sovereign in itself. One discovers, that is, that its absolute being is but one element of the totality, and capable of being integrated as such, destined to be integrated.¹⁷⁸

Abstract, almost exclusively semiotic reasoning about the relationship between transcendental subjects and objects was transformed into an immediate, material polemic among them: abstract deontology had become an immanent material *dialectic* in which everybody—every subjectivity—participated. As Cacciari puts it, ‘[t]he *form* of the dialectic is the form of the negative that affirms itself positively, of recoverable contradiction’.¹⁷⁹ Because the immanent, contradictory coexistence of ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ could now be observed by society at large, it had to be coped with at large—from within the very social processes experienced by Hegel, and to which his work contributed. Bourgeois praxis had brought individual subjects into an immanent struggle to reconcile and recover what they themselves could of the contradictions between ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ in material and intellectual terms. In this respect, bourgeois capitalism was distinctive because, unlike earlier socioeconomic formations, it had seriously transformed the material-semiotic circumstances in which subjects experienced this struggle. On the one hand, bourgeois praxis concentrated large, heterogeneous populations of people in comparatively small areas, transforming abstract or distant contradictions (between the urban, say, and the rural) into immanent material *crises*. Similarly, bourgeois capitalism produced forms of material technology which dramatically increased the ability, method, and scale according to which some human beings could assemble and bring power to bear on other human beings.

Cacciari argues that bourgeois capitalism necessitated new, *differently founded* forms of critique and analysis in order to make sense of this transformed (or transforming) reality. This, in his view, is exactly what Hegel was developing by grappling with the material contradictions of his

¹⁷⁸ Massimo Cacciari: ‘Sulla genesi del pensiero negativo’ *Contropiano* (1/69); p. 131.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

world as it was being transformed. That he attempted to resolve these contradictions in theory should not, according to Cacciari, obscure his reflexive material analysis. In this vein, even Hegel's synthetic conclusions about ultimate, total knowledge were, in Cacciari's view, an ideological attempt to reconcile previous, abstract existential (and transcendental) foundational narratives with the imminent contradictions and transformations he was experiencing. Hegel's theoretical synthesis is thus a situated, contextual attempt to overcome these imminent material-semiotic contradictions between the new conflicts and material-semiotic transformations of bourgeois capitalism.

In Cacciari's reading, Hegel's *Weltgeist* and the logics within it are entirely contingent upon the specific material-semiotic circumstances (*Weltweisheiten*) in which phenomenological 'spirits' live, coping with the irreducibly plural realities presented by simultaneously coexisting other 'spirits'. Thus the *becoming* of the *Weltgeist* Hegel experienced was not reducible to anything cosmogonic or cognitive: instead, Cacciari says, it was a product of specific material capitalist praxis and specific attempts to cope—in imminent, reflexive *praxis*—with the consequences of bourgeois praxis. It was this immanent praxis—the *improbus labor*¹⁸⁰ of becoming within capitalism—that Hegel examined in his discussion of the relationship between *Aufhebung* and *the modern State-form*.

Aufhebung and the Modern State-Form

Hegel observed how capitalist praxis revealed the ways in which 'negative' contradictions between equivalent, coexistent entities on the immanent, material-semiotic world constitute the irreducible plurality with which phenomenologically reflexive human subjects must cope. Put very simply, for Hegel, 'positive' and 'negative' depended on the irreducibly plural struggle among differently situated persons living in the material world, a struggle which was transforming and

¹⁸⁰ In Vergil's *Georgics*, 'improbus labor' is both "deplorable work" and "devastating suffering" if one has to do it to survive'.

[Christopher Nappa: *Reading After Actium: Vergil, Octavian, and Rome* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005); p. 42].

It is a term Cacciari uses frequently. In his words, *improbus labor* refers to 'work so strenuous that it appears iniquitous: to build whilst moving, to build in time, to build *with* the time conceded to us'. [Massimo Cacciari: 'Quid Tum' (Eulogy for Manfredo Tafuri, 23 February, 1994), *Domus* 762 (July, 1994)].

intensifying as bourgeois capitalism spread. That is, what one person asserts as being ‘positive’, ‘true’, or ‘right’ may not match with what another person asserts. Yet, such struggles were much more diffuse in pre-bourgeois societies because the pre-industrial circumstances in which people lived were homogeneous *communities* that had not yet been transformed into heterogeneous *cities*. According to Cacciari, because bourgeois praxis drew people from homogeneous communities into a central location, it produced cities—*metropoli*—in which homogeneities came into contact with contradictory homogeneities, producing the dense, highly conflictual heterogeneity and hybridity constitutive of urban, capitalist life. This historical development emphasises that definitions of ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ are material-semiotic rather than transcendental—they are understood relationally, in both material and intellectual (phenomenological) terms. While standard readings of Hegel may emphasise that Hegel believes he can discern the outlines of a rational state in which citizens see their social life as expressive of the *Weltgeist*, Cacciari’s reading is different. Cacciari finds Hegel’s argument that people assert themselves based on their irreducibly plural material-semiotic lived experiences to be of more significance than the conclusion Hegel reaches regarding peoples’ access to any transcendental objectivity. In Cacciari’s reading, subjective experiences can be shared by and communicated among real people with ‘dialogic imaginations’, an exchange that produces common knowledges and ‘common sense’ within material-semiotic communities. Such sharing is not an expression of any transcendental, semiotic, or ‘spiritual’ process; rather, it is imminent, the outcome of reflexive, material-semiotic praxis. It is a consequence of the shared-yet-heterogeneous experiences of *improbus labor*—the experiences of *becoming* in an irreducibly plural, material-semiotic world. What is more, such sharing is not total: neither common knowledge nor common sense are uncontested totalities in any community because heterogeneity is, itself, shared. Indeed, within a bourgeois community, a recognition of heterogeneity may be the only experience most people have in common. Thus, the definition of what *becomes* and *remains* ‘common’ is an ongoing struggle carried out in reflexive, dialogic praxis within specific material-semiotic circumstances. This suggests therefore that there are *elements* of ‘truth’ and reality in the assertions

of all people engaged in the struggle. When these contradicting assertions come into contact with one another, Hegel further argued that the *truer* assertion *incorporates* the elements of truth from the less-true assertion within itself.

Hegel used the German term *Aufhebung* (literally, 'to pick up') to describe this process, in which all human beings participate, 'picking up' partial truths and incorporating them, little by little, into a complete, total knowledge. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel defines *Aufhebung* as '...the negation coming from consciousness, which supersedes in such a way as to preserve and maintain what is superseded, and consequently survives its own supersession.'¹⁸¹ *Aufhebung* is usually translated as 'sublation' in English, though philosophers—including Hegel himself—have understood it to mean 'annulation', 'preservation' and 'lifting up'.¹⁸² For instance, the German philosopher Walter Kaufman explained that *Aufhebung* 'it is what you do when something has fallen to the floor. Something may be picked up in order that it will no longer be there; on the other hand, I may also pick it up to keep it.... Hegel may be said to visualize how something is picked up in order that it may no longer be *there* just the way it was, although, it is not cancelled altogether but lifted up to be kept on a different level'.¹⁸³ Kaufman highlights an important distinction: from the perspective of the floor, the object is no longer there—its presence has been 'cancelled', but the object has not been annihilated; it continues to exist in the universe. From the perspective of the object, it still exists, but is no longer on the floor. It also exists in terms of the shelf onto which it was 'incorporated' from the floor through a process in which a human bent down, picked it up, and placed it carefully on the shelf.

In Cacciari's view, Hegel's new discourse of *Aufhebung* and irreducible plurality substantiated the collapse of classical, post-Enlightenment philosophy by showing how capitalist *pro-duction* transformed pre-bourgeois civil society into the bourgeois 'modern State-form'. This is because, as Cacciari explains, *Aufhebung* is reflexive material praxis in the world: one expresses and

¹⁸¹ G.W.F. Hegel: *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Miller. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977); pp. 114-115.

¹⁸² G.W.F. Hegel: *The Science of Logic*, trans. Miller. (London: Allen & Unwin, 1989); p. 107.

¹⁸³ Walter Kaufman: *Hegel: A Reinterpretation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978; p. 144.

enacts one's thoughts, ideas, and feelings socially and materially. *Aufhebung* is therefore an expression of *power*—the expression, of what Nietzsche would later term the will-to-power—in a material world full of other similar expressions of power. But, Cacciari explains,

Power is not synthesis—if it were synthesis, there would no longer be any need for power.... If there were a synthesis—there would be nothing left to logicise [*logicizzare*] to comprehend, to *dominate*. To believe that the process of rationalisation tends necessarily towards Synthesis is to return to Utopia—to fish out Kantian logic. The logical form, once again, is not a should [*dover-essere*], but a desire-to-be-able-to-do [*voler-potere*].¹⁸⁴

Logics, he argues, are attempts by human beings to impose reductive order upon the irreducible plurality they experience in the material-semiotic world. In Cacciari's terminology, logic is a materially and socially contingent *language*¹⁸⁵ that describes and communicates this *experience*, rather than any abstract, absolute, totality. As a result, Cacciari states that '*Aufhebung* does not coincide in any way with a simple process of transposing the individual onto a pre-defined plane of universality. *Aufhebung* is the process of the ex-pression ['pressing outward'] of the idea of every reality...'.¹⁸⁶ And those ideas of reality are entirely relative to the experience of the person thinking them—for whom they represent the entirety of that person's understanding of existence. In Cacciari's view, the ideas of the real are 'universal' within the limits of one's own mind, but they are materially finite because they are based reflexively on only the material realities that a single individual has experienced. Therefore,

Aufhebung is the expression of the subject as universal and of the universal as subject. The essential point is that this outcome is not a formal, simply intellectual process, but rather something that springs forth from the definiteness [*determinatezza*] of its contents. They do not develop towards a Destination—but become their own universal, their own truth.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁴ Op. cit. *Krisis*, p. 69.

¹⁸⁵ Cacciari's understanding of 'languages' is like Bakhtin's: as reflexive and dialogic, self-organising 'vernacular' assemblages within specific material circumstances. This is the case in a 'macro' sense ('national' languages like Italian or English) or within smaller, more specific experiences and praxes, such as regional dialects, or the 'languages' of aesthetic disciplines, mathematics, logic, scholarly disciplines or other fields of expertise (such as that of the workers in Marghera's petrochemical plants compared to the autoworkers in Turin). Though they may overlap, they are, nevertheless, irreducibly plural. As Carrera summarises, 'one of the key concepts in [Cacciari's] "negative thought" trilogy maintains that the languages of different artistic disciplines, different social classes, and different political realities are not translatable into one another'. [op. cit. *The Unpolitical*, p. 16].

¹⁸⁶ Op. cit. *Dialettica e critica...* p. 17.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

And this social transformation throws the pre-bourgeois State-form into crisis, because the pre-capitalist state has no ‘conceptual instruments’ for coping with such a material socio-political transformation—for translating between these irreducibly plural languages. In Hegel, Cacciari argues,

the classical appears in the form of its crisis. The radical consciousness of its problem coincides with the maximum critical tension on the conceptual instruments designed to resolve it. There is no “poverty” of ideology: the modern State-form exists rationally-legitimately if its autonomy is produced by the civil dialectic as a function of the disalienating reconciliation of its interests and needs. If its autonomy functions towards something else—if it exercises *violence* towards those interests—it then becomes irrational-illegitimate. The Hegelian attempt to reveal its solution as effectual reconciliation is ideological. But the problem of the State-form, as it appears in Hegel, is really *the* problem of the modern State at the height of the modern social relations of production.¹⁸⁸

Cacciari subsequently uses Hegel to show how bourgeois praxis has *always* been a system of crisis rather than of harmony. Put more simply, as the pre-bourgeois State struggled to cope with the crisis provoked by bourgeois capitalism, it was gradually defeated and transformed by the ‘revolutionary’ bourgeois forces that emerged within it. Both the concept and the material reality of the State-form were thus transformed *endogenously* from an earlier exogenous imposition (‘classical’, pre-revolutionary monarchy). The outcome of this transformation is a *kratos* (Greek: κράτος, ‘power’ or ‘rule’) which is *pro-duced*—led forward—by the newly empowered bourgeois *demos*. Cacciari argues that the particularities of such transformation in any given historical situation cannot be explained in universal terms because the form of these transformations—the praxis of transformation—is historically, contextually, and materially indigenous. Thus, rather than teleological, inevitable, or predictable according to any set of abstract principles, the transformations Hegel was experiencing and describing were ‘bespoke’—they were ‘tailored’ according to the specific ‘measure’ of the societies in Western Europe in which they were emerging. Indeed, bourgeois praxis always had to be tailored to the particularities of the places in which it sought domination. For example, the material realities of post-Revolutionary France or late-Georgian Great Britain were different to those Hegel experienced in the German states during the

¹⁸⁸op. cit. *Dialettica e critica del politico...*; p. 52.

decline of the Holy Roman Empire. In Cacciari's view, it is this reflexive, indigenous praxis contingent upon local particularities that makes immanent reality impossible to abstract or universalise. For example, when Cacciari and his colleagues referred to 'capitalism' they were referring to the specifics of Italian capitalism, rather than to abstract, monolithic concepts. Thus, he writes that

This 'trans-formation' must be founded on the *specific nature* of that *power*—that is, the modern State-form must justify itself on the foundation of the *specific nature* of the bourgeois "revolution": the form of such a "revolution" heeds the State-form, the *Aufhebung* of the subject that produces it.¹⁸⁹

The result of capitalist *pro-duction* was the emergence of a modern State-form that was immanently and simultaneously *material* and *subjective*: it was devoted both to supporting the bourgeois society that had emerged within it and, with systematic reciprocity, to the very particular foundational material circumstances and practices upon which it relied. This, says Cacciari, is the 'secret' [*l'arcano*] of the modern State-form: though it asserts itself as a monolithic totality, the modern State-form is actually contingent and contextual material-semiotic praxis. It is a deliberate, reflexive-*subjective* praxis of becoming one thing rather than another undertaken by specific people in reaction to the specific circumstances in which they live. As Cacciari explains, '...the *radical* systematicity of this method...[lies] in the fact that this in-tention¹⁹⁰ appears completely *in the*

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 27. Cacciari's emphasis on the morphology of the words 'trans-formation' and *Aufhebung* should not be overlooked. In Italian, a 'transformation' is a *trasformazione*, in which *tras* ('between', 'among') is combined with *formazione* ('formation', 'development'). By replacing *tra* with its Latin antecedent *trans* (across, beyond), Cacciari is emphasising that the transformations being wrought by capitalist praxis began *within* pre-capitalist societies, reached their limits, and expanded *beyond* or *across* the limits of their already-existing foundations rather than merely between or among those limits. Cacciari's emphasis here on German grammar is equally important. The noun *Aufhebung* comes from the infinitive *Aufheben*, which is a separable prefix verb (*Trennbare Verb*), in which the adverbial prefix *auf* ('up') has been attached to the verb *heben* ('to lift'). This conjunction produces a noun based on the consequences of the action described by the verb, in this case, 'the lifted up' or 'that which was lifted up'. By highlighting the foundational separability of this word, Cacciari emphasises that deliberate material action was taken by somebody to *hebt something auf*. It did not simply happen as a matter of course, without any human intervention. Just as the noun *Aufhebung* was deliberately created from already existing words in order to describe a specific action, specific, material action has been taken to *lift something up*.

¹⁹⁰ Here is another example of Cacciari's demystifying, etymological orthography. By writing *intenzione* ('intention') as *in-tenzione*, he emphasises the conflict inherent in peoples' intentions—that they are always 'in tension' or in dispute with the 'intentions' of *other people*. It also highlights—following Saussure, Husserl, Quine and others—the ways in which subjective conceptualisation, the internal 'content' of concepts (their 'intension'), and the objects to which they refer or connote fluctuate and change in relation to the flux and

depths of the development of subjectivity'.¹⁹¹ To dominate within material-semiotic circumstances, bourgeois capitalism—like any other dominant, hegemonic discourse—must entice people to exploit hegemonic bourgeois praxis more effectively, thus participating in their own domination and exploitation as efficiently as possible. This means that *bourgeois* subjects must be created. And this creation 'is the interest of the process of *Aufhebung-Vergeistigung* [sublation-spiritual or intellectual reification] that the subject produces and that produces the subject as material. . . .'¹⁹² That is, as the modern state-form develops, it affects the subjectivity of those who live within it, leading them, in turn, to affect the state-form accordingly. 'The mode of operation of this structure is the process of *Aufhebung-Vergeistigung* that is fulfilled in the production of the State'.¹⁹³ The state is not, therefore, purely semiotic, linear, or subject to any exterior, super- or supranatural guiding forces (teleological, transcendental, invisible or otherwise): it is a deliberate attempt to reify specific subjective praxis as dominant within specific material-semiotic circumstances.

Cacciari resists 'simplistic' attempts to locate this process of *Aufhebung-Vergeistigung* within abstract individuals, for that would be to reduce the practical, reflexive agency of individuals as labouring material subjects to an *a priori* cognitive intention or 'duty'. In his view, the 'secret' of the modern State is that *both* the State *and* the subjective intention of those that create it are material-semiotic: '[t]he problem, the *secret* lies in the effectuality of this intention: in the fact that the labour of the subject not only intends the State, but also produces it—it produces itself as material, and that this process is *irreversible*'.¹⁹⁴

change of the real, material circumstances in which subject and object coexist. The 'meaning' of the State, that is—its *intension*—is directly relative to the circumstances in which it is being both created as an 'object' and defined as such by a 'subject'. This, Cacciari argues, exposes the *modern* State-form as a deliberate *political* praxis within specific material circumstances. Because it is deliberate, the modern State-form is assembled as a consequence of *decisions* taken by material human beings to assemble it in one way rather than in another. As Cacciari puts it, it is a *de-cision*—to cede from *something else* [de-cædere]; to de-side from one group in order to 'side with' another): ceded are the classical definitions, roles, and praxes of the State-form in favour of new, capitalist replacements. Thus, as capitalism was developed, the role and the definition of the 'State' changed: its classical definitions were abandoned and new definitions were adopted according to the specifically material circumstances of *Capitalism* and the political-economic praxes it required.

¹⁹¹ Op. cit. *Dialettica e critica del politico*... p. 21.

¹⁹² Ibid., pp. 21-22.

¹⁹³ idem..

¹⁹⁴ ibid.

Hegel, Cacciari argues, had identified the emergence of the *foundational* crisis of the modern State. Because the processes of *Aufhebung* and *Vergeistigung* are reciprocal and endogenous processes whose consequences are intellectual and material (subjective and objective), their instrumentality to bourgeois capitalism is to develop a state whose indigenous logic (or 'language', as Cacciari calls it) is that of subjective wants, and which needs 'wealth' to be produced and distributed to satisfy these wants; it is, therefore an *economic* state. Because subjective wants and needs are as irreducibly plural as the material subjects themselves, however, the struggle to fulfil them is an unending power struggle. Cacciari argues, therefore, that this economy is a *political* economy, negotiation over *which* wants and needs to fulfil and *how* to fulfil them: 'Reduced to a guarantee of the logic of development in its immediate foundation on instrumental egoism-identification, it is the State of economics; the economy can only be *political* in this sense'.¹⁹⁵ To study the new, modern State-form requires a new, modern science (which has, itself, been *aufgehoben* and *vergeistigen*) capable of making (common) sense of it:

Political economy is the science that analyses the development and distribution of this wealth [produced to satisfy subjective needs and desires]. The infinity of subjective needs is removed dialectically in the rational consideration of the work required to achieve their fulfilment. Political economy therefore analyses the field of mediation, of "complications", of the relations between diverse and discrete interests, from which the recognition of the need for reconciliation in order to achieve their fulfilment is produced.¹⁹⁶

Because Hegel's political economy was dialectical, Cacciari points out that it is the *positive* role of the *negative* that makes development and production possible. This is because the negation of a desire for something by another desire for *something else* creates a market and, therefore, an incentive for the production of the desired something else. Political economy, therefore,

gives shape to the moment of the *negative* as the condition-motor of development. Development is the destiny of the modern. But development is only realisable through the

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 31.

¹⁹⁶ *idem*.

ex-sistence¹⁹⁷ of the negative: of the force that breaks the abstract totality of the beginning or of the End, that *criticises* it.¹⁹⁸

However, Cacciari has little respect for critiques of bourgeois capitalism that presume its development to be natural or inevitable. He considers such claims to be ‘vulgar’ apologies based on ideological dogma rather than on material evidence. In his view, bourgeois development is ‘the irreversible abandonment of the natural—it is the production, creation, multiplication of *unnatural* needs and *unnatural* forms of organisation, artificially constructed for their own fulfilment’.¹⁹⁹

Because bourgeois development is a negation of natural needs and forms of organisation, it needs to establish a formalised system of material praxis that continuously negates and decentres the primacy of peoples’ ‘natural’ needs, in order to replace them with desires for its ‘unnatural’ products. This negating mechanism, Cacciari explains is, *in principle*, the effectual capitalist State-form itself.

He argues, however, that the modern State-form is never *practically* effectual, because it is never stable enough to satisfy its need for its *own* completion, and the negative keeps bursting in to undermine that completion. Cacciari uses the metaphor of a ‘motor’ that never stops running, with the result that the process of the modern State-form’s becoming repeats itself endlessly, creating a *system* of needs. In this system, the satisfaction, or ‘end’ of one subject’s ‘need’ is the ‘beginning’ of a new subjective need towards whose satisfaction the means of production must be then be turned. Its beginning is therefore also its end, and vice versa; it regenerates itself for each new need. Though the system presents a universal, eternal façade, it is constantly reproducing its own necessity by enticing people to exploit the system for themselves, guaranteeing the system’s

¹⁹⁷ *Ex-sistere*: ‘to stand out’. The reference is to Heidegger’s concept of *Dasein* (‘being there’), and his understanding that human beings are ‘of the world’ while ‘standing out’ from it at the same time. Put in slightly different terms, Heidegger argued that though all *Homo sapiens* exist similarly as *Homo sapiens*, our particular morphologies, identities, behaviours, and experiences mean make us distinguishable from one another. For Heidegger, we *ex-sist* whilst existing; and whereas we cannot control our existence, we can at least influence how we *ex-sist*, because life is an ongoing process of *becoming* [*Bildung*]. Like islands in an archipelago, we *ex-sist* in the material world *in relation to* other existing material human beings who are, themselves, engaged in the ongoing process of becoming.

¹⁹⁸ Op. cit. *Dialettica e critica del politico...*, pp. 33-34.

¹⁹⁹ Idem.

dominant, material-semiotic continuity. It is simultaneously, thus, its own material supply and subjective demand, in perpetuity:

A necessity is *the* need which, in order to satisfy itself, *systematically* produces the complex body of mediations, the process of recognition that we call the division of means and of labour. The satisfaction of *this* need is simultaneously the development of needs themselves. The process repeats itself for the new needs in a formally identical way. *Development*, the economic logic of development, implies the incessant repetition of the intellectual abstraction of needs and the intellectualisation of subjective ends. Toil creates an absolutely fake universal; it creates an appearance of reconciliation, strictly delimited to the fulfilment of *one* need. At the end of *this* process, the abstract subject bursts in with new problems and new “propositions” and retriggers the mechanism development and satisfaction in formally identical terms.²⁰⁰

Cacciari also argues that the process initiated by the capitalist State-form is *irreversible*, but not because it is part of any teleological discourse of thought or history. Rather, Cacciari argues that irreversibility comes from the material fact that the development and employment of material mechanisms for satisfying subjective needs and desires *have transformed the material world in which we live*. And this transformation is so drastic that any alternative to a technologically mediated intervention—that is to say, imagining a world without a technological infrastructure, without distribution networks, and so on—is, in Cacciari’s words, literally ‘unthinkable’. Indeed, it is precisely *because* the effort and resources required to dismantle this material infrastructure are so enormous that all that remains ‘thinkable’ is *how* such material infrastructure can be (re)organised and *to what ends* it might be employed. Indeed, even if this massive material and meaningful infrastructure were to be dismantled, even if people still carried memories of the lives they once experienced within it, these memories alone would not be sufficient to unmake the bourgeois infrastructure that has reshaped the material world.

The issue of irreversibility is critical because bourgeois capitalism is not just an abstract idea in peoples’ heads that can be replaced with another abstract idea. Human beings cannot be intellectually ‘deprogrammed’ or ‘reprogrammed’ to interact with the material world in different ways. Moreover, simply changing people’s ideas will not automatically bring about an alteration in the material infrastructure of the world in which they live. Bourgeois praxis has consequences, in

²⁰⁰ Ibid., pp. 31-32.

other words: not just in terms of the allocation of scarce material resources for one purpose rather than another, or in terms of the technological manipulation of the natural environment. Rather, as Hegel and his work demonstrate, people learn ‘phenomenologically’ how to live bourgeois lives as a result of living in a bourgeois society. That is, people do not simply ‘acquire’ bourgeois ‘beliefs’ as they acquire a material commodity; people *learn* bourgeois *praxis* as the normal experience of everyday, material life, during which they and everyone else must *engage materially* with a range of material commodities and forms of material-semiotic infrastructure, simply in order to survive. As time passes, bourgeois praxis becomes so well entrenched that it becomes taken for granted, as synonymous with life itself for the people living within bourgeois society. Such praxis is not, therefore, easily reversed: people cannot simply unlearn or forget everything they have learned about living as a member of their society. Nor can they simply stop relying on the material objects and infrastructure that makes that social life possible, or wish them out of existence, or bring back what had been there in the past. However, the *ends* to which peoples’ skills and experiences are directed—and, indeed, the material infrastructure they have helped build—*can* be transformed or repurposed in different ways. As I will show in later chapters, Cacciari habitually seizes upon the material possibilities of repurposing people’s skills and experiences, and of refounding the material infrastructure in which they live—whatever they may be—in the pursuit of alternative ends (*or ‘third’ possibilities*): these actions are central to his disenchanting praxis.

Cacciari emphasises, as we saw earlier, that once set in motion, particular trajectories of bourgeois development in particular societies transform the material worlds of those societies in ways that make a return to past infrastructures and relations impossible. But irreversibility does not mean immobility. Thus, rather than abstract theorising about what to do with abstract means of production, Cacciari and his Italian predecessors are repeatedly concerned with questions about how specific inherited infrastructure *in Italy* might be repurposed in the present: this theme will recur throughout the thesis. It may be impossible to reverse the material transformations one’s predecessors have carried out on the world, but Cacciari reminds us constantly that what people *do*

with the things they inherit is not predetermined. This is because all things and all meanings exist in permanent states of *becoming*—they undergo constant transformations as time passes and circumstances change. As a consequence, the process of development is not only irreversible; it is also *interminable*. That is, the capitalist system of exchange—of which the bourgeois is but one iteration—is constantly sublating itself into a new version of itself. Put another way, rather than aiming towards a predetermined outcome, the process of *pro-duction* within the modern State-form is ‘without end’ because it *renounces its own completion, detaching* itself from the very dialectic teleology that created it, and carrying on, like a caterpillar that refuses to build a chrysalis, in a ‘suspended’, ‘uncompleted’ form, deliberately preventing itself from reaching its end. This is because the process of fulfilling the infinite needs and desires of the abstract Subject produces inequity: the needs and desires of some must be marginalised if the needs and desires of others are to be fulfilled. Thus, bourgeois praxis is constantly transforming; exploiting the inequities it produces by adapting to them in order to exploit them. Material-semiotic bourgeois praxis therefore outpaces the instantiations of its own ideology. Indeed, the foundational infrastructure of bourgeois capitalism was adapted in Russia after 1917 to the demands of new, Communist pro(-)duction. Similarly, contemporary ‘finance capitalism’ represents the transformation of twentieth-century corporate capitalism, thanks in no small part to the development of digital infrastructure that has displaced, without fully eliminating, the bricks-and-mortar, blood-and-sweat, material infrastructure of its previous iteration. In this regard, ‘capitalism’ is only an ‘ism’ in temporally specific and contextually limited ideological terms. In material-semiotic terms, as the manipulation and allocation of scarce material resources by human beings in response to their subjective, material-semiotic wants and needs, ‘capitalism’ is productive praxis that continually sublates itself.

Hegel explains that this inequity results in the emergence and development of a precarious civil society and a ‘rabble’ [*Pöbel*] at its fringes among those who have been marginalised within the modern-State form. However, Cacciari points out, the modern State does not provide this civil

society or this ‘rabble’ with a path to ‘liberty’ through control of the means of production, forcing them to ‘manufacture’ their own liberty wherever and however they can.

Hegelian civil society is maximally *productive* in the *pro-ducting* of its own Liberty—making it visible, effectual, legible—as a comprehensive Law of the determinations of Liberty as a State. Operating this way, civil society reveals (pro-duces, actually) its own secret: being-intending the State. The freedom of self-consciousness is realised in the State. Here civil society ends as such, and becomes bourgeois society.²⁰¹

This bourgeois society, in turn, both nourishes and restrains the modern State-form’s system of production. It nourishes it by providing workers, for example, but it at the same time restrains it by making impossible the universal satisfaction of all needs and desires within it. Bourgeois society therefore acts as a negative counter which the modern State-form cannot overcome via positive *Aufhebung*, but which it can, at least, contain. As Cacciari explains,

The State-form is produced by this “suspension”, by this unresolved dialectic remainder. This State is founded on a real *renunciation*. The fundamental determination of the negative in the system of needs and of civil society is extraneous to the dialectic of classes and corporations that produces it. Its power must (müssen) *renounce* this negative: renounce developing-comprehending it dialectically; it can only respond to it contingently, administratively (police and colonisation).²⁰²

Thus, the dialectic renounces the negative of civil society while civil society renounces the positivity of the dialectic. This is to say that the liberty civil society has produced for itself lies *within the State*, within its administrative apparatus. This apparatus allows members of the State to contain and manage—and thus exploit—the crisis caused by the contradiction between infinite subjective desire and finite material, productive capability. But this only defers the universal satisfaction by the dialectic. Civil society is, to paraphrase Cacciari, forever in the antechamber of dialectic satisfaction. This is because the State satisfies its own wants and needs—it ensures its own stability and continuity—by counterbalancing the deferred wants and needs of the civil society it has created in a temporary, unstable equilibrium with an external *Pöbel* whose wants and needs it ignores. This crisis is functional for bourgeois capitalism, however, because it opens a parenthesis within the abstract processes of dialectical *Aufhebung* and civil society. This parenthesis is made possible by social institutions like the police who can restrain the rabble, potentially deferring

²⁰¹ Op. cit. *Dialettica e critica del politico...* p. 41.

²⁰² Ibid., p. 43.

indefinitely the satisfaction of their needs and desires. It is within this parenthesis that partial political economy—*Aufhebung* and *Vergeistigung*—can insert and reproduce itself *endlessly*, within the irreducibly plural contextual and material circumstances of the real world. This is how the State becomes a mechanism for contingently and administratively containing the political economic contradictions of bourgeois capitalism.

Far from being a rung on a teleological ladder, the State is therefore a work-in-progress whose ‘work’ is that of producing liberation within immediate, specific, *restricted* material circumstances. As Cacciari puts it, ‘[t]his State is the process of liberation, produced *in and of* this process, not a future liberation’.²⁰³ As a consequence, ‘liberation’ becomes a work-in-progress itself, rather than a self-contained, pre-determined state of affairs that can be realised and imposed for all in the fullness of time. Indeed, liberation remains a work-in-progress because, in an irreducibly plural society, that from which one desires liberation is never annihilated; it is constantly changing. The State-form becomes therefore the formalisation and institutionalisation—and the containment—of this ongoing, liberating *praxis*, rather than the embodiment of any particular liberatory outcome. Any ultimate ‘completion’ or ‘fulfilment’ for the State is ‘renounced’ in order to produce immediate, relative relief from specific conflicts and contradictions—many of which are, themselves, produced by the State and its system of production. According to Cacciari, the State renounces its final completion because, were the process of fulfilling desires and needs to be completed, there would be no further need for the institutions and structures that produce and benefit from this process. The State therefore not just a work-in-progress, but a *contradiction-in-progress*:

There is no legitimisation of the modern State within the *logic* of political economy—because here *autonomy*, truly self-founding autonomy is Economic. Between the Economic and the Political there is a perfect homology. Therefore, political economy is inherently

²⁰³ Ibid., p. 56. Readers familiar with post-structuralist continental philosophy may recognise an affinity between Cacciari’s discussion of liberty as ongoing, immanent praxis rather than an ultimate, utopian state and the conclusions in a similar vein reached by Michel Foucault. While there is certainly a similarity between their discussions, it is important to note that Cacciari was highly critical of Foucault and the foundational assumptions about material human praxis used by Foucault to scaffold his work.

contradictory because it *dissolves* the State-form, of whose actual operations, however, it is continuously shown to be in need.²⁰⁴

Because of its inherent contradictions, Cacciari says, the modern state is home to (at least) 'two' distinct *languages*: that of the capitalists and that of the proletariat. 'The State does not possess the language of totalising synthesis, of reconciliation. It is the complex in-finity of the negation of negation'.²⁰⁵ The State therefore can only become legitimate by some other means. According to Cacciari, the state

has approval and therefore power, to the extent that it realises the logic of the modern social relations of production in the form of reconciliation, of non-alienation. It is illegitimate, therefore, whether it desires to immediately overcome this form (the classical Political utopia), or whether, if remaining in that form, it does not succeed at *developing* it into reconciliation. The problematic of such *development* is therefore the inherent problematic of the foundation of the modern State.²⁰⁶

The development of reconciliation and non-alienation are efforts that, along with police and colonisation policies, for example, are meant to contain the State's contradictions partially and temporarily, until the material-semiotic circumstances in which the State operates change, requiring new forms of containment; they do not represent stages on the road to utopia, because they are temporary, partial, and incomplete. But rather than cause for despair, Cacciari emphasises that this realisation of the incessant coming-into-being and passing-away of the state has progressive possibilities even though it is not utopian. This is because both processes involve the transformation of *something* into *something else* rather than the dissolving of something into nothingness. Here one can observe the roots of the disenchanted *operaista* response to workers' struggles in Porto Marghera. Rather than overthrowing or annihilating existing institutions and practices, the *operaisti* sought to *transform* or *refound* the relationships between labour, capital, and the intermediary institutions that link them.

There is always, therefore, an opportunity for people to actively influence this material-semiotic transformation in ways they consider progressive, even though no utopian outcome is

²⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 51.

²⁰⁵ Op. cit., *Dialettica e critica del politico*... p. 58.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 50.

guaranteed. All existence, for Hegel, is a process of becoming, of beginning again and again: first one as thing, then as another, *ad infinitum*. This means that there is always an opportunity to affect change or to sustain the status quo for ideological or material reasons. As Cacciari says,

the concept of finitude “has merely to show that the finite is not [‘i.e., that the finite is not the truth but the transition to something higher’]”. The nihilism that brings about the dialectic of the State is the destiny that concludes its process. Like every determination of the finite, even the State must be “a passing-away [*trapassare*] and a going beyond itself”. The dialectic of the Auf-hebung does not just pro-duce the State, but it comprehends it: it also does its work of “nullifying nullity” and “making vanity vain” on the State.²⁰⁷

Because Cacciari does not approach Hegel as a foundation for deriving or deducing abstract principles or propositional logics, it is crucial to explore his different, alternative methodological approach to canonical texts. Cacciari’s reading of Hegel is an excellent introduction to Cacciari’s own thought: it demonstrates both his disenchanted methodological approach to scholarship (and, in this case, to canonical texts) and it draws attention to those aspects of Hegel’s work Cacciari considers important, ‘picks up’ and includes as a foundational element of his own praxis.

He approached Hegel’s work as reflexive, critical commentary on the reality he was experiencing and participating in a society in which capitalist praxis was still taking shape in Western Europe. Separated from any teleology, therefore, Cacciari was able to read Hegel as a guide for studying political activity as material-semiotic (phenomenological) praxis. Cacciari uses Hegel to demonstrate how capitalist praxis has *always* been a system that continually produces material-semiotic crises rather than cognitive harmony. That is, bourgeois capitalism is a precarious work-in-progress—or better, a *crisis-in-progress*—that uses its foundational instability to recruit those it dominates: if the system fails, everybody will suffer, so it is better to comply with the system’s goals of stabilisation. It is therefore the *promise* that eventual harmony via the bourgeois means of material production is getting closer—via technology and labour—that persuades people to participate actively in the pursuit of that harmony, using those means.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 57. In Italian, the phrase ‘vanity is made vain’ is translated as *la vanificazione del vano*. This is important to note, because the word *vanificazione* (literally ‘vanification’, ‘to make vain’) is derived from the verb *vanificare*, which means ‘to frustrate’ or ‘to nullify’. A subject’s vanity is, therefore, nullified by this ‘internal act’: it is rendered *vain*; its ‘selfish’ pursuit of fulfilment is *frustrated*.

Bourgeois capitalism is not, therefore, a positive system: according to *operaismo*, capitalism was progressive because workers' resistance forced capitalists to innovate. But this is not all: capitalist praxis also requires 'maintenance' in order to survive. This 'maintenance' takes the form of what I will later term 'participatory domination' or complicit, reflexive praxis from those it dominates.

Indeed, bourgeois capitalism demands this complicity from people whether they agree with the system or not; whether they believe it will eventually deliver harmonious satisfaction or not. Bourgeois capitalism requires complicit praxis to maintain its precarious foundation because it is that precarity which compels people to engage in complicit praxis rather than begin looking for 'third' possibilities. To maintain this contingent complicity, bourgeois capitalism produces epic existential narratives of teleology and binary ontology (Liberalism and Communism most obviously) according to which the only alternative is the abyss. To paraphrase *Peter Pan*, the bourgeois capitalist system convinces people to clap and say they believe in fairies lest the system die; people clap not because they necessarily believe in fairies, but because they are afraid of what happens if the system dies. This production of crisis-as-stability is the foundational aporia that 'nourishes' capitalist praxis.

For political theorists trying to challenge the discipline's foundational approach to the praxis of political theory, Cacciari's approach to Hegel can be taken as an encouraging tutorial: if, like Cacciari, they renounce the praxis of utopian abstraction to explore the open possibilities of everyday material praxis, considering ways to repurpose the debris of the past, they may well find themselves differently situated in the world, but not sinking into a void. By following the reflexive and material-semiotic path Cacciari blazes through Hegel, political theorists may instead find themselves on a reliable, if unfamiliar, alternative, material-semiotic foundations. He makes two moves that are common among Marxists rejecting teleology and utopian abstraction. But he then makes a third, perhaps unexpected, move to irreducibly plural, archipelago foundations and insists that any subsequent analysis attend to the reflexive relationships between the material and the semiotic dimensions of praxis.

The third and final aspect of Cacciari's discussion of Hegel's philosophy to which I would like to draw attention concerns the freedom of the subject within the modern State-form. This is important because insisting upon or taking for granted the primacy of a purely intellectual and universal(isable) conception of freedom, as is standard in much—if not most—political theory produces aporetic consequences. These consequences include the inability to conceive of the material-semiotic agency of specific human beings struggling to cope with specific material-semiotic circumstances as praxis, and the inability to examine reflexively the material-semiotic foundations upon which definitions of freedom lie. Cacciari argues, by contrast, that freedom must also be defined in terms of material-semiotic praxis, in response to the material circumstances experienced by the person seeking to define freedom. As discussed above, Cacciari argues that the modern State-form *renounces its ultimate fulfilment of individuals' subjective desires* in order to keep the system functioning. If this is the case, however, Cacciari points out that the State is also *renouncing the possibility of the ultimate synthesis* it was designed to provide: universal freedom from all conflict and contradiction. Because the State is forced to abandon its utopian goals as it is drawn into the reality of the irreducible plurality that exists within it (and to which it is beholden for its continued existence), Cacciari argues that Hegel's analysis negates the individualistic, ahistorical, and universalistic foundations of the bourgeois State. Indeed, if human life in the material world is irreducibly plural, there is no possibility for *any universal* liberation from conflict and contradiction—that is, from politics—by *any* political doctrine.

This same negation of foundational political doctrine can be found in the work of Hegel's critics like Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche, and has indeed become widely accepted in the continental philosophical tradition. Yet Cacciari's disenchanted interpretation of this analysis is unique. For example, he notes that Schopenhauer's pessimism that the 'will-to-life' of all living things could ever be satisfied undermines the teleological project of Hegel's *Aufhebung*.

Schopenhauer's pessimism also lays bare the impossibility of understanding the production of the State as liberation, dis-alienation. In negative thought, the Political is an analysis and recognition of alienation, it constitutes its highest understanding. Its language is *disparate* alienation. The *division* between the Political and morality, the critique of the

Political as a synthesis of the diverse “needs” of subjectivity, the abandonment of the teleological perspective, again implicitly present in Schopenhauer, determine the specificity of *grand Politics* in Kierkegaard, even before Nietzsche.²⁰⁸

Material-Semiotic Agency as Political Negation

For Cacciari, negative thought takes on the form of the negation of *all* foundational political doctrines, while incorporating the insight that what negation implies is not the dissolution of something into nothing but the transformation of something into something *else*. This aspect of Cacciari’s work is particularly significant for political theorists, because this alternative is one that Anglophone political theorists in particular seem unable to find via their own deliberations. Indeed, it is because Anglophone political theory is so intensely focussed ‘isolat[ing] and captur[ing] the very essence of political being’ by ‘conceptualising the political as an autonomous real with its own intrinsic logic’²⁰⁹ that it forecloses any such differently foundational, material-semiotic alternatives that realists have identified in the discipline. Put differently, by discounting the role of all praxis except intellectual praxis, political theorists foreclose the very possibility of seeking alternative methodological tools and political possibilities by means of material praxis. But Cacciari insists that this kind of material praxis can produce a materially sound *alternative*, and I will argue that his work provides several such examples. Cacciari finds justification for this alternative in Hegel himself, after whom negative thought was no longer merely an intellectual exercise. After Hegel, negative thought became a critical response to the changing material conditions of the era: both the emergence of industrialisation and bourgeois capitalism and their restructuring of society, as well as the political and social reorganisation set in motion by the French Revolution. After Hegel, Cacciari writes,

[t]he period that follows, directly or not, is fully aware of this fundamental fact: of the unrepurposeability [*irriproponibilità*] of the bygone forms of romantic criticism, of the decisive and irrefutable character of Hegelian critique. In fact, it stems from this awareness; all of its creative force is contained within the attempt to respond to the dialectic—never to preserve the categories that have already become irreversibly contained within the dialectic system itself. This movement passes through various degrees of radicality, but its general direction is indisputable: in criticising the dialectic form,

²⁰⁸ Op. cit. *Dialettica e critica del politico...* p. 66.

²⁰⁹ Op. cit. McNay, p. 2.

“negative thought” sees the elements already included within it, is conscious of the need to integrate them, and therefore criticises these very elements.²¹⁰

Cacciari therefore reads Hegel’s work as a deliberate and decisive, ‘radical’²¹¹ break with the past rather than as a desperate, reactionary attempt to respond to a break which, out of nowhere, had been imposed upon him (and the world) by capitalism. In Cacciari’s view, Hegel rode the ‘new wave’ rather than getting caught unawares by it: rather than flailing around trying desperately to stay afloat, he was able to criticise what the wave was doing and where it was taking him. Hegel understood that life as lived, experienced, and reflected upon was changing, and that his study of those changes—*how* he studied and expressed his responses to them—would also have to change. For Cacciari, Hegel’s critique was therefore an act which broke out of old limits, ending previous ways of thinking and acting in order to think and act *differently* in a world distinctly different from the one that preceded it.

Hegel’s critique revealed new possibilities for engaging with the known and unknown world, alternative methods of critique, and new meaningful discourses. These possibilities were seized upon by a great many philosophers, often in the form of a critique of Hegel himself. Cacciari refers in his analysis to the ways negative thought was subsequently developed by philosophers like Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Weber, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger. In his studies of their work, Cacciari pays particular attention to the ways in which negative thought becomes an evermore robust critical methodology for exposing and demystifying the absolutist pretensions of the bourgeois world. However, Cacciari consistently claims that this critique is not ‘vectored’ towards the absolute annihilation of this bourgeois world, but rather at its deconstruction and examination; what *follows* from that critique cannot be determined until the critique has taken place. For Cacciari, therefore, negative thought is a specific and emphatic critique of *any* discourse that asserts that the outcome of a critical analysis can be determined beforehand; of *any* discourse

²¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 133-134.

²¹¹ E.g. op. cit. *Dialettica e critica del politico...* p. 16.

that promises an absolute, universal liberation from conflict, contradiction, or *politics* that emerge *within this world*.

In Cacciari's view, renouncing all pretensions to absolute, universal outcomes is implied by Hegel's critique (even though it is contradicted by Hegel's utopian affirmation of the possibility of a universal, teleological *Aufhebung*). According to Cacciari, Nietzsche can be understood as building on Hegel's critique whilst criticising his utopian conclusions²¹² when he suggests a reflexive, phenomenological subject who, not enchanted by utopia, takes a 'grander', more holistic view of life in the world and its many coexisting contradictions. As Alan Schrift explains, Nietzsche hoped that the Hegelian reflexive, disenchanted phenomenological critique of material reality would create a new individual subject, one 'possessed of grand style and politics, *who will view themselves as an artist views her or his material*; who will represent the antithetical character of existence most strongly and courageously; who will allow themselves the greatest multiplicity of contradictory perspectives, while maintaining the formative power of self-dominion and the ability to discipline themselves to wholeness...'.²¹³ Nietzsche hoped that 'Grand Politicians' would learn specifically political *techniques* analogous to the specialised technique of the master sculptor: the 'Grand Politician' would develop the skills and tools required to hew the most 'beautiful' political arrangements possible from imperfect materials.

Anyone can complain about politics, criticise politicians, and claim that they could do a better job. To *do* politics successfully, however—to cope with conflicts and to negotiate solutions—requires skill, experience, and tools. Success is not, therefore, a matter of theory alone, of arriving at an abstract, semiotic solution through intellectual deliberation (such as the dialectic); rather, it involves thinking reflexively within irreducibly plural material-semiotic limits and contradictions, without the promise of an assured utopian outcome. From Cacciari's perspective,

²¹² Cf. Stephen Houlgate: *Hegel, Nietzsche and the Criticism of Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

²¹³ Alan Schrift, *Nietzsche and the Question of Interpretation: Between Hermeneutics and Deconstruction* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1990); p. 159. [Emphasis added].

one must not assume—as Negri did, for example—that certain circumstances will catalyse the revolution as a matter of teleological course. Cacciari writes that

[t]he detachment of the Political from the dialectic form is completed as soon as it no longer represents the *true language* of the multiplicity of civil dialects, of the individual, of the economic—as soon as it no longer constitutes or promises a *telos*. *This means that grand Politics is a renunciation of being a totality*. In this sense, grand Politics “interiorises” the process of the State’s decadence—it constitutes its most disenchanting, coldest thinking, in the sense that not only does it conceive it in its effectuality, but it prohibits any images of utopia *beyond* such decadence. The dissolution of the State ‘frees’ grand Politics, not to Nirvana or to the Religious—it ‘frees’ it to *renounce* Nirvana or the Religious.²¹⁴

Grand politics is not merely a renunciation of utopian ends, Cacciari explains; it is also a rejection of *foundational* assumptions which presume the primacy of the individual subject and its infinite needs and desires. Nietzsche’s ‘prophesying’, he argues, conceals the fact that it is impossible to speak of an actual ‘grand politician’. This is because Grand Politics is a reflexive engagement with irreducible plurality—with *dissoi logoi*—from *within* that very irreducibility. In order to achieve anything, grand Politics must ‘renounce’ or decentre its own foundational pretences about subjectivity and objectivity in order to engage with the similarly-decentred pretences of those with whom it encounters. As Cacciari puts it, ‘[t]he positive decision of Grand Politics is the affirmation that being just *is*, separated *from nothing*, that only its movements, its languages, its interests are calculable and *utterable*’.²¹⁵

From Cacciari’s perspective, therefore, Grand Politics becomes a reflexive political methodology free from any semiotic enchantment—a *beginning* for political praxis that, to paraphrase Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, seeks to mediate the ‘friction’ caused by irreducible plurality to forge ‘awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference’²¹⁶ rather than the imposition of a universal synthesis of one kind or another. As Cacciari explains, Grand Politicians have no choice but to *begin* their political praxis from the recognition that, within the dissonant *heteroglossia* of irreducible plurality, theirs are but individual voices. As a

²¹⁴ Op. Cit. *Dialettica e critica*... p. 72.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing: *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); p. 4.

result, the sound each voice makes, and the harmonies it seeks, must be relative to, and contingent upon, the specific material realities of its provenance *in relation to those of the other voices present*. Therefore, 'what Grand Politicians *are able to do* depends on the extent to which they understand this procedure, the various techniques that compose it, their relations, the field lines²¹⁷ that emerge from their conflicts'. According to Cacciari, the result of grand political praxis is not dialectic synthesis, utopia ('freedom') or dystopia ('anarchy') of any kind. It is instead the *transformation* of everything that preceded and contributed to this praxis, the state, its power, the relationships and subjectivities of the people within it. No one and no thing emerges unaffected; because all are forced to cope reflexively with one another means that *new* praxes are developed. Grand Politics, Cacciari argues,

produces new powers and new forms, *not* anarchy, *not* freedom. This Politics is for those who renounce and *who are not consoled* by renunciation. Neither Nirvana nor the Religious are consolations as such, but pretences for the dialectical-paradoxical overcoming of the Political. As separate, untranslatable Political techniques, they remain as warnings of the ineffectuality of all-encompassing *Aufhebung*.²¹⁸

Those who renounce the possibility of universal, all-encompassing *Aufhebung* do not find any consolation in this renunciation because the consequences of this renunciation are not pre-determined. Yet, *disenchantment* with the possibility of universal, utopian reconciliation of all conflict and contradiction is not a dead end; on the contrary, it creates myriad possibilities for myriad partial, contingent solutions beyond the binary limits of ideological enchantment and disenchantment. For Cacciari, the de-cision to renounce one discursive practice makes possible the (re)attachment to any number of *alternative* discursive practices—not a plunge into nothingness. Renouncing utopia makes it possible to live in the material world as it changes—to sculpt something in an imperfect medium. It therefore places the responsibility for living in the material, irreducibly plural world *as it happens to be* on imperfect, irreducibly complex, material human shoulders. We must rely on the experiences of which we try to make sense within the imperfect

²¹⁷ In physics, a 'field line' refers to a 'path followed by an electric charge free to move in an electric field, of a mass free to move in a gravitational field, or generally any appropriate test particle in a given force field'. In this context, a 'field of hegemonic influence' may be a more accurate description.

[Source: *Encyclopedia Britannica* [[http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/field line](http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/field%20line)].

²¹⁸ Op. cit. *Dialettica e critica...* pp. 72-73.

material limits in which we live, rather than on utopian abstractions within abstract intellects on abstract shoulders. In Cacciari's view, utopian thinking is dangerous because it directs attention away from the possibilities for reflexive, material-semiotic creativity within imperfect, imminent limits. Instead, utopian thinking—like that of Negri, which drove Cacciari from *Potere Operaio*—focuses on abstract cognition directed towards a longing for strict ideological ends. As a result, the search for 'third' possibilities is hijacked. "Supposing we are determined to live",²¹⁹ within irreducible plurality rather than trying to overcome, negate, or marginalise it, Cacciari writes,

we organise our thinking in order to make becoming "manageable". These forms have different themes and languages. There is no Technique, but *differences* between techniques and the forms of their transformation. Is *this* grand Politics? A paradoxical 'being-at-home' [*essere-a-casa*] in the *Unruhe* [restlessness, unease] of this being-that-just-is? Or, equally, a paradoxical *aversion* [*non-volere*] to being-at-home?²²⁰

To 'be-at-home' in the *Unruhe*-that-just-is is to be willing to cope with things as they happen to be. This does not in any way suggest that because the status quo is all there is (and all there will ever be), resistance is useless. On the contrary, it means that every status quo is unstable: it is a contingent alliance among irreducibly plural components, a material-semiotic assemblage which can be destabilised and transformed into something else.²²¹ It is within the *utopian* status quo that resistance is useless, allegedly because there will be no need for it. There is no hope in utopia, Cacciari argues, because it is the realisation of perfect equivalence and interchangeability: it is the achievement or realisation of terminal nihilism.

The modern State-form has been developed as a way to end hope by realising peoples' hopes once and for all. But if people are irreducibly plural, so to must be their hopes, making this an impossible task. "The "political Hegel", says Cacciari,

is the grand experiment with this possibility: the State produces itself as separate, as an Autonomy—but such Autonomy is a production of the subject as a foundation, of the

²¹⁹ Cacciari cites Nietzsche: "...gesetzt daß wir entschlossen sind zu leben...". [Friedrich Nietzsche: *Nachgelassene Fragmente August–September 1885* (H40: §39). [<http://www.nietzschesource.org/>]

²²⁰ Op. cit. *Dialettica e critica*... 74.

²²¹ This is an example of the affinity between Cacciari's work and that of the agonists within political theory. I will return to this affinity in the conclusion.

subject as substance. Understood rationally as a foundation, the subject produces the autonomous form of the State.²²²

This is to say that, in an attempt to cope with the material contradictions being experienced in one's society, material-semiotic subjects *experiment* with ways to cope with those contradictions. Historically, as Hegel (and many others) explain, the contradictions that bourgeois capitalism produced (and according to which it produced) compelled people to develop material and intellectual praxes—forms of *Aufhebung*—for coping with those contradictions. In the nineteenth century, bourgeois capitalists sought to link the individual, phenomenological subjectivity (the ordinary bourgeois individual) directly and causally with a specific autonomous objectivity (the modern State-form). That is, they directly linked the material contradictions experienced by 'ordinary' individuals to an objective means for overcoming those very contradictions. This object is therefore entirely contingent upon the subject rather than vice versa. For this reason, Cacciari explains that '[t]he work of the subject is explicitly *political*—it is *sui generis*: it is the dimension of producing the separate, the autonomous, as production, expression, its own subjectivity as substantiality'.²²³

The political subject leads people forward (*pro-duces*), focussing their will to overcome these contradictions into a common, political expression of that will which *presses out* (*ex-presses*) against these contradictions from within the contradictions themselves. Therefore, in Cacciari's view, the modern State-form is not the enactment of any universal solution; rather, it is the outcome of a contextually and materially contingent project of *experimental political praxis* within material, (bourgeois) capitalising reality. In other words, the state-form is an attempt at *Aufhebung* without any guarantee of success; indeed, as we have seen, that success is perpetually deferred. To continue the earlier metaphor, the modern State-form is the 'sound' uttered by the bourgeois capitalist within the irreducibly plural chorus. Though it is shouted loudly in an attempt to press

²²² Op. cit. *Dialettica e critica...* p. 74. Emphasis added.

²²³ Ibid.

out—to *ex-press*—against the din of other sounds shouting as loudly as they can for similar reasons: to bring other voices into harmony with their own, drowning out the rest of the chorus.

From Cacciari's perspective, negative thought is a method of critique that exposes the impossibility of utopia by demonstrating the ineradicable persistence of conflict and contradiction not just in everyday life itself, but more specifically *within those discourses that assert the possibility of utopian reconciliation*. Yet even as it deflates any discourse which claims the possibility of universal emancipation, salvation, or reconciliation of these conflicts, the result is not the void, but rather an encounter with materials for rebuilding everyday life. As an experiment, political praxis cannot guarantee a specific outcome, no matter what it promises. As Cacciari puts it, the fact that 'no subject and no Truth express themselves within the State'²²⁴ confirms the contingency and the partiality—the relative *subjectivity*—of the discourse and praxis of the modern State-form. As a result, 'there can only be organisational forms founded on the *times* of the subject, no longer foundation, no longer substance—that is, on the difference and the separation between these *times*.'²²⁵ That is, as times change, so too will the organisational forms—the politics—of the State in response to new contradictions, which contradict previous contradictions and the way in which the State was organised to cope with them. New *Aufhebung* will be required. And every new *Aufhebung* will require that even the subjective politics within the discourse of the modern State-form will need to be reworked. This political discourse is never settled because it is constantly struggling to transform a subjective response to material realities into an objective, universal utopia. Yet, it is trying to realise a utopia that can only be considered objective from a specific, subjective point of view. And because it is narrowly subjective, this political discourse cannot help but run into the problem of irreducible plurality; that is, it can never *hebt* everything *auf*.

This failure means that the State is not the ideal outcome of history after all; it is merely the outcome of contingent and ephemeral material-semiotic praxis. True, the subjective need for

²²⁴ Op. cit. *Dialettica e critica...* p. 74.

²²⁵ Ibid.

resolution or consolation produces a desire for a system of *Aufhebung* which will deliver that resolution or consolation. But because bourgeois capitalism is constantly producing new contradictions and needs, people are constantly attempting to develop new systems of *Aufhebung* to cope apace because they are in constant need of new (or more) consolation. It is this cycle that takes place on the aporetic foundation discussed above. '[T]he State is transformable',²²⁶ Cacciari argues, because new contradictions produce new politics which produce a revolution of the State's organisation. Politics is therefore a never-ending, experimental praxis for coping reflexively with contradictions. Cacciari is very pessimistic, therefore, that any particular move at any particular place and time would be sufficient to overcome the hegemony of the bourgeois state.

This it does, as explained above, by offering people a 'choice' between itself or the abyss—a choice which Cacciari argues is no choice at all, because it merely reproduces the same aporia time and time again. This analysis leads Cacciari to conclude that negative thought 'is a critique of the very idea of Freedom'. This is because, as Hegel noted, within the modern State-form, 'freedom' is understood as freedom *from* 'contradiction' rather than freedom *to* contradict and be contradicted. The State, Cacciari concludes, is therefore a *negation* of freedom because it is a system intended to ensure that no individual is alienated by contradiction from any other individual. The meaning of freedom, says Cacciari, is restricted by the limits of the subjective interpretation of the material circumstances in which it is defined: 'Freedom is the *Aufhebung* of the Will: the substantial unity of the right of the individual with the ethical ideal—in this sense Freedom is truly an *Offenbarung* ['epiphany', 'manifestation'] of the substance of the Will'.²²⁷ Thus, within a society dominated by bourgeois praxis, 'freedom' is defined in bourgeois terms within the limits of bourgeois praxis; freedom is what the subjective Will recognises reflexively (its 'epiphany') as freedom for itself *within* capitalist material circumstances. This is an individual, phenomenological definition of freedom of *Aufhebung* within the institutionalised *Aufhebung* of the modern State-form. It is not a

²²⁶ Ibid. p. 74.

²²⁷ Ibid., p. 60.

definition of freedom that permits movement *outside* of this State-form. It is therefore an aporetic cul-de-sac.

It turns out, Cacciari concludes, that the concept of 'universal' Freedom is, in fact, an *entirely* individual product. He draws this conclusion from the fact that the Will (of the material-semiotic subject) is experiencing life *within* the capitalist State-form, which exists to produce the fulfilment of the infinite needs and desires of the individual subject. Thus, Freedom is only a *specific individual's* idea of what universal Freedom would be *according to his or her subjective desires*. And these desires depend entirely on the specific material circumstances in which that individual exists. In Cacciari's view, negative thought seeks to restrain this subjective understanding of freedom, or at least temper the consequences of what Hegel referred to as '[t]he extravagances of subjectivity' which whirl 'round and round in the vortex of reflecting understanding, which is ever negative in reference to itself.'²²⁸ Such extravagant reflexivity could lead to madness. Madness can be averted (or, at the very least, its consequences may be tempered) by criticising utopian discourse as subjective extravagance, as something without foundation outside the mind of a particular subject. Cacciari does not seek to impede or disparage individual thoughts or desires which seeks to resist, reform, or replace a particular material-semiotic status quo. However, negative thought has value as an attempt to deflate subjective extravagance. Such deflation is helpful because it enables *sublation* of the criticality and its vigour of such extravagance, redirecting it in order to cope effectively with life in an irreducibly plural, material world that lacks any 'firm and steady basis'.

Whereas Hegel set out to deduce the Freedom of the Will, Cacciari argues that negative thought explains why the idea of Freedom of the Will is an irresolvable contradiction. His discussion of freedom takes a reflexive, material-semiotic approach to the question of freedom. In his view, '[t]he subject conceives of Freedom, *today*, only through the dialectics of use, of ownership—of *universal alienation*. The subject...wants Freedom of the Will—not *from* the

²²⁸ G.W.F. Hegel: *Lectures on the History of Philosophy 3: Mediaeval and Modern Philosophy*, trans. Haldane and Simson. (Lincoln, NE: Bison Books/University of Nebraska Press, 1995); p. 510.

Will'.²²⁹ Cacciari argues that the Will of individual subjects exists in an irreducibly plural material world. Because the information it processes is ineluctably linked to its narrow material-semiotic experience and participation in that world, the Will of any subject can never be completely free of all entanglements, because the material world it experiences is full of other similar wills and their ineluctable, dialogic interaction. Any individual Will is only one will among many. This irreducible plurality means that the modern State-form cannot complete the task it was ostensibly designed and implemented to complete: delivering total freedom to each individual subject. The state's failure is a consequence of the fact that the modern State-form is contingent, *material* praxis rather than a teleological mechanism. To be sure, the state produces alternative means which people can use to organise themselves in various ways based on their needs and desires, whether those are sober or utopian. However, Cacciari insists, negative thought reveals that the State is not actually designed to *produce* any end other than its own longevity. The State is thus not just a problem people have created for themselves; it is a perpetual problem which is, at the same time, always its own solution. The modern State-form is a practical mechanism for coping with irreducible plurality by stabilising and *institutionalising the ineluctable conflict* such plurality entails.

What this means for Cacciari is that material-semiotic political praxis can never be overcome, *Aufgehoben*, or decentred once and for all. However, he argues that conflict and plurality—whatever their ideological or political foundations may be—can be *managed* effectively in any number of ways within the intellectual and material infrastructure of the modern State-form. This recognition, Cacciari explains, was at the centre of Nietzsche's critique of Hegel. For Nietzsche, Hegel was too enchanted by the idea of a teleological *Aufhebung* which would lead to a synthetic, total knowledge. Ultimately, however, Cacciari concludes that there is no freedom from the political except by separating oneself from the material world, by decentring reality and replacing it with pessimism, religion, or faith.²³⁰

²²⁹ Op. cit. *Dialettica e critica...* p. 60.

²³⁰ Ibid., p. 71.

For Cacciari, therefore, Nietzsche's Grand Politics disenchant Hegel's *Aufhebung* by exposing the aporia produced by any pretention to 'onto-theo-teleological foundation'. In his view, it was Hegel, Nietzsche, and other negative thinkers who helped identify the origin of this aporia with the emergence of bourgeois praxis, and who began to make sense of how it worked. Because it lacks any foundational ideological pretence, Cacciari insists that negative thought is able to criticise foundations recognised by others and expose their contingency, revealing them as the outcome of relative, contextual praxis (or *projects*), of particular wills-to-power acting within a context of irreducible plurality. As a result, he argues that subjective notions of freedom must be understood as the praxis of coping with the experience of specific power relations within the material-semiotic circumstances in which individuals live. In Cacciari's view, freedom, therefore, is a reflexive and subjective material-semiotic praxis, undertaken by specific people in specific circumstances; it is not a monolithic, cognitive 'ideal', universal 'value', or transcendental 'concept'. What freedom means, in his view, is contextually relative, and that meaning is constantly developing and transforming as material-semiotic circumstances change. And in Hegel's case as in ours, power relations are dominated by capitalist praxis. In the final section I will begin to examine Cacciari's discussion of how the paradoxical foundations of capitalism and its aporetic praxis produce self-renewing *crisis*.

The Means of Pro-Duction

According to Cacciari, using negative thought to criticise bourgeois foundations suggests that bourgeois praxis can only produce aporia. Real people who experience aporia in praxis subjectively experience that aporia as *crisis*: as the conviction that something, somewhere, has gone wrong, because what was promised is not being delivered. Cacciari explains that if bourgeois praxis produces crisis, the modern State-form is actually designed to produce, and then cope with, crises-in-progress, rather than producing universal harmony. This is, he says, because bourgeois capitalism requires foundational crisis in order to sustain itself. Under bourgeois domination, therefore, crisis is the norm rather than an aberration; in short, crisis is the harmony produced by

capitalism. Given this understanding of the origins of crisis within the modern State-form, the problem of Grand Politics becomes one of devising means that will *manage* the ever present crises the system produces. Grand Politics must cope with crisis to ensure that it does not become *catastrophe*. As Cacciari explains, a *crisis* is manageable, but a *catastrophe* is not; in bourgeois society, grand politics is to be found wherever longterm collective continuity is desired. It is, therefore, a form of collective bargaining and is as much to be found among labour (general assemblies to protect jobs) as among capital (collective bargaining agreements that protect production).

Indeed, as suggested earlier, Cacciari argues that capitalist praxis relies on the moment of crisis to influence the praxis of those it would dominate. As he puts it, '[t]he relativity of the bourgeois project (as critique of every revolutionary idea...) has the security of eliminating any exception to its own assumptions'.²³¹ Thus, if the subjectivity of the bourgeois subject can be 'centred' as the foundational origin of the framework for interpreting the world *logically*, the crisis of the bourgeois project becomes taken for granted as normal, as *rational*; all exceptions become *irrational, illogical* aberrations. The consequence of all praxis built upon this foundation is revealed in the tragic material praxis of the State, which is 'crisis management'. As Cacciari puts it,

In their multiplicity and their differences, [the] results of negative thought distinguish themselves with regard to the Hegelian "classical"—in the sense that they recognise in Hegel the decisive *theory* of the *tragedy* of the modern: literally, its *crisis*. And it is precisely this *crisis* that emerges with specific evidence in the philosophy of right and of the State.²³²

That is, to sustain itself, the State must *sublate* its crises lest they transform into catastrophes, the consequence of which would be a new, alternative order. The State therefore seeks to preserve a crisis in order to maintain its status quo: '[p]erennial emergency keeps a political system organised. . . on the edge of catastrophe'.²³³ Perennial crisis also influences the behaviour—the praxis—of those the state governs. In this sense modern State-form thus institutionalises itself as both its problem *and* its solution—a form in permanent crisis; a form in which crises can be managed but

²³¹ Massimo Cacciari: *The Unpolitical: On the Radical Critique of Political Reason*, ed. Carrera. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009); p. 144.

²³² Op. cit. *Dialettica e critica*... p. 62.

²³³ Massimo Cacciari: 'Catastrophes' in op. cit. *The Unpolitical*.

never fully resolved. Cacciari insists that this manageable-yet-unresolvable crisis is *tragedy*,²³⁴ as we have seen. But again such tragedy is not cause for despair. As noted throughout this discussion, Cacciari insists that once one has renounced the possibility of utopia, and embraced material praxis, one confronts the irreducible plurality of the desires of others. However, this same irreducible plurality also opens possibilities for any number of affirmative ways to achieve political stabilisation. That is, relative and contingent *freedoms* and *liberties* are possible if people are willing to take political action. As Giorgio Gaber once put it, 'liberty is participation':²³⁵ one copes with tragedy by coping with it, by *participating* in that coping, by exercising the agency one has, enlisting allies, and affecting iterative change: *hic contradictio, hic tracta*.²³⁶

We have seen how Cacciari was moved by lessons gained among *operaisti* to go back to reconsider texts that had inspired the *operaista* critique. His rereading of Hegel allowed him to recover evidence of material-semiotic praxis in Hegel's own work, which Cacciari argued had been obscured by Hegel's enthusiasm for teleological synthesis. Cacciari then used this to further his own reflexive material-semiotic critique, rethinking how to understand the process of *Aufhebung*. Cacciari then used this new understanding of *Aufhebung* to reconsider the meaning of 'negative thought' as developed in the work of German philosophers inspired by Hegel's work, as well as to help him rethink his own political experiences. The end result was the development of what I have called his disenchanted methodology.

At this point, some political theorists may still be sceptical that Cacciari's disenchanted position on Hegel and praxis is anything more than another abstract account of material praxis. In the next chapter, however, where I examine the history of Cacciari's antecedents in the Italian Hegelian movement, I will show how his views are rooted more in Italian political history than in abstraction or dogma.

²³⁴ C.f. Friedrich Nietzsche: 'The Birth of Tragedy', in *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, ed. Geuss and Speirs. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); pp. 1-117.

²³⁵ Giorgio Gaber and Sandro Luporini: 'La Libertà' from *Dialogo tra un'impegnato e un non so*, (Carosello Records, 1972).

²³⁶ 'Here is a contradiction, here you deal with it'.

CHAPTER THREE

COMMON ANCESTRY

The Italian 'Philosophy of Praxis' and Chantal Mouffe's Agonism

To anyone reading Cacciari's work in translation, it is surprisingly easy to lose sight of the fact that he is an *Italian* philosopher, despite his well-known involvement with *Potere Operaio*. After all, he is a scholar of German negative philosophy, and much of his interdisciplinary scholarship is involved with the Germanic world, particularly *fin de siècle* Vienna. In Anglophone political theory, the Italian connection is even easier to miss because Italian philosophy is, itself, largely ignored within the discipline. However, to neglect the Italian aspects of Cacciari's work is to overlook a fundamentally *Italian* aspect of his work, which is the continuation of a longstanding relationship between radical Italian philosophers and German negative philosophy.

This relationship began in the work of the Neapolitan Hegelians Augusto Vera and Bertrando Spaventa before the revolutions of 1848, arguably reached its apex in the work of the Marxist Antonio Gramsci before World War II, and remains a central pillar of contemporary Italian philosophy. As I will argue in this chapter, the significance of Gramsci's influence on Chantal Mouffe identifies this line of Italian Hegelian—proto-material-semiotic—critique as a common ancestor to her and to Cacciari. Thus, a discussion of Gramsci, who most fully embodied this critique, contributes to the discussion of material-semiotic political praxis, as a crucial foundational element in Cacciari's work as well as in Mouffe's 'agonistics'. As a common ancestor to both Cacciari and Mouffe, Gramsci's work is therefore a vital tool for the material-semiotic renovation of socially weightless, primarily semiotic existential foundations.

Although this lineage is not explicit in Cacciari's own work, I will explain in this chapter that this is partially by design. I will also argue that Mouffe's recent neglect of the Gramscian influence in her own work has hindered its interpretation by her readers, sympathetic and critical alike. By reading Mouffe's 'agonistics' with Cacciari's 'disenchanted engagement', it becomes

possible not only to resituate and critically re-evaluate her work via the Italian, material-semiotic aspects of its foundations but, in so doing, expand and enrich the possibilities of agonistic critique via Cacciari's indirect development of the Gramscian foundations he 'inherited' as a member of the radical Italian left in the 1960s. To begin this latter enterprise, I will, in this chapter, set out the historical and philosophical circumstances which link Gramsci, Cacciari, and Mouffe together. I will then focus on the relationship between Mouffe, Gramsci, and agonism and how this relationship distinguishes Mouffe from her fellow agonists. I will conclude with a material-semiotic critique of Mouffe's agonism, arguing that Cacciari's work demonstrates how the 'psychosemiotic' limits she imposes unnecessarily and detrimentally restrain the possibility of agonistic critique. In the chapters that follow, my examination and exploration of Cacciari's work will provide examples of what his work can contribute to the foundational expansion and material-semiotic enrichment of agonistic critique.

Conspicuous Absence

Any reader familiar with the work and history of Antonio Gramsci might well have been wondering why the preeminent figure of the Italian Left had not once been mentioned in my preceding discussions of Cacciari, *Potere Operaio*, and negative thought. This was by design, for *Gramsci's name never appears* in Cacciari's work, and my analysis so far has respected this fact. To explain why Gramsci's name never appears, however, one must first understand Cacciari's work in the 'post-Gramscian' context of his life and work, which I set out in the preceding chapters. This is the case because by the time Cacciari became involved in Italian politics in the early 1960s, radicals like Raniero Panzieri and Mario Tronti—the founders of *operaismo*—were struggling to break out of the 'Gramscian' dogmatism that emerged in Italy following PCI leader Palmiro Togliatti's beatification of Gramsci as the Party's tutelary martyr. Yet, this was more than a scholarly disagreement, because Togliatti's strategic editing, reorganisation, and total control over the dissemination of Gramsci's *oeuvre* ensured that the Party's holy Gramscian writ never challenged or criticised Moscow. Gramsci's work had been spoilt by its own success, an expression of Gramsci's

own suspicions about what happens when a counter-hegemonic critic becomes the dominant hegemon. Thus, the ‘Gramsci’ to whom Panzieri and Tronti were objecting was in many important ways a caricature—something that only became evident in the mid-1970s, ten years after Togliatti’s death, when it became possible to publish Gramsci’s writings *verbatim* and *in toto*. It is important to note here that Mouffe was one of the first scholars to study Gramsci’s unexpurgated prose at the end of that decade.

This history is important because it distinguishes the unfiltered Gramsci with which Mouffe engaged from Togliatti’s ‘Gramsci’ which, on the one hand had been translated and in scholarly circulation outside Italy for many years and which, inside Italy, had become a suffocating burden on the radical Italian Left.

Inspired by the heterodox Marxist philosopher Galvano Della Volpe, Panzieri and Tronti were attempting to fight the interpretive restrictions this burden imposed by approaching the specifically Italian struggles of the Italian working class as part of a larger, global class struggle. In their view, this broader approach was a ‘scientific’ one that sought to identify, empirically, what was homogeneous between heterogeneous working classes. To make this broader approach possible, Della Volpe, Panzieri, and Tronti argued that the historicism upon which Gramsci relied had to be abandoned: in their view, though it may well have been the case that certain material aspects of Italian life rendered it distinct from elsewhere in the world, they felt nevertheless that his contextual, historicist approach was myopic and, therefore, unscientific. Like a controlled experiment whose ‘control’ is never compared with any other results, its results are meaningless without placement and comparison within a wider context—especially since the struggle with capitalism was an expanding, global phenomenon rather than merely an Italian one.

The Italian influences Cacciari acknowledges are collaborators and mentors like Negri, Tronti and Tafuri, who, in their own ways, mediated the break with Gramsci’s legacy. But, as I will show, their ‘Gramsci’ fatigue did not wholly reject or abandon all that Gramsci argued. Indeed, the

operaisti can be understood to have been *preserving* and *refounding* many of Gramsci's most important insights—insights that had been redirected or filtered out by Togliatti. Unless one is familiar with Gramsci's work and able to spot the continuities and resonances immediately—something a scholarly Italian reader is almost certain to do—features of Cacciari's Gramscian inheritance are easy to overlook. This state of affairs resulted, at least partially, by design: one way to break out of a strict, operative 'Gramscianism' is to not mention the man or his work directly and to avoid anything that resembled overtly 'Gramscian' conclusions—especially when they had no recourse to the original texts.

Thus, that traces of Gramsci's ideas appear in Cacciari's work demonstrate the extent to which these insights were no longer radical theory by the 1960s, but had become *common sense* among many thinkers on the Italian left. That they had become so was not a question of cognitive consensus; it was because they were supported by evidence of *material-semiotic praxis*, of life as lived and experienced by millions of Italians in the aftermath of the unification of Italy's kingdoms into a Liberal state during the nineteenth century. As I show below, the perceived *failure* of the new state to deliver the liberations it promised led to *disenchantment* among many Italian political thinkers regarding the possibility that that abstract intellectual theory of *any kind* could ever serve as the necessary foundational beginning for successful political praxis. Here, in my view, begins the very reflexive, material-semiotic (albeit *avant la lettre*) disenchantment that links Gramsci, Cacciari, and Mouffe.

Though developed later by Gramsci, the term 'philosophy of praxis' was coined by Antonio Labriola, a philosopher, critic and early Italian Marxist. He intended the term to emphasise the reflexive relationship between intellectual theory and material practice. The philosophy of praxis was, therefore, 'the philosophy which is immanently present in the things about which it philosophises. From life to thought, and not from thought to life; this is the realistic process'.²³⁷

²³⁷ Antonio Labriola: 'Discorrendo di socialismo e di filosofia', *Scritti filosofici e politici*, vol. II, ed. Sbarberi (Torino: Einaudi editore, 1973); p. 702.

In this regard, Cacciari's retracing of Gramsci's steps through German *negatives Denken* as a foundational element in a reflexive theory of praxis was a shrewdly disenchanted way to cope with institutional "Gramsci" fatigue'.²³⁸ It allowed him—and others like Tafuri and the *Contropiano* circle—to test and build upon the 'foundational integrity' of Gramsci's insights on capitalism, materialism, and cultural praxis, while avoiding the ideologically operative Gramsci 'brand' that had been installed as a filter on the mouthpiece of *PCI*. Rather than affirming themselves *as* something (i.e., followers of 'Gramsci') and then attempting to deduce deontologically what such an affirmation required of them, Cacciari, Tafuri, and others identified themselves 'negatively', in terms of what they were *not*: they were *not Gramsciani*, they were *not PCI* acolytes, estranged Socialists, or radical Liberals.²³⁹ In their view, to *begin* one's political analysis fully committed to a specific ideological framework was to limit the scope of one's analysis and the range of possible conclusions regarding alternative, non-binary political praxes. In their view, the contemporary world required contemporary political analysis based on the material realities within which material Italians were living. This was not to ignore the great political thinkers and critics of the past, it was to reread and criticise them afresh in comparison with contemporary political insight, criticism, and material evidence of politics as practiced. Starting from this apophatic political identity, Cacciari proceeded to develop the radical, material-semiotic critical praxis that distinguishes his methodological approach to politics and scholarship.

To demonstrate how the Italian 'philosophy of praxis' and its material-semiotic foundations are common to Cacciari and Mouffe, I will briefly outline the development of this line of critique. I will then discuss Mouffe's incorporation of this critique into her own, highlighting the

²³⁸ Indeed, as Antonio Negri recalled:

I always...read Gramsci! And always badly! There was no way to get rid of him. There wasn't a film you could watch without having already been told by the critics: "This is a classic example of the hegemonic usage of such and such a concept"! There wasn't a play you could go to without having been given twenty pages of Gramsci to read in advance! It was all really suffocating and terribly dogmatic. But what was most absurd was the fact that somehow Gramsci had inevitably foreseen and approved each and every move of the communist party!

[Source: Cesare Casarino & Antonio Negri: *In Praise of the Common: A Conversation on Philosophy and Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); p. 47].

²³⁹ As I explained in Chapter 1, Cacciari, Tafuri, and others joined the *PCI* for pragmatic, rather than ideological, reasons.

limits of her work. The rest of the thesis will set forth the ways in which Cacciari has pushed beyond these limitations, and how his work can thus, expand the possibilities of agonistic political theory.

The Roots of Radical Italian Disenchantment

Though he died in 1937, Gramsci's influence cast the mould according to which all subsequent radical Italian politics would be shaped after World War II, both within the Party itself and on the wider radical left. Though Gramsci was an undeniably innovative thinker, the foundations of his innovation were not novel. Rather, he was the latest—and perhaps most articulate—of a line of Italian intellectuals who had become critically disenchanted with the liberal Italian state after its establishment in 1860. Gramsci was therefore speaking for many when he argued that in their support for Italian unification

[the Italian educated classes] said that they were aiming at the creation of a modern state in Italy, and they in fact produced a bastard. They aimed at stimulating the formation of an extensive and energetic ruling class, and they did not succeed; at integrating the people into the framework of the new state, and they did not succeed. The paltry political life from 1870 to 1900, the fundamental and endemic rebelliousness of the Italian popular classes, the narrow and stunted existence of a sceptical and cowardly ruling stratum, these are all the consequences of that failure.²⁴⁰

Searching for ways to cope with this perceived failure, many post-unification Italian intellectuals discovered in Hegel and German negative philosophy an alternative approach to contemporary social critique and analysis. German philosophy, like revolutionary French philosophy, also challenged the hegemonic superposition of hereditary elites. For this reason, it had long been banned in Italy, and scholars who dared to study it, or to translate it into Italian, found themselves in prison or, like the aforementioned Spaventa brothers, exiled.²⁴¹ Those critical of the new, unified regime found in Hegelianism mainstream resources for criticising that regime. Further, as the work of one of Gramsci's most important influences, the philosopher and critic

²⁴⁰ Gramsci, annotated citation in *ibid*, pp. 226-227.

²⁴¹ Cf. e.g. Nico di Federicis: 'Hegel in Italy' in Herzog, ed. *Hegel's Thought in Europe: Currents, Crosscurrents, and Undercurrents* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013), pp. 223-238; Sergio Landucci: 'L'Hegelismo in Italia nell'età di Risorgimento' *Studi Storici*, (6/4, 1965) pp. 597-628; Guido Oldrini, ed. *Il Primo Hegelismo Italiano* (Firenze: Vallecchi, 1969), *Gli Hegeliani di Napoli: Augusto Vera e la corrente ortodossa* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1964).

Antonio Labriola demonstrates, Hegelianism also provided an opportunity to begin incorporating Marx into their critique.

Hegemony, Praxis, and Historical Blocs

To an Italian Marxist in 1968—let alone a *Potere operaio* activist like Cacciari—Hegel’s suggestion, discussed in the previous chapter, that knowledge is a process which takes place in the material world among competing ‘positivities’ through a process of *Aufhebung* is a trite banality. This is because such an understanding of the world was obvious, it was common sense; to their eyes, Hegel and negative thought were glaringly obvious antecedents to Gramsci’s concepts of *hegemony* and *praxis*, which were products of what Christine Buci-Glucksmann described as Gramsci’s

astounding combination [...] of two projects that are customarily quite separate: research into the state, and research into Marxist philosophy in its relationship with the masses. They both converge in a single reformulation of the concept of the state in its relation with society.²⁴²

During his lifetime, Gramsci sought to do precisely what Tronti was attempting to do a generation later: to read Marx (and Hegel, and others) ‘in the present’, confronting them from within his own ‘age’, according the material-semiotic circumstances in which people (then) lived. As David Forgacs explains, Gramsci’s juxtaposition of Marx’s nineteenth century scholarship with twentieth century socio-economic and geopolitical reality revealed to him that whereas militant Marxism ‘was strong on general predictions about the course of capitalist development and about connections between economic crisis and political transformation’, it was ‘weak on detailed analyses of the forms of political power, the concrete relations between social classes and political representation and the cultural and ideological forms in which social antagonism are fought out or regulated and dissipated’.²⁴³ To cultivate a Marxist understanding of the antagonistic relations of

²⁴² Christine Buci-Glucksmann, cited in Peter D. Thomas: *The Gramscian Moment: Philosophy, Hegemony and Marxism* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2010); p. 38.

²⁴³ David Forgacs (ed.): *The Antonio Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916-1935* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1988); p. 189.

political power, Gramsci began developing the concept of hegemony by combining philosophy and theory with his own lived experiences, particularly those as a political activist and party leader.²⁴⁴

As Forgas summarises, Gramsci argues that ‘changing socio-economic circumstances do not of themselves change or “produce” political changes. They only set the conditions in which such changes become possible’.²⁴⁵ That is, Gramsci observed no teleological connection between socio-economic circumstances and the ways in which people will make use of them to affect political change of one kind or another. It is not a simple question of cognitive, deontological interpretation of those socio-economic circumstances by rational, autonomous individuals. For Gramsci, affecting political change is reflexive, ‘material-semiotic’ praxis in which ‘the “relations of force” [obtain] at a political level, the degree of political organisation and combativity of the opposing forces, the strength of the political alliances which they manage to bind together and their level of policies consciousness, of preparation and struggle on the ideological terrain’.²⁴⁶ *Hegemony* is therefore praxis, a ‘war of position’ in which various antagonistic forces ally and align themselves in (historical) ‘blocs’, heterogeneously assembled alliances which compete for popular support in order to accumulate power and achieve positions of dominance in their society. In Bakhtinian terms, these blocs are ‘open unions’ of reflexive, ‘dialogic imaginations’ coping with irreducible *heteroglossia*. Hegemonic material-semiotic praxis is precarious because positions of hegemonic dominance are under constant counter-hegemonic attack; it is also, therefore, an ongoing process of negotiation between those-who-would-dominate (or those-who-dominate) and those-who-are-dominated.

To protect against counter-hegemonic attacks, those-who-dominate attempt to foreclose upon the very possibility of any such attack. For example, the invocation of ‘relativism’ is an act intended to foreclose upon the possibility of any discussion of language and meaning that extends beyond

²⁴⁴ It is important to note that Gramsci’s understanding of praxis as reflexive, embodied action is not limited to the theoretical or shaped entirely by the comparative novelty of his experiences as an activist. The question of embodiment took on significant meaning for Gramsci based on the ‘novel’ experiences his own body made possible. Gramsci suffered from Pott’s Disease, a malformation of the spine which stunted his growth (he stood less than five feet tall) and made him a *gobbo*, a hunchback.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

individual subjectivity and semiotic cognition. It does this by confining any investigation or critique of language and meaning to a narrow, deontological analysis within a closed semiotic system in which categorical, self-contained ‘concepts’ or ‘ideas’ can only be apprehended, by discrete individuals, as indisputable monolithic meanings-in-themselves. By contrast, Cacciari demonstrates how human *material*-semiotic experience exposes the fallacy of such foundationally semiotic claims. He shows that politics, to say nothing of human life itself, is far *more* than just a ‘contest of ideas’ which produces discrete, self-contained, unambiguously communicated ‘choices’, in the form of monolithic, semiotic propositions, among which rational, autonomous individuals may freely select. Further, not to advocate or champion the same proposition as another is not, *ipso facto*, to advocate nothing or to champion indeterminacy; rather, it is to ‘stand for’ or, more importantly, participate ‘in favour of something *else*, no matter what—or, indeed, *despite*—what one ‘thinks’ or ‘believes’. Nor, as Bakhtin reminds us, need any agreement be absolute. As Emily A. Schultz explains, for Bakhtin, ‘[d]ialogic agreement...is not ruled out. It is dialogic agreement that makes the heteroglot elements in a culture hang together despite the absence of rigorous policing of boundaries or routing out of contradiction’.²⁴⁷ The ‘truth’ of a dialogic agreement, she argues, ‘is a voluntary assent to a unified truth which includes the partial truths of each point of view, but is greater than any one of them taken by itself. Similarly, the aforementioned ‘choice’ to participate in one’s own domination, for example, cannot be understood simply as one of deliberative, semiotic cognition and deontological analysis of monolithic ‘concepts’; it too is a form of dialogic agreement.

Unlike Togliatti, who sought to identify Gramsci as a specifically Italian figure, and unlike the political theorist George Crowder, for example, who forecloses on further engagement with Gramsci’s work by dismissing it as ‘dubious’, ‘eclectic material’,²⁴⁸ Mouffe has identified Gramsci as a sophisticated, original Italian thinker whose work is relevant to the entirety of Marxist thought—if not political thought—beyond any national or party boundaries. Indeed, one of her early

²⁴⁷ Emily A. Schultz: *Dialogue at the Margins: Whorf, Bakhtin, and Linguistic Relativity* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990); p. 145.

²⁴⁸ George Crowder: *Chantal Mouffe’s Agonistic Pluralism*, (Refereed paper presented to the Australasian Political Studies Association Conference, University of Newcastle 25-27 September 2006), pp. 3; 6.

scholarly projects, *Gramsci and Marxist Theory*,²⁴⁹ sought to explain this relevance, particularly regarding the role of what Schultz terms ‘dialogic agreements’ as a necessary aspect of all hegemonic praxis. The intersection of my project on Cacciari’s work with Mouffe’s project on Gramsci is one of fortuitous reciprocity: while Mouffe’s discussion of Gramsci helps clarify Cacciari’s debt to Gramscian foundations, Cacciari’s work helps identify the Gramscian aspects of Mouffe’s work and use those aspects to build upon and expand both. Mouffe’s discussion of Gramsci is, thus, the first element of what this larger discussion of Cacciari adds to Mouffe’s work, emphasising her explicit debt to Gramsci, which, in turn, helps reveal Cacciari’s implicit foundational debt to his scholarly and political forbear.

Mouffe & Gramsci

As Crowder’s comment demonstrates, the Gramscian character of Mouffe’s work is something that her critics have not taken seriously enough. Though it may be considered dubious and eclectic by some within mainstream Anglophone political theory, Gramsci’s work—if in its Togliattian guise—has influenced Anglophone political theorists like Raymond Williams, Tom Nairn, Perry Anderson, and the political scientist and anthropologist James C. Scott—as well as many beyond political theory, ranging from Louis Althusser to Ludwig Wittgenstein.²⁵⁰ This should suggest, at the very least, that his work not be so cavalierly dismissed.

In the introduction, I suggested that Mouffe’s Gramscian, materialist orientation to agonism makes her work the *least* weightless of contemporary political theorists. Andrew Schapp’s evidence²⁵¹ that her agonistic approach has proven repeatedly fruitful in real world, post-conflict

²⁴⁹ Chantal Mouffe (ed.): *Gramsci and Marxist Theory* (London: Routledge, 1979).

²⁵⁰ For discussions of the link between Gramsci and Wittgenstein via the economist Piero Sraffa, cf. Amartya Sen: ‘Sraffa, Wittgenstein, and Gramsci’, *Journal of Economic Literature* (41/4, 2003), pp. 1240-1255; Franco Lo Piparo: *Il professor Gramsci e Wittgenstein: Il linguaggio e il potere* (Roma: Donzelli Editore, 2014).

²⁵¹ Cf. Andrew Schapp: *Political Reconciliation*, (London: Routledge, 2005); ‘Agonism in Divided Societies’ *Philosophy & Social Criticism* (32/2, 2006); pp. 255-277; (with Gary Foley and Edwina Howell, eds.) *The Aboriginal Tent Embassy: Sovereignty, Land Rights, Black Power and the State*, (London: Routledge, 2014).

political interaction and reorganisation adds a good deal of ‘weight’ to her claims, and indicates that her arguments are worthy of further exploration and experimentation. Nevertheless, I argued that it is still ‘floating’ in abstraction because she is primarily thinking about thinking (or thinking about feeling), even if she is doing so in ‘psychosemiotic’ (rather than predominantly semiotic) terms. To illustrate how its foundational reliance on Gramsci—and on the Gramscian understanding of hegemony, in particular—distinguishes the foundations of Mouffe’s work from that of other agonistic thinkers (and, indeed, mainstream political theory), it is necessary to closely examine three of her recent arguments in juxtaposition with her earlier reading of Gramsci’s texts. This comparison will also make clear the intellectual foundations upon which the rest of the thesis will begin to outline, via Cacciari’s work, a more nuanced discussion of hegemony as reflexive, material-semiotic praxis.

First, Mouffe explains that, since 1985 she has argued that

to think politically requires recognising the *ontological* dimension of *radical negativity*. It is because of the existence of a form of negativity that cannot be overcome dialectically that full objectivity can never be reached and that *antagonism is an ever present possibility*. Society is permeated by *contingency* and any *order* is of an *hegemonic* nature, i.e. it is always the result of *power relations*.²⁵²

Second, she argues that it was on these grounds she developed her well-known model of ‘agonistic pluralism’ in which, ‘by inscribing the dimension of radical negativity in the political domain’ she attempted to distinguish between “the political’ and “politics”:

By “the political”, I refer to the ontological dimension of antagonism, and by “politics” I mean the ensemble of *practices* and *institutions* whose *aim* is to *organise* human *coexistence*. These practices, however, always operate within a terrain of *conflictuality* informed by “the political”.²⁵³

Finally, she has argued that according to her agonistic approach,

to acknowledge radical negativity implies recognising not only that the people is *multiple*, but that it is also *divided*. Such a *division* cannot be *overcome*; it can only be *institutionalised* in different ways, some more *egalitarian* than others. According to this approach, radical politics consist in a *diversity of moves* in a *multiplicity* of institutional *terrains*, so as to construct a *different hegemony*. It is a “*war of position*” whose objective is not the creation of

²⁵² Chantal Mouffe: *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London: Verso, 2013); p. xi.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. xii.

a society beyond hegemony, but a *process* of radicalising democracy—the *construction* of more democratic, more egalitarian institutions.²⁵⁴

Absent from this scholarly autobiography—critically, in my view—is a serious discussion of the Gramscian foundations upon which these arguments rely. Although this is something to which she and Ernesto Laclau do refer directly in their 1985 book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, she has made progressively fewer references to Gramsci over the following decades. And although she does note that she ‘takes her bearings from Gramsci’,²⁵⁵ she provides no explanation of what these bearings entail; where she does cite him, the citations are fleeting and little more than a reference to one of his concepts, as her furtive use of the term ‘war of position’ in the third citation demonstrates above. Indubitably, to any reader familiar with Gramsci’s work—particularly in its unadulterated totality—these references are instantly recognised, allowing Mouffe to bring Gramsci into the conversation as an interlocutor, and to ensure that the ‘Gramscian’ contexts and connotations of terms like those I have italicised above are inferred and understood. If, however, one is not particularly familiar with Gramsci, one is left to define these terms according to his or her own lexicon; and the flustered responses her work has elicited in recent years²⁵⁶ indicates that a bona fide acquaintance with Gramsci cannot be taken for granted. In what follows, I will therefore use Mouffe’s own words to highlight the Gramscian foundation of her work and the ways in which this foundation transforms the ways in which her work must be interpreted. Limited by space and scope, I will restrict this exposition to the influence of Gramsci’s most important concept, hegemony, and the reflexive, (proto-)material-semiotic leeway it provides Mouffe for distancing herself from her more exclusively semiotic colleagues.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., p. xiv.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., p. xvii.

²⁵⁶ E.g. George Crowder: *Chantal Mouffe’s Agonistic Democracy*. Refereed paper presented to the Australasian Political Studies Association conference, University of Newcastle, 2006; John S. Dryzek: ‘Deliberative Democracy in Divided Societies: Alternatives to Agonism and Analgesia’ in *Political Theory*, Volume 33, No. 2, April 2005, pp. 218-242; Eva Erman: ‘What is Wrong With Agonistic Pluralism?: Reflections on Conflict in Democratic Theory’ in *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 2009:35; Mathias Thaler: ‘The Illusion of Purity: Chantal Mouffe’s Realist Critique of Cosmopolitanism’ in *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 2010:36.

As Mouffe explains, the relationship between hegemony and domination is not straightforward. In Gramsci's view, the relationships between social class, political organisation, power, and the possibilities of revolutionary transformation

...led him to postulate that "the supremacy of a social group manifests itself in two ways, as 'domination' and as 'intellectual and moral leadership'". Hegemony . . . becomes... "political, intellectual and moral leadership over allied groups". It is by means of this formulation that Gramsci articulated the level of analysis of the mode of production with that of the social formation in the notion of the "historical bloc".²⁵⁷

Mouffe's formulation updates and adds subtle nuance to Antonio Labriola's definition of politics as 'the application of a force, or a system of forces, to an ensemble of resistances'.²⁵⁸ Expanding this definition, Gramsci argued that hegemony refers not necessarily to a collection of atomised, individual intellectual or moral (exclusively semiotic) resistances, but rather to an ensemble of reflexive actors whose *alliance*, whose material *cooperation* rather than their intellectual consensus—has been negotiated and organised within the specific material and cultural circumstances in which they live. It is on this material, phenomenological basis that the 'historical bloc' emerges rather than according to any materially aloof theory of abstract, objective teleology, epistemology, or ontology. As Mouffe continues,

This non-instrumental conception of politics, no longer considered as exclusively an activity of domination, but permeating all the superstructures and serving as an articulating principle, is linked in Gramsci to the notion of the integral state (coercion + hegemony). But if hegemony is related to the state then this is only in so far as the latter is defined as "the entire complex of practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its dominance but manages to win the active consensus of those over whom it rules", which clearly indicates it is always in the fundamental class that hegemony has its primary point of reference.²⁵⁹

Gramsci's insistence on the 'active consensus of those over whom it rules' is crucial. *Active* consensus does not mean an intellectual or 'rational' affirmation of a propositional 'truth'; rather, it means *material-semiotic praxis*, a reflexive, negotiated 'dialogic agreement' to *cooperate* materially and intellectually with the hegemon, whether by offering active support for the regime or by

²⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 9.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 72.

agreeing not to resist as long as certain demands are met. The ruled class is not, therefore, *subordinate* to the hegemon; rather, it is a *subsidiary*—a ‘negative’ that affirms itself positively and participates actively in, or is complicit with, hegemonic (or hegemonically led) *Aufhebung*.

Therefore, Mouffe continues,

...the concept of the integral state must not be understood as designating simply the enlarged state of monopoly capitalism. For Gramsci, it serves primarily to demonstrate that civil society, which in liberal thought is presented as an autonomous sphere having no relation to class interests, is in fact the place where the hegemony of the bourgeoisie is exercised. This notion plays a role which is doubly critical; of the instrumentalist conception of the state and politics which reduces them to the single dimension of the expression of class interests, and of the liberal conception which presents them as completely independent of those interests. For Gramsci it is important to emphasise that the dimension of the expression of general interests does exist but that it is always linked, through a hegemonic system, to the interests of a fundamental class.²⁶⁰

There is therefore no *a priori* class system or teleology according to which classes emerge and evolve. Instead, they are self-organising systems that emerge and are developed contingently by material actors within specific material-semiotic realities. Thus,

[f]or Gramsci, hegemony does not refer only to the strategy of the proletariat. It is...a general interpretative category which applies to all forms of the articulation of the interests of a fundamental class to those of other social groups in the creation of a collective will. Consequently, there are several possible forms of hegemony according to the modes of articulation through which a class assumes a leading role.²⁶¹

Hegemony is therefore a material-semiotic concept in which the intellectual and material are related, where definitions of subject and object are reflexive and fluid. Following Marx, Gramsci addresses *how* labour is led hegemonically and what the material consequences of this leadership are: *how* people behave, *how* labourers labour. Hegemony is the *praxis* in which various *praxes* compete with one another for power within a society. Gramsci does not assume that a particular hegemonic discourse simply ‘programs’ the ideas in the heads of those over whom it has influence, leading them to ‘automatically’ behave sympathetically or complicitly with its plans. Instead, Gramsci argues that a hegemon must win the hearts, minds, and the *participation*—the material compliance or behaviour—the *material-semiotic praxis*, in other words—of those it would (or does

²⁶⁰ Idem.

²⁶¹ Ibid., p. 11.

already) dominate. A hegemon, he argued, does this by dialectically affecting their thought processes—the behaviour of thinking, as it were, rather than what is or is not *thought*—such that contradictions between theory (the ideas people have in their heads) and reality (what they experience in the real world) become synthesised in complicity with the hegemonic regimes' direction.

For Gramsci, the result of this synthesis is a dialectic of active complicity and passive resistance which becomes synthesised as continuity or, more bluntly, as survival. Active complicity, it must be stressed, does not imply or require any intellectual or 'moral' consensus or alignment with the regime with which one is complying. Put as simply as possible, one complies because compliance is better than the alternative: at the extreme, compliance may protect one from violent coercion. It was, for example, 'common knowledge' in the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century that a critic deliberately kept his or her mouth shut in public, actively complying with the regime's demand that no public criticism be made of it. In return, the regime would not punish them for sedition. With the passage of time, such knowledge and behaviour became what Gramsci, developing an idea from Vico, referred to as 'folklore and common sense'.²⁶² It was also the case that a critic could resist the regime's hegemony passively, 'in theory', on the one hand, by refusing to accept the regime's statements within the limits of their own minds. Alternatively (and possibly simultaneously), critics might resist 'in practice', hindering the regime's efforts to suppress certain behaviours. Though such partial, piecemeal 'resistance' might not have constituted a direct assault on the regime's stability, it was still counter-hegemonic: it slowed the regime down, making room for more challenges, and contributed to the erosion of the regime's hegemonic superposition. In an analysis of the praxis of the East German political regime (the German Democratic Republic; GDR), the historian Mary Fulbrook applies just such an understanding of hegemony to reveal that the GDR regime was best understood as a 'participatory dictatorship':

...it is necessary to rethink the social character of political processes in the GDR, with respect to the means, the structures, and the goals of politics [in terms of 'participatory dictatorship']. This somewhat oxymoronic expression is intended to emphasise the extent

²⁶² Antonio Gramsci: *Quaderni del carcere*, (Q. 8), ed. Gerratana (Torino: Einaudi, 1975); p. 35.

to which “democratic centralism”, as practised in the GDR, did actually involve very widespread participation of large numbers of people, for a wide variety of reasons: not always or necessarily out of genuine commitment to Marxist-Leninist ideals; nor always or necessarily as a result of being simply coerced or cowed into compliance; nor merely in a sometimes defiant representation of one’s “own interests” The notion of participatory dictatorship is intended to underline the ways in which the people themselves were at one and the same time both constrained and affected by, and yet also actively and often voluntarily carried, the ever changing social and political system of the GDR.²⁶³

According to Gramsci’s definition of hegemony, *all* political orders are ‘participatory domination’ in one way or another: the ruled either participate democratically or are somehow actively involved in the day-to-day political organisation of their society, or they participate by *not* organising and acting *en masse* to overthrow the regime. Whatever the case, a hegemonic analysis underlines, as Fulbrook noted, ‘the ways in which the people themselves were at one and the same time both constrained and affected by, and yet also actively and voluntarily carried, the ever changing social and political system’ in whatever material circumstances they happen to find themselves. This was the crucial subtlety in Gramsci’s thinking about hegemony. Hegemony is not absolute or monolithic; it is a precarious and ongoing process of material-semiotic negotiation within which a hegemon must actively cope with counter-hegemonic forces in order to maintain or enhance its own stability. Such a reflexive understanding of hegemony is critical because it reveals the material reality that daily life within any political regime involves *coping hegemonically with hegemony itself*; that is, coping with irreducible, contradictory *praxis*.

The Gramscian notion of hegemony demonstrates how a political regime can perhaps survive (and even thrive) without the fully conscious moral, intellectual, or ideational assent of those it rules. It reveals how, in the face of irreducible material-semiotic contradictions, a regime and those it rules can negotiate enough common ground—or reciprocal *behaviour*—to sustain the regime’s hegemonic superposition in the face of counter-hegemonic challenges. Once a ‘dialogic agreement’ has been negotiated, compliance with the new rules is not entirely without reward for those on the losing end, and that reward is not simply cynically material. The regime need not have ‘convinced’

²⁶³ Mary Fulbrook: *The People’s State: East German Society from Hitler to Honecker* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005); pp. 12-13.

anyone of anything other than the need for negotiation. There comes an empirical point at which *just enough* people find it *just enough* in their interests to comply with the regime's demands—to *police themselves*—in order to get *just enough* of something they want from the regime. One might argue—and many in East Germany did argue—that the moral, ethical, and practical progress in employment as well as health, housing, and gender policy in the GDR relative to the West was a worthy undertaking, even at the cost of brutality and repression.²⁶⁴ Indeed, some argued that such progress could *only* be attained within a state willing to use an apparatus like the STASI to stand forcefully against those who would challenge such 'humanitarian' goals—even if that forcefulness was occasionally too extreme or imperfectly implemented.²⁶⁵

From Gramsci's perspective, such renegotiation is possible because the traditionally absolute dualisms of theory and practice, or subject and object, were actually entangled aspects of one another rather than separate and distinct entities. As Mouffe notes, Gramsci's transformation of Marx's historical materialism into a 'science of history and politics' requires

a break with the positivist conception of science which reduces its role to the establishment of laws. The form of scientificity appropriate to marxism must be different since, as a "theory of contradictions" it must enable us to establish a correct analysis of antagonistic forces and the relationships of force which exist between them at a determinate historical moment, but it can only indicate the way in which the antagonism may be resolved.²⁶⁶

Put differently, human material-semiotic praxis is the result of reflexive, intellectual and material *culture*: of meanings and behaviours learnt from other human beings 'within our circle of

²⁶⁴ Cf. Manfred G. Schmidt: 'Social Policy in the German Democratic Republic' in Schmidt and Ritter: *The Rise and Fall of a Socialist Welfare State: The German Democratic Republic (1949-1990) and German Unification (1989-1994)*, (Berlin: Springer-verlag, 2013); pp. 23-166.

²⁶⁵ Cf. e.g. Brigitte Reimann: *Franziska Linkerhand* (East Berlin: Aufbau-verlag, 1974); Gary Bruce: *The Firm: The Inside Story of the STASI*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010)—particularly Chapter 5, 'The STASI in Everyday Life'; op. cit. Fulbrook.

²⁶⁶ Op. cit. *Gramsci and Marxist Theory*, p. 6.

humanity',²⁶⁷ in Gramsci's words; that is, within the material, communal circumstances in which human beings find themselves.

As a result, *how* to interact with the world and *what it is* that people are interacting *with* are reciprocally interwoven within the societal 'niche' in which they live. This knowledge and behaviour is, therefore, bespoke material-semiotic praxis, tailored to 'fit' the society in which it emerges. Because it is reflexive and dialogic, it 'works'—or 'reacts back', as Gramsci put it—within that society because it is the embodiment of the 'common sense' of the people within it:

One could say that the historical value of a philosophy can be calculated from the 'practical' efficacy it has acquired for itself, understanding 'practical' in the widest sense.... The extent to which precisely it reacts back is the measure of its historical importance, of its not being individual 'elucubration' but 'historical fact'.²⁶⁸

Assembled together, theory, praxis, and contingent material context constituted Gramsci's understanding of 'culture', which, he defined as 'a coherent, unitary, nationally diffused "conception of life and man", a "lay religion", a philosophy that has become precisely a "culture", that is, it has generated an ethic, a way of life, a civil and individual conduct".²⁶⁹ In Mouffe's view, by '[r]ejecting the traditional division between philosophy and common sense, Gramsci shows that both express, at different levels, the same "conception of the world" which is always the function of a hegemonic system expressed in the whole culture of a society'.²⁷⁰

At a foundational level, this reflexive understanding of 'culture' and 'common sense' made it possible to begin a non-binary critique of political praxis in reflexive, hegemonic terms—to argue, on the basis of lived experience, that the Italian experience from the *Risorgimento* to his own time provided tangible evidence about the material, *cultural* consequences of industrialised capitalist production. An important (proto-) material-semiotic pragmatism emerged from these experiences,

²⁶⁷ Writing about the Armenian Genocide, Gramsci reflected on the difficulty of reacting to events at a distance, lamenting that, ordinarily, '[f]or something to interest us, to move us, to become part of our interior life, it needs to happen near to us, among people we have heard speak and who are therefore within the circle of our humanity'. [Firmato A. G., "Il Grido del Popolo", 11 marzo 1916, XXII, n. 607, *Opere di Antonio Gramsci. Scritti giovanili (1914-1918)*. (Torino: Einaudi Editore, 1972); p. 30].

²⁶⁸ Op. cit. *Selections from The Prison Notebooks*, p. 661.

²⁶⁹ Antonio Gramsci: *Letteratura e vita nazionale* (Roma: Editore riuniti, 1971); p. 20.

²⁷⁰ Op. cit. *Gramsci and Marxist Theory*, p. 8.

because, they made it clear to Gramsci that, as Mouffe puts it, ‘...the development of capitalism was not going to cause the disappearance of those social groups which were not strictly the bourgeoisie or the proletariat, and that that working class would have to pose the problem of the transition to socialism in terms which were not strictly class-based’.²⁷¹

It is on such Gramscian grounds, therefore, that Mouffe’s work must be interpreted, rather than according to any primarily semiotic foundational discourse. With all of this in mind, I will now emphasise more clearly how the reflexivity and recognition of (irreducible) plurality that appears in her agonistics reaches beyond the almost exclusively semiotic praxis of her fellow political theorists and gestures towards the disenchanted political praxis we see in Cacciari’s work. However, I observe that she fails to achieve a fully material-semiotic praxis because she persists in theorising abstractly about thinking alone.

Mouffe’s foundationally Gramscian understanding of hegemony and the ‘historical bloc’, for example, distinguishes her work from that of other agonistic thinkers (and, perhaps, political theorists at large). Put another way, the ‘historical bloc’ is, like the later *operaista* general assembly, a contingent, heterogeneous assemblage—an alliance organised in response to specific, local, immanent matters of concern, rather than according to any purely intellectual or abstract ‘moral’ or ‘ethical’ consensus, fundamental ‘reason’ or propositional logic. Nor, conversely, does the historical bloc emerge in response to the threat of brute force. All of these factors have a part to play in the hegemony a historical bloc achieves. But, as Mouffe continues, its hegemony is never absolute; it is just enough to achieve and then sustain the bloc’s domination in the face of counter-hegemonic challenge. For Gramsci, she explains, hegemony need only be ‘just enough’ rather than universal and absolute is because it ‘operates principally in civil society via the articulation of the interests of the fundamental class to those of its allies in order to form a collective will, a unified political subject’.²⁷² Gramsci offers a ‘non-instrumental conception of politics’ as hegemonic praxis, in other words, which need not be absolute—it need only be enough to convince, coerce, or otherwise enlist

²⁷¹ Ibid., p. 9.

²⁷² Op. cit. Mouffe, p. 10.

the cooperation of real people to establish and maintain (or to at least not challenge) the ongoing social superposition of the 'fundamental class' in relation to counter-hegemonic challenges within a particular society. One way the hegemon maintains itself is by transforming the institutional infrastructure of its community or society into a formal State based on its own image. Thus, to use (rather than challenge) the institutions of the State—to cooperate with its 'governmentality', as Foucault might put it—is to contribute to the legitimacy and maintenance of the State's praxis of domination. According to Gramsci, the State was not designed to pursue and realise an abstract, intellectual principle; it was designed as mechanism for justifying, establishing, and maintaining the power of certain people in certain real world circumstances rather than that of other people in those same circumstances. Indeed, in Mouffe's view, Gramsci's concept of hegemony and its relation to the bourgeois state made it possible to cast into sharp relief, how '...the increasing intervention of the state in the countries of monopoly capitalism has led to an increasing politicisation of social conflicts[,] multipl[ying] the forms of confrontation between masses and state and created a series of new political subjects whose demands must be taken up by the working class'.²⁷³

Thus, Gramsci's insistence on the 'active consensus of those over whom it rules' is crucial. *Active* consensus does not mean an intellectual or 'rational' affirmation of a propositional 'truth'; rather, it means consensus in terms of what I have called reflexive, material-semiotic *praxis*; that is, a dialogically negotiated agreement to *cooperate* materially and intellectually with the ruling class (the 'hegemon'), whether by offering active support for the regime or by agreeing not to resist as long as certain demands are met. The ruled class is not, therefore, *subordinate* to the hegemon; rather, it is a *subsidiary*—a 'negative' that affirms itself positively and participates actively in, or is complicit with, hegemonic (or hegemonically *led*) *Aufhebung*. As active participation, no hegemonic domination is ever absolute or complete. It is, instead, an open-ended assemblage of contingent, heterogeneous alliances which need not render absolute assent or affirmation to the hegemon.

²⁷³ Ibid., p. 11.

For Gramsci, there is no ‘autonomous sphere’, no Platonic *hyperouraneous topos* (‘place beyond heaven’) where pure, unadulterated ‘forms’ of social organisation await the speculation of free, unburdened deliberators—not anywhere in the universe, not anywhere in the human mind or human conscious. Though we can *imagine* such a thing *in material-semiotic juxtaposition* to the experienced impurities of everyday reality, there is no hidden totality or purity anywhere in Gramsci. Therefore, the industrial-capitalist state-form, its theory, its practice, its articulation, its metaphysics, its contradictions, and its consequences are *all* imminent, reflexively developed in relation to the finite material-semiotic circumstances in which it emerges—nothing more, but nothing less. It is neither a linear enactment of discrete, self-contained ideas, theories, or concepts nor is it a rung on a teleological ladder; though it is *influenced* by intellectual theory, the state-form in Gramsci’s view is not determined concepts of purity or determinate logical systems: it is the outcome of contingent, *material-semiotic praxis*. Similarly, Cacciari argues that despite all protestations to the contrary, the modern state-form is a material-semiotic, hegemonic work-in-progress whose open-ended, heterogeneous composition demands constant attention, maintenance, and defence from counter-hegemonic challenges. Therefore, as Mouffe points out, Gramsci’s account of the ‘integral state’ insists that the discourses of totality, universality, transcendence upon which it relies for its justification and legitimation are neither total, universal, nor transcendent: instead, they were developed by specific people in specific places at specific times for specific reasons related to the specific, real world context in which they emerge and come to have meaning. There is no *a priori* class system or teleology according to which classes emerge and evolve in Gramsci’s work. The political organisation of the state is a heterogeneous assemblage of self-organising systems that emerge and are developed contingently by material actors within specific material-semiotic realities. For Gramsci, she argues,

hegemony does not refer only to the strategy of the proletariat. It is...a general interpretative category which applies to all forms of the articulation of the interests of a fundamental class to those of other social groups in the creation of a collective will. Consequently, there are several possible forms of hegemony according to the modes of articulation through which a class assumes a leading role.²⁷⁴

²⁷⁴ Idem.

For Gramsci, Mouffe explains, which group will become the fundamental class and achieve hegemonic superposition is never a foregone conclusion and is never absolute: '[f]or Gramsci, the objective conditions render the subjective conditions possible but the development of the latter depends on political organisation'.²⁷⁵ Applied to the earlier example of strikes in Porto Marghera, Gramscian, 'participatory' hegemony would insist that both labour *and* ownership have interests in the condition of the modes and means of production and that their relationship is (self-)reflexive: if workers and the equipment they employ are maintained in good, safe condition, not only will more be produced, but it will be produced more efficiently—in mechanical, human, and economic terms. By striking until working conditions were improved, it was the collective will of the workers that actually led the owners to transform those conditions; by acceding to their demands the owners led the workers back to work. Hegemony is therefore a material-semiotic concept in which the intellectual and material are reflexively related, where definitions of subject and object are (self-)reflexive and fluid.

Following Marx, Gramsci addresses *how* labour is led hegemonically and what the material consequences of this leadership are: *how* people behave, *how* labourers labour. Hegemony is the *praxis* in which various praxes *compete* with one another for power and influence within a society—it is not simply a synonym for absolute domination. Gramsci does not assume that a particular hegemonic discourse simply 'programs' or 'supplies' the fully-formed ideas in the heads of those over whom it has influence, leading them to 'automatically' behave in absolute sympathy or complicity with its demands. Instead, Gramsci argues that a hegemon must win the hearts, minds, and material compliance or behaviour—the participatory *praxis*, in other words—of those it would (or does already) dominate. A hegemon, he argued, does this by dialectically affecting their thought processes—the behaviour of thinking, as it were, rather than what is or is not *thought*—such that contradictions between theory (the ideas people have in their heads) and reality (what they

²⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 13.

experience in the real world) become synthesised in complicity with the hegemonic regimes' direction.

This reflexive, material-semiotic understanding of hegemony is perhaps the most significant of the many Gramscian concepts that fortify all of Mouffe's subsequent work, since it was the foundational understanding of human praxis upon which Gramsci's other concepts—such as the 'historical bloc', the 'war of position', the 'collective will', 'intellectual and moral leadership', the 'structure' and the 'superstructure'—directly rely. As she argues,

Once the Gramscian concept of hegemony is located...as political, intellectual, and moral leadership of the working class over all anti-capitalist sectors, a leadership which demands a real democratic relationship within the hegemonic system and which therefore implies a democratisation of the institutions through which it is exercised, it provides us with the basis for a strategy of democratic transition to socialism.²⁷⁶

But although she emphasises that the strategy Gramsci provides is towards 'a *new* conception of socialism'²⁷⁷—what I would dub a (proto-) material-semiotic strategy—and although she argues convincingly of the importance of this novelty, Mouffe's own approach to this strategy and its theoretical development remains limited. That is, she somewhat paradoxically remains a reflexive, almost-material, semiotic *theorist*—what I have termed a 'psychosemiotic' thinker, in consideration of her focus on human affect. That is, she *thinks about* thinking in terms of hegemonic, material-semiotic praxis rather than studying specific examples of it in action and developing theories based on the evidence such studies would provide.

From The Reflexive, Semiotic 'Political' to 'Agonistics'

Like Cacciari, Mouffe has long refused dialectical narratives about utopian, 'post-political' synthesis. Regardless of their normative or ideological orientations, she argues that irenic theories

²⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 15.

²⁷⁷ Idem. Emphasis added.

of political consensus are dangerous and delusional, ‘anti-political’²⁷⁸ abstractions. This is because, to make their points, they must decide to dispense with the reality that antagonism is an ineluctable aspect of lived human experience in the irreducibly plural world. It is her view, therefore, that because real people are emotional, passionate beings coping with reality as we encounter it, we will disagree with one another for reasons which have nothing whatsoever to do with *a priori* truths, transcendental values, teleological normativity, or ‘rational’ propositional logics.²⁷⁹ Moreover, she regards these disagreements as inevitable because ‘rationality’, like beauty, lies in the eye (and experience) of the beholder. Thus, even though one person’s views may not be ‘rational’ according to a particular system of abstract logic, (and no matter how ‘irrational’ they may seem to any particular observer—even including the person who is disagreeing) they nevertheless compel real people to take real action regardless of what they may or may not think. Real people have to decide in circumstances in which the ‘right’ decision is not necessarily obvious (for any number of reasons). For this reason, she has sought to ‘rescue political liberalism from its association with economic liberalism’.²⁸⁰ To begin this rescue, she follows ‘lessons about the ineradicability of antagonism’ from psychoanalysis²⁸¹ which, she argues, make plain the ways in which human beings are naturally emotional and therefore consider that their emotions can be enough to justify action (or inaction) because they are related to specific real world circumstances. These emotionally influenced decisions must be recognised as *legitimate* justifications of or grounds for specific disagreement and specific real world political practice because they represent and describe the contingencies—the resources, the obstacles, and so on—with which the people making the decisions are struggling to cope. This *praxis* of passionate disagreement and antagonistic negotiation between irreducibly plural real people in the real world as a result of their *real* relationships with one another and the real circumstances in which they live is what Mouffe

²⁷⁸ Chantal Mouffe: *On The Political*, (London: Routledge, 2005); p. 2.

²⁷⁹ E.g. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

²⁸⁰ Chantal Mouffe: *The Return of the Political* (London: Verso, 1993); p. 7.

²⁸¹ *Op. cit.* *On The Political*, p. 3.

defines as 'the political'.²⁸² Defined in this way, I argue that her 'political' must be recognised as reflexive, semiotic *praxis* rather than a self-contained semiotic 'concept'. Though she gestures towards it, Mouffe never quite arrives at material-semiotic praxis: although emotional 'feeling' might be distinguished as something more material or 'physical' than cognition, Mouffe's reliance on psychoanalytic hypotheses constrains her discussion of emotional materiality to embodiment within abstract individuals and the psychosemiotic intellectual reaction they might have to it.²⁸³

Nevertheless, she claims that real world political interaction is different to thinking about politics: it involves real-time, three-dimensional interactions with specific people, in specific contexts, confronting specific stakes.²⁸⁴ She therefore argues that the praxis of thinking about politics be transformed accordingly, from abstract weightlessness to the social weight a recognition of reflexive and interrelational psychosemiotic subjectivity provides, an outcome Gramsci's methodology makes possible (see the citation above regarding 'a *new* conception of socialism'). It is therefore irrelevant how 'rational' any particular stakes may or may not be: if enough members of society feel deeply about them, they will exercise their agency by acting and making decisions, and those decisions will have consequences. Some people will acquire more power; others will find themselves with less. Some people will find themselves among a dominant 'us', whereas others will find themselves in an opposing 'them'. Some members of the community will claim that such an outcome is unfair, for any number of legitimate reasons—and, indubitably, some illegitimate ones, depending on one's perspective. However, Mouffe argues, power, equality and freedom are impossible to distribute equally within *any* society: this is how hegemonic *praxis* emerges from reflexive, semiotic political interaction. This is an inevitable feature of political life with which we must cope through 'a diversity of moves in a multiplicity of institutional terrains, so as to construct a different hegemony'.²⁸⁵ This is where her foundations shift from those of most political theorists:

²⁸² Ibid., pp. 8-9

²⁸³ I will discuss this in more detail at the end of the chapter.

²⁸⁴ This is an argument Mouffe has been making for many years; she summarises the development of the argument in Chapter One of *Agonistics: Thinking The World Politically*, 'What is Agonistic Politics?', pp. 1-18.

²⁸⁵ Ibid., p. xiv.

‘the political’ becomes more than just an abstract concept in an abstract head—it becomes an example of the Gramscian *hegemonic*: reflexive, relative, *praxis* rather than just an intellectual framework for thinking about thinking based on the assumption that appropriate practice will necessarily follow whatever is thought.

As a result, if political theorists wish to understand (and change) the power relations responsible for the allocation of freedom or equality in the society in which they live, they must, in Mouffe’s view, reconceptualise in subjective and semiotic terms how human beings interact politically with one another in society. The first step is to recognise that no political order is ever ‘the manifestation of a deeper objectivity exterior to the practices that bring it into being’.²⁸⁶ Next, theorists must stop devoting so much intellectual energy to the exposition of unassailable, abstract epistemologies based on the (alleged) universality of certain principles, such as inalienable human rights.²⁸⁷ Such a focus is misplaced in her view because, even if individuals come to agree that they share equivalent, homogeneous *a priori* rights within their society, these individuals will retain heterogeneous subjective identities in many fundamental and legitimate *a posteriori*, social ways—identities made possible (or at least openly expressible), perhaps, by an agreement regarding *a priori* societal rights: they could be members of minority groups; they could be women, trade unionists, immigrants, ‘postmigrants’,²⁸⁸ or members of the *élite*. Their material, socio-economic circumstances will also remain heterogeneous. ‘[E]quivalence does not eliminate difference’,²⁸⁹ Mouffe argues. She claims, therefore, that by placing emphasis on theoretical resolutions rather than empirical solutions, a liberal discourse that emphasises the universality of individual (liberal)

²⁸⁶ Op. cit. *On The Political*, p. 18.

²⁸⁷ Mouffe explains this example: ‘I believe that democracy must come to terms with pluralism because under modern conditions, where one can no longer speak of “the people” as a unified and homogeneous entity with a single general will, the democratic logic of identity of government and governed cannot alone guarantee respect for human rights. It is only by virtue of its articulation with political liberalism that the logic of popular sovereignty can avoid descending into tyranny’. (*The Return of the Political*, p. 105) Timothy Garton Ash makes much the same point, arguing that to speak of ‘the people’ as unified and homogeneous in an evermore multicultural world is ‘precisely the illiberal thing to do’. (Timothy Garton Ash: ‘Freedom & Diversity: A Liberal Pentagram for Living Together’ in *The New York Review of Books* (22 November, 2012).

²⁸⁸ According to Robert S. Leiken, ‘postmigrant’ refers to ‘people with a migration background’, such as the children born in the country to which the parents have already immigrated. (cited in *ibid.*).

²⁸⁹ *The Return of the Political*. (London: Verso, 2005); p. 84.

human rights is irrelevant and counterproductive because it is blind to forms of ‘vernacular’ difference among human beings. In the vocabulary of this thesis, it is socially weightless because it does not take into account to the specific, irreducible differences between specific people in specific places at specific times.

Following Gramsci, Mouffe argues that the only way to get past this insufficiency is to confront practical political realities that are incapable of theoretical resolution alone.²⁹⁰ They must be confronted as ‘hegemonic practices’ susceptible to challenge from ‘counter-hegemonic practices... which will attempt to disarticulate the exiting order so as to install another form of hegemony’.²⁹¹ Thus, in order to address forms of inequality that go unrecognised by hegemonic liberal political ideology—such as structures of power, hegemony, and *praxis*—social actors are obliged, in Mouffe’s view, to exercise their subjective semiotic agency through critical, reflective and *agonistic*—counter-hegemonic, in other words—political *praxis*. It is only by participating in the hegemonic competition to organise one’s society that one can cope democratically with the inadequacies of current hegemonic political principles. To imagine that democratic political change will emerge once all social actors give their intellectual assent to a set of uniform political principles is, for Mouffe, equivalent to burying one’s head in the windswept dunes of utopian abstraction:

Instead of trying to design the institutions which, through supposedly “impartial” procedures, would reconcile all conflicting interests and values, the task for democratic theorists and politicians should be to envisage the creation of a vibrant, “agnostic” public sphere of contestation where different hegemonic political projects can be confronted.²⁹²

In an argument that resonates with Cacciari’s discussion of the archipelago—which I will discuss in the next chapter —Mouffe states that a global political topography in which an equilibrium is sustained between several regional poles would allow for a ‘plurality of hegemonic powers’ to

²⁹⁰ This is not dramatically different from Mark Philp’s comment about ‘modern realism’, which he claims, ‘wants to draw our focus down from the sunlight of principle to the grubby exigencies of the political cave’. Mark Philp, ‘Reality Without Illusions’, in *Political Theory* 40(5); Sage Publications (Online), p. 646.

²⁹¹ Op. cit. *On The Political*, p. 18.

²⁹² Ibid, p. 2.

coexist.²⁹³ Indeed, she approvingly cites Cacciari's 'interesting insights' in this regard.²⁹⁴ Starting with the premise that passionate antagonism is inevitable among human beings, such a multipolarity of hegemonies (and counter-hegemonies) would struggle to transform or refound liberal institutions in order to facilitate democratic confrontation, moderate disagreement, and promote the negotiation of progressive, proximate solutions to current political problems. By contrast, Mouffe's goal is to strengthen democratic institutions by refounding liberal democracy outside liberal orthodoxy as reflexive, semiotic praxis and procedure: 'instead of putting our liberal institutions at risk, the recognition that they do not have an ultimate foundation creates a more favourable terrain for their defence'.²⁹⁵ If liberal democracy is neither eternal nor inevitable, it is vulnerable to anti-democratic attack.

Following Gramsci, liberal institutions are, as elements of hegemonic praxis, vulnerable to counter-hegemonic challenge. It therefore becomes a task of liberal democrats to defend and fortify already existing liberal institutions to make them capable of withstanding the rigours of agonistic pluralism *in praxis*. Mouffe's goal is not to overthrow liberalism, but to overhaul it. 'Once we accept the necessity of the political and the impossibility of a world without antagonism', Mouffe says, 'what needs to be envisaged is how it is possible *under those conditions* to create or maintain a pluralistic democratic order'.²⁹⁶ Understanding 'order' as praxis rather than 'belief', 'reason' or 'consensus' this can be done, she argues, by transforming Schmitt's binary opposition of 'friend' and 'enemy' to a more nuanced distinction between 'friend' and *adversary*. Though she offers no specific examples, she claims that '[a]dversaries...see themselves as belonging to the same political association, as sharing a common symbolic space'.²⁹⁷ According to Mouffe, an adversary, in other words, is someone with whom one might disagree on any number of things, but with whom one agrees on the 'ground rules' of organised political interaction—what Bernard Crick called the

²⁹³ Ibid., pp. 6-7.

²⁹⁴ *Inter alia*, op. cit. *Agonistics*, pp. 52-53.

²⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 145.

²⁹⁶ *Return of the Political*, p. 4.

²⁹⁷ Op. cit. *On The Political*, p. 20.

‘activity’ of politics²⁹⁸—within a society. A significant strength of liberal democracy, she argues, is that the ground rules and institutional structure it provides mediate, organise, and transform the passionate, political antagonism of specific people in specific places at specific times, thus ‘shap[ing] the element of hostility in a way that defuses its potential’ as material-semiotic praxis.²⁹⁹ Mouffe’s aim is similar to one articulated by the historian Tony Judt, who wrote that, in the wake of hegemonic, global capitalism, ‘[t]he left...has something to conserve’, by which he meant the conserving the aspects of liberal infrastructure which scaffold democratic *praxis* and rearming them for battle in the twenty-first century.

Mouffe intends agonistics as an adversarial (rather than a revolutionary) counter-hegemonic discourse—or what Cacciari calls a ‘counter-punch’—against the hegemony of a liberal epistemology whose methodological praxis divorces specific conflicts and contradictions from the real world circumstances in which they occur by reducing them into abstract, purely intellectual problems. As methodological praxis, agonistics seeks to make possible a confrontation with conflicts and contradictions in their subjective-semiotic (or ‘emotional-rational’) immediacy without any deontological limits upon their interpretation. The adversarial system Mouffe advocates is, in many ways, a ‘multi-partisan’ republican version of British parliamentary democracy, in which the opposition(s) to the government remain loyal to the regime, seeking to resolve disagreements and achieve political satisfaction through parliamentary means rather than violent ones. Importantly, she notes that adversarial confrontation of this kind is an open-ended process: it is a ‘democratic politics’ which, understood as ‘the confrontation between conflicting hegemonic projects’, has ‘no possibility of final reconciliation’.³⁰⁰ Opponents may disagree that a particular policy is an adequate solution to a particular problem, but they will nevertheless

²⁹⁸ e.g., ‘...politics is to be seen neither as a set of fixed principles to be realised in the near future, nor yet as a set of traditional habits to be preserved, but as an activity, a sociological activity which has the anthropological function of preserving a community grown too complicated for either tradition alone or pure arbitrary rule to preserve it without the undue use of coercion’. *In Defence of Politics*, (London: Continuum, 2005), pp. 9-10.

²⁹⁹ *Return of the Political*, p. 5.

³⁰⁰ *Op. cit. Agonistics...*, p. 17.

cooperate with the democratic mechanism of its deliberation and implementation; that is, whatever they think, they agree to 'play by the same rules'.

When discussing the praxis of playing by the rules, Mouffe argues that people 'play' according to 'ethico-political' principles.³⁰¹ Deliberative critics claim that by referring to such 'principles', Mouffe is hypocritically invoking an intellectual principle to which rational people have affirmed their moral consent. The term 'ethico-political', however comes from Benedetto Croce, whose definition Gramsci criticised and developed in his *Prison Notebooks*.³⁰² Gramsci's notion of the 'ethico-political' was hegemonic and historical rather than purely intellectual and/or abstract: it involved the relationship between peoples' ideas and their transformations into praxis within specific material, economic circumstances.³⁰³ Understood this way, the 'ethico-political principles' to which Mouffe refers are hegemonically negotiated praxes within a specific society or political state. As 'principles', they are reflexive, psychosemiotic ones: they are not abstract intellectual concepts held to be true in all places at all times. Instead, they are reflexive, intellectual and social praxes negotiated in relation to specific empirical social realities. As such, 'ethico-political principles' mean nothing in and of themselves; they only make sense to those who learn them within the circumstances in which they are developed and employed.

Because ethico-political principles are hegemonically negotiated, reflexive, praxis-based relationships, the 'enemies' of specifically democratic 'rules of the game' will never disappear. However, Mouffe argues that it is not inevitable that this opposition must degenerate into Schmitt's zero-sum alignment of 'friends' and 'enemies'. For her, who is a 'friend' and who is an 'enemy' in any specific situation at any specific time is a relative question because such definitions

³⁰¹ E.g., op. cit. *The Return of the Political*, pp. 66-73.

³⁰² The discussion appears in *Quaderno 10*; reprinted in op. cit. Forgacs, pp. 194-195.

³⁰³ 'Ethico-political history', he argued, 'is an arbitrary and mechanical hypostasis of the moment of hegemony, of political leadership, of consent in the life and activities of the state and civil society'. Gramsci's 'ethico-political' was, therefore, praxis-based and historical: 'the conception of ethico-political history, in that it is independent of any realist conception, may be adopted as an "empirical tool" of historical research, one which needs constantly to be borne in mind in examining and understanding historical development, if the aim is that of producing integral history and not partial and extrinsic history (history of economic forces as such etc.)'. [Ibid., p. 195].

transform as time passes and circumstances change.³⁰⁴ As a result, she argues that a society with sufficiently robust democratic institutions—‘agonistic channels for the expression of conflicts both in domestic and in international politics’³⁰⁵—will be able to act to diffuse potentially extreme behaviour within these categories by encouraging and rewarding democratic participation according to a set of democratically negotiated rules of *praxis*. Therefore any ‘enemies’ of agonistic pluralism marginalise themselves by refusing to participate democratically with the heterogeneously adversarial-but-politically-cooperative, hegemonic majority of society—from those who agree to participate actively rather than passively in their own domination. In practice, enemies of an agonistically plural society would be able to voluntarily retreat from democratic activity without ever escaping it, much as ‘enemies’ of United States domestic democracy have retreated to rural parts of the country to live in as much isolation and as disconnected from as much of organised society as actually possible. They continue, therefore to participate in their own domination by the United States government by marginalising themselves from ‘mainstream’ society. It is important to note that this self-marginalisation is a contingent marginality because, should ‘enemies’ decide to participate according to the hegemonic ground rules they become ‘adversaries’ according to the *rules* by which the game of government is played in their society. As long as people play by the rules, what they think of them is comparatively insignificant: for Mouffe, ‘adversaries’ are precisely those with views that differ, but who agree nevertheless to play by the rules—even if their goal is to ultimately transform those very rules.

It is on these Gramscian foundations that Mouffe then criticises liberal political theorists like John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas. Because this critique is well known, and because her critique of liberalism and its foundations is sufficiently commensurate with critiques from Cacciari and others already discussed at length elsewhere in this thesis, I will not explore this aspect of agonistics

³⁰⁴ E.g., op. cit. *Agonistics...*, pp. 137-139.

³⁰⁵ Op. cit., *On the Political*, p. 69. The lack such agonistic channels, she argues, leads to an absence of agonistic debate. This lack of organised antagonism, in turn, makes it possible for ‘other forms of identifications which could become problematic for the working of the democratic system’, such as right-wing populism. [Ibid].

further here. I will instead proceed to outline a material-semiotic critique of her resituated agonism. I will then illustrate and develop this critique in the following chapters based on both Cacciari's disenchanted critical methodology and the evidence from his political career that substantiate the effectiveness his approach and the soundness of the foundations upon which that approach is based. Indeed, I intend this discussion as an example of the very sort of disenchanted, material-semiotic critique Cacciari's methodology demands.

Mouffe's Reflexive, Pluralist Psychosemiotic Agonistics

When read with Gramsci in mind, Mouffe's work reveals a character entirely different from that described by her critics. McNay, for example, argues that Mouffe's agonism is socially weightless because—paraphrasing Nancy Fraser—she 'accord[s] primacy to the political real over other social practices and identifications without offering any compelling justification why this should be the case'.³⁰⁶ From a Gramscian perspective, however, such a distinction is impossible to make because 'the political' and 'the social' are inseparable aspects of one another. They are both dimensions of reflexive, material-semiotic (or psychosemiotic, in Mouffe's case), and hegemonic praxis in an irreducibly plural world. Political interaction is social and social interaction is political—there is no 'pre-political', 'post-political', or 'extra-political' in irreducibly plural, reflexive, material semiotic life. As Gramsci argued, the experience of life in the world for any particular individual is to cope with 'being' in the midst of the hegemonic, irreducibly plural praxis of other beings. Adapting Gramsci along psychosemiotic lines, Mouffe does not, therefore, 'turn away from thinking meaningfully about issues of inequality, domination, and exclusion in the context of embodied social relations',³⁰⁷ as McNay argues. Instead, she thinks about these things as psychosemiotic hegemonic praxes within the irreducible plurality of lived social reality.

Unfortunately, because Mouffe does not make the Gramscian aspects of her agonistics clear, I find that there has been much confusion and misunderstanding in readers' interpretations

³⁰⁶ Op, cit. McNay, p. 96.

³⁰⁷ Ibid. p. 94.

of her work. For example, McNay states that Mouffe ‘seems to attribute to the political dynamics of indeterminacy and dissensus a *self-evident radical quality that is unsupported by any sustained justification*’.³⁰⁸ Yet if one takes into consideration Mouffe’s history as one of the first post-Togliatti Gramsci scholars, and the central role Gramsci’s work plays in her own analyses, it becomes self-evident that the ‘radical quality’ McNay identifies is, for Mouffe, the Gramscian orientation to political dynamics as hegemonic praxis. Thus, she justifies indeterminacy and dissensus in terms of psychosemiotic, hegemonic praxis rather than as homogeneous conceptions founded on abstract, dialectical foundations (and therefore opposed equally, and oppositely, by conceptions of decidability and consensus). Mouffe may overgeneralise or take it too much for granted that her readers will recognise and understand the Gramscian (and, for that matter, the Lacanian) foundations of her work. Nevertheless, the Gramscian, praxis-oriented foundations she uses have been shown by social scientists to be socially weighty and therefore convey considerable social ‘heft’ to her theories, at a foundational level at the very least.

Should one read Mouffe’s work without any prior knowledge of Gramsci, or if one is familiar with only the Togliattian tint that has for so long coloured his work and reputation, it becomes extremely difficult to engage with the substance of her arguments. However, as I will now argue, the revelation of Mouffe’s debts to Gramsci is but a first step in responding to the concerns of Philp, Galston, McNay and others regarding the discipline’s drift towards irrelevance. This is the case because, even resituated in this way, the psychoanalytic components of Mouffe’s work render it incapable of engaging sufficiently with the disenchanting, material-semiotic implications of Gramsci’s argumentation and the social scientific evidence that supports them. In my view, the ‘social weight’ Gramsci provides her agonistics is abrogated by her commitment to an enchanted, ‘psychosemiotic’ foundational orientation to the relationships between human beings, the mind, and the natural world. The next step is, therefore, to criticise Mouffe’s resituated work from upon its Gramscian foundations. The limitations this critique reveals—where Mouffe’s analysis ‘ends’—cultivates the requisite context in which to begin the exploration in the following chapters of

³⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 95. Emphasis added.

Cacciari's work for it is in response to these material-semiotic and social scientific questions that his work begins.

Psychosemiotic Buoyancy

It is unfortunate, in my view, that Mouffe sacrifices Gramsci's materialism for Lacanian psychosemiotic reductionism. Though she argues that psychosemiotic reflexivity yields irreducibly plural material praxis, by remaining in the realm of individual, self-contained semiotics, she minimises the indispensability of Gramsci's attention to the irreducible, hegemonic relationships between the *material* and the semiotic as what makes his 'philosophy of praxis' distinct and socially 'weighty'. Thus, not anchoring agonistics firmly enough to its Gramscian (or Lacanian) foundations means that it can break away from its footings and become entangled with the foundational assumptions of whoever is reading her work.

To reposition Mouffe's work more solidly on its Gramscian foundations does not absolve it from criticism or, indeed, from challenges of social weightlessness; but it does transform the nature of the critique. McNay's critique is not, therefore, without merit; it is just incomplete. Indeed, in my view, McNay's critique of Mouffe's reliance on now-antiquated post-structuralist linguistic criticism and Lacanian psychoanalysis are entirely appropriate, as is her argument that the lack of real-world examples in Mouffe's work sap the strength from well-intended and well-targeted criticism. If Mouffe's work is socially weightless, in my view, this is because it remains thinking about thinking, even though this psychosemiotic reflexivity is erected on Gramscian foundations. Like Honig and Stears, Mouffe *theorises a theory*—a *theory of thinking*. To criticise Mouffe effectively—which is to say constructively—one must criticise her work according to Gramscian, material-semiotic foundations. To do otherwise is to risk addressing weightless theory with weightless critique. Appropriate critique needs to throw Mouffe's work into crisis by taking the Gramscian foundations fully into account, which means recognising their *material-semiotic, social* features and their implications for political activity as a form reflexive, irreducibly plural, hegemonic praxis—even if Mouffe does not fully do this in her own work. Thinking about

thinking must, therefore, be decentred from any position of primacy in order for it to be taken into consideration and criticised within the social and material circumstances in which it occurs. Once Mouffe's work is thrown thus into crisis, the historical circumstances in which it has emerged become as important as the work itself. As noted above, Mouffe was one of the first post-Togliatti Gramsci scholars. This did not happen in a vacuum: as mentioned above, agonistics and its antecedent iterations are theories of thinking heavily influenced by the *unexpurgated* Gramsci that first emerged in the late 1970s.

Since that time, agonistics has been deployed in Anglophone political theory as a counter-hegemonic challenge to the hegemonic theories of deliberative democracy produced and developed by theorists like Rawls, Habermas and their followers. To this end she argued that since all conflicts and contradictions can never be resolved once and for all, people must expect conflicts and contradictions to be *transformed* via proximate, negotiated agreements into new relationships of reflexive, psychosemiotic praxis, which will, inevitably, produce *new* conflicts and contradictions with which people will then *begin* to cope. This is not a reification of conflict and antagonism as an *end* or a desired outcome; it is a disenchanting recognition that in a world full of irreducibly plural human beings, human praxes will ineluctably contradict one another. This means that people will have to find ways to *cope* with the irreducibly other—to mediate their differences and disagreements—without any absolute guidance or the deontological guarantee of any particular outcome. All that is guaranteed is transformation: once people are no longer enchanted with the notion that they are entitled to have all of their wants and needs—political, material, or intellectual—satisfied all of the time, they will be willing to negotiate for something else. They will be willing to transform a conflict into a compromise.

Indeed, the absence of universal absolutes means that one group of citizens—however assembled—will have to give something in order to get something else in return from another group of citizens. They participate in their own domination, which means that they will not necessarily get everything that they want, and they might end up unhappy. However, should they

end up unhappy, Mouffe's agonistic model claims that there will inevitably be more than just one group of dissatisfied citizens within a society, and thus many potential allies with whom the dissatisfied might make common, counter-hegemonic cause. Mouffe's agonistics also suggests that these groups—individually or in an alliance they have assembled with others—will be able to carry on fighting and negotiating through any number of channels. For Mouffe, the most important channel is understood to be the channel made available by the institutions and procedures of liberal democracy, which provide citizens with the resources to articulate their grievances and demands democratically. She argues, therefore, that

[w]e should not accept a false dichotomy between individual liberty and rights, or between civic activity and political community. Our choice is not only one between an aggregate of individuals without common public concern and a premodern community organised around a single substantive idea of the common good. A modern democratic political community outside of this dichotomy is the crucial challenge.³⁰⁹

Nonetheless, this quote embodies the paradox at the heart of Mouffe's agonistics. On the one hand, following Gramsci, she makes a socially weighty praxis-based argument that rejects abstract, conceptual dichotomies as the foundation of political praxis, arguing that a 'modern democratic political community' must be located outside such dichotomies. To return to the vocabulary I have introduced, Mouffe is arguing that the modern political community must be a *tertium*, a non-binary 'third' option 'outside' these (false) dichotomies. Like Cacciari, she argues that the 'premodern' is no longer relevant; as a 'postmarxist' scholar, she has also argued that neither the orthodox Marxism nor the orthodox capitalism of the twentieth century are relevant either, nor can their operations be taken for granted. Where they differ is what to do with this realisation when confronting the inferno of practical political engagement. As the chapters that follow will show, whereas Cacciari has leapt repeatedly into the inferno—the full, material-semiotic world of everyday praxis—to *begin* the assembly of various *tertia* without any enchantment—without any 'belief that a strict outcome *must* be achieved, any 'faith' that a 'good' outcome *will* be achieved, or, indeed, the guarantee of any particular outcome of any kind—Mouffe refuses to leap.

³⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 65.

Agonistics thus becomes counterproductive according to its own foundations: although her work is *grounded* on socially weighty, Gramscian, material-semiotic foundations, and although she herself does at least gesture towards the material, she allows this ground—particularly the *material* aspects of these foundations—to erode. As a consequence, her discourse floats away from its foundations, into the thin air of weightless abstraction. Because she makes anecdotal references to real world developments rather than using specific discussions of specific people in specific places at specific times, she has nothing to buttress her claims other than more theorisation; she confronts her adversaries with abstracted generalisations—what Cacciari always refers to as ‘gossip’—rather than detailed, annotated evidence. Not only is this unfortunate, it is unnecessary because there are many socially weighty studies which corroborate and reinforce Mouffe’s Gramscian conclusions in real world praxis.³¹⁰

It is important, however, to remember the scholarly contexts in which Mouffe has been arguing, and at whom her arguments have primarily been aimed. As mentioned above, Mouffe has long been a critic of deliberative theorists like Rawls and Habermas; but the ‘post-Marxist’ ‘radically relational’ materialism she and Laclau defended was also heavily criticised by more orthodox, *au courant* Marxists. For example, the acrid grandiloquence of Norman Geras’s review of Laclau and Mouffe’s *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*³¹¹ demonstrates the extent to which arguing that the ‘embeddedness of ideas in the material conditions of society’ should be understood ‘in terms of signifying totalities...whose only identity is established relationally with other differences...’³¹² threateningly subverted then-hegemonic discourses of anti-capitalist subversion.

In my view, care must be taken to ensure that their integration of thought into reality by means of a ‘radically relational’ materialism not be marginalised or diminished, particularly as this

³¹⁰ Cf. e.g. Andrew Schapp: *Political Reconciliation*, (London: Routledge, 2005); ‘Agonism in Divided Societies’ *Philosophy & Social Criticism* (32/2, 2006); pp. 255-277; (with Foley and Howell, eds.): *The Aboriginal Tent Embassy: Sovereignty, Land Rights, Black Power and the State*, (London: Routledge, 2014); Michael Warner: ‘Public/Private’, in *Critical Terms for the Study of Gender* Stimpson and Herdt, eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

³¹¹ Norman Geras: ‘Post-Marxism?’ *The New Left Review* (I/163, 1987); pp. 40-82.

³¹² Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe: ‘Post-Marxism Without Apologies’, *The New Left Review*, (I/166, 1987); p. 90.

move was made before the collapse of the Soviet Union. Indeed, considering the heteroglossic spectrum of opposition they encountered, it is easy to understand why they must have felt compelled to circle their theoretical wagons around a narrow, yet foundationally transformative argument rather than back down under criticism. But from a vantage point nearly three decades on, their achievement must be considered an historical (and an historic) one. Such a consideration is in keeping with Laclau and Mouffe's own advice.³¹³ Subsequent scholarship adds considerable nuance and complexity to the discourses of relationality and materialism upon which Laclau and Mouffe relied.³¹⁴ In light of Cacciari's arguments, however, I find that Mouffe unfortunately and unnecessarily limits her *oeuvre* (with and without Laclau) to the realm of the psychosemiotic, by continuing to rely on monolithic, psychoanalytic 'signifying totalities' rather than 'archipelagos' of open-ended, dialogic, and material-semiotic praxis.

By criticising Mouffe through Gramsci and Cacciari I suggest, therefore, that Mouffe follow Cacciari's example by staying on the ground, throwing ivory-tower abstractions into crisis and then knocking the towers down, forcing her adversaries to do material-semiotic battle at ground level with evidence and reality. To do this, Mouffe need only follow her own advice:

The left should acknowledge the pluralist character of the world and adopt the multipolar perspective. This, as Massimo Cacciari has argued, means working towards the establishment of an international system of law based on the ideas of regional poles and cultural identities federated among themselves in the recognition of their full autonomy. Cacciari acknowledges the pluralist character of the world and...suggests a model of globalisation constructed around a certain number of great spaces and genuine cultural poles and insists that the new order of the world needs to be a multipolar one.³¹⁵

³¹³ The step is to 'rethink' (Laclau and) Mouffe, accepting 'in all their radical novelty, the transformations of the world in which we live—that is to say, neither to ignore them nor to distort them in order to make them compatible with outdated schemas so that we may continue inhabiting forms of thought which repeat the old formulae. The second is to start from this full insertion in the present—in its struggles, its challenges, its dangers—to interrogate the past: to search within it for the genealogy of the present situation; to recognize within it the presence—at first marginal and blurred—of problems that are ours; and, consequently, to establish with that past a dialogue which is organized around continuities and discontinuities, identifications and ruptures. It is in this way, by making the past a transient and contingent reality rather than an absolute origin, that a tradition is given form'. [ibid., p. 80].

³¹⁴ In addition to Cacciari's work, see also the short bibliography appended to Chapter Four.

³¹⁵ Op. cit. *On the Political*, p. 117.

As I will argue in the rest of this thesis, Cacciari's reflexive, material-semiotic intellectual orientation and the material substantiation of this position by his political experiences demonstrate a way to engaging these disenchanted, material-semiotic implications without the need for any psychosemiotic or otherwise reductionist attempt to abrogate the reality of irreducible plurality. Therefore, an exploration of Cacciari's contention that such social weightlessness is an intended consequence of semiotic bourgeois philosophy as well as the ways in which he has combatted this weightlessness in his own career make his work indispensable to any political theorist concerned with finding a path out of the contemporary disciplinary aporia. With Mouffe's resituated agonistics now linked on Gramscian foundations to Cacciari's background in *operaismo* and negative thought, I will begin this exploration with Cacciari's disenchanted analysis of the Metropolis and his material-semiotic geophilopshy of the archipelago.

CHAPTER FOUR

DISENCHANTMENT AND ACTING ON DISENCHANTED FOUNDATIONS

McNay suggests that the discipline's increasing distance in recent years from the social sciences plays an important role in the emergence of socially weightless theory. Drawing closer to work in the contemporary social sciences not only forces theorists to pay attention to political practice; it can also offer political theorists fresh perspective and tools for confronting reflexively the socially weightless existential foundations upon which they have traditionally relied. In this regard, the inter- and multidisciplinary character of Cacciari's work is invaluable. To study his arguments is to encounter historical networks of social and natural scientific scholarship that have developed and accumulated in response to the foundational critique launched by negative thought on capitalist praxis. Cacciari's work also illustrates the way in which a reflexive critique of foundations need not lead to emptiness and despair, but can in fact expose non-binary, material-semiotic resources on which new foundations for political theory and practice may be constructed.

In this chapter I will first explore Cacciari's understanding of the term *praxis*, situating his discussion within the history of philosophical 'disenchantment' inspired by Hegelian negative thought. In particular, I show how Cacciari uses the concepts of *poiēsis* (Ancient Greek, [ποίησις]: 'bringing forth', 'bringing to light'; 'creation') and *fare* (Italian: 'to make', 'to do') to develop his understanding of praxis, thereby demonstrating why disenchantment need not lead inevitably to apathy, despair, or annihilation. Cacciari's understanding of praxis follows from his commitment to what I have called a material-semiotic perspective on the world, in which the dualistic foundations of Western philosophy have been replaced by an archipelagic understanding of foundations in which *poiēsis* and *fare* work together as reflexive, inseparable, often indistinguishable, aspects of one another. Although *fare*, for example, implies the material 'making' of a *thing* as distinct from the idea of a thing, thinking is, itself, a form of *fare*. In this way, thinking is a methodological process, or as Gramsci put it, a 'technique'; it is a form of reflexive, material-semiotic praxis. I will illustrate the distinctiveness of Cacciari's position by citing his own contrast between the 'modernist',

‘positivist’ understanding of science based on post-Enlightenment dualism and his own views that derive from a critique of that positivist perspective. For Cacciari, thinking about one problem rather than another, thinking about a particular problem according to a particular logic, or within particular boundaries (or refusing to think beyond certain logics or boundaries) in order to achieve a particular goal is part of *doing* a particular kind of *poiēsis*, such as *bringing forth* the kingdom of heaven on earth, the dictatorship of the proletariat, or the ‘ownership society’. Equivalently, one’s material *fare* has consequences which, on their own, contribute to *bringing forth* or *to light* non-binary, ‘third’ possibilities which were previously non-existent or existent but ‘veiled’ by hegemonic binary discourse.³¹⁶

Second, I will use Cacciari’s critique of Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Homo democraticus* as an example of the disenchanted, foundational understanding of the reflexive relationship between *poiēsis* and *fare*—and the consequences of that relationship—upon which his material-semiotic *doing* begins. By rejecting the binary separation of the material and the semiotic, material-semiotic *doing* pushes the material and the semiotic back together in order to build a platform upon which one can pile the evidence needed to climb out of binary aporias produced by their separation. From the top of this evidence it becomes possible to look for the hidden, non-binary ‘thirds’ in any set of circumstances. As I will discuss, the decision to begin piling up material-semiotic evidence—social ‘weight’—is the first step to bringing socially weightless theory to an end in order to begin open-ended, socially ‘weighty’ material-semiotic praxis based on reflexive, disenchanted critique. I will argue that it is the radical forcefulness of this reflexive critique that makes this process an open-ended one, because it makes possible non-binary opportunities for ‘achieving closure and moving on’ from forms of *poiēsis* and *fare* which, though not fully realised or completed, need to be abandoned because they have become more destructive than constructive—a determination based

³¹⁶ Examples of these ‘third’ alternatives can be ‘negative’ (the ‘unsynthesised remainders’ of bourgeois *Aufhebung*, or the rise of organised crime as a result of the Prohibition laws in the United States), ‘positive’ (the discovery of a species of bacteria that can survive at high temperatures leading to the efficient production of DNA), or ambiguous (European Union employment laws and Eurozone GDP versus member-state GNPs), and are often hidden by the pursuit of narrowly ideological outcomes.

on material-semiotic evidence (of aporia, ineffectiveness, or catastrophe) rather than based on their own abstract logics alone.

Third, I suggest that this kind of radically reflexive critique reveals the assumptions of bourgeois political theory to be hegemonic discourses rather than foundational totalities. At the same time, such a radically reflexive, material-semiotic critique reveals the contours of ‘different’, disenchanted (and potentially counter-hegemonic) foundations on which scholarly and political engagement may be built. In this way, Cacciari’s critique points toward a path for agonist political theorists seeking a way to provide social weight to their political analysis. Finally, I address Cacciari’s conclusion that acting upon such alternative foundations allows for the possibility of *changing one’s mind*—that is, for recognising that ‘third’ possibilities beyond the restricted dualistic options sanctioned by Western philosophy are always available for political praxis, and that one can decide to pursue them if one so chooses. Taken as a whole, this chapter’s discussion of Cacciari’s ‘disenchanted engagement’ offers political theorists a consideration of constructive alternatives for political analysis that emerge from disenchanted, material-semiotic philosophical methodology. In particular, this encounter shows how Cacciari’s form of ‘differently’ foundational—material-semiotic—disenchanted engagement with irreducible plurality can connect the ‘socially weighty’ scholarly praxis of contemporary social science with the practices of political theory.

Material-Semiotic Doing

Thus far I have argued that Cacciari’s foundational understanding of human life is a ‘material-semiotic’ one in which cognition and doing are understood together as reflexive *praxis*. In his view, intellectual ‘theory’ and material ‘practice’ are not discrete, self-contained, autonomous entities, but are instead reciprocally entangled aspects of one another—they are *poiēsis* and *fare*. Put differently, it is not just that cognition and doing are two sides of the same coin: they are simultaneously the physical coin, the overall social system that establishes and maintains the coin’s value, and the

language in which its value is recognised and communicated among specific human beings in specific places at specific times.

There are, Cacciari argues, many distinct forms of *poiēsis* and *fare*—many ways of material-semiotic creating, bringing-forth, making, and doing. To Plato, *poiēsis* was the passage between non-being and being: it was, as Cacciari summarises, ‘a bringing to light or manifestation of something that was not previously manifest...the passage from being not-manifest to manifest’.³¹⁷ It is from this understanding of *poiēsis* from which the word ‘poet’ is derived, as ‘one who makes or creates’. In ancient Greek, the *poiētēs* (ποιητής; ‘poet’) *created, produced, or brought forth* ‘art’: both aesthetic art like paintings, poems, but also ‘intellectual’ or discursive art like philosophy, commentary, and critique. But, Cacciari points out, this definition raises important questions regarding the provenance of that which is now manifest—questions that have shaped the history of Western philosophy: where does the *poiētēs* get his or her material? Where was it before it was manifest? What is its origin? How did that passage from non-manifest to manifest occur? In Cacciari’s view, the most prominent Western answers to such questions over the last few millennia have been foundationally, and *essentially*, equivalent: the ‘stuff’ is taken for granted as an absolute, *a priori* totality. But *where* that original, unitary stuff came from is beyond our means to identify absolutely. The latter, scientific, explanation, however, adds an important ‘executive’ layer to the process of *poiēsis*: no longer is the *poiētēs* concerned with origins; he or she is now primarily concerned with studying how what *is*—wherever it might have ‘come’ from—actually works. In the post-Enlightenment West, the *poiētēs* has become the so-called ‘objective scientist’, investigating existence on behalf of humans seeking to exploit it for their own material ends, rather than a demiurge seeking to proclaim the ends of the universe and how humanity must comply with those ends, whatever their own material ends may be.

Yet, rather than creating or providing any objective truth, Cacciari argues that the ‘objective scientist’, is actually the bourgeois *poiētēs* who helps husband the process of

³¹⁷ Massimo Cacciari: ‘Poīēsis e le forme del fare’, lecture given at the Poīēsis Festival – Fabriano, 3a edizione, 2010.

manifestation along, ensuring that what becomes manifest suits bourgeois interests.³¹⁸ The bourgeois *poiētēs* therefore helps create aporia. By using his or her knowledge, skills, and special equipment—all of which are based extensively on what he or she has learned or ‘inherited’ from his or her predecessors, both formally and informally—the ‘objective scientist’-as-*poiētēs* is conceived as one who pulls back the veil of ignorance, bringing the natural Truth, which has always existed, to light before our eyes. Once brought to light, we humans can figure out how to bend nature—literally and figuratively—to our wills; we can figure out how the human *cogito* can dominate natural material, transforming it into a something useful—into a *utilitas*, as Cacciari puts it—with which we might produce whatever our subjective wants and needs may demand. As he explains, there is nothing deterministic about this modern bourgeois transformation: it is a *decision*³¹⁹ to confront the world in one way rather than another; to assert the foundations from which all things will be brought forth and the lens through which they must then be understood:

I decide. This is the characteristic form of modern, contemporary fare. I decide that my fare recognises nothing that would transcend it. This is a decision. A big decision. A momentous [epochale] decision in the modern, contemporary world. It echoes Bacon, when he says [that ‘truth and utility are perfectly identical’³²⁰]. The name of the thing is to be useful to me. That is the true name of the thing. Therefore, nothing beyond me, nothing that transcends me. The thing is of value in the sole and exclusive sense that it has value for me; that it serves me; that it is at my disposition. But this is a presupposition. It is uninvestigated; uninterrogated. It works. It works frighteningly well; it works marvellously. Our civilisation is based on this presupposition.³²¹

In making this statement, Cacciari takes for granted that his audience is familiar with the history of the philosophy of science. This means in particular that they should understand that the ‘modern’ scientific tradition stemming from Bacon, widely called ‘positivist science’, is *not* ‘science’ *tout court*; that it is instead a particular way of doing (*fare*) science.³²² He expects them to know that it is called ‘positivist science’ because, it emerged as an equal and opposite response to the intellectual crisis in Western philosophy provoked by the aforementioned ‘negative’ critique of the epistemological and

³¹⁸ Ibid.

³¹⁹ See Chapter Two.

³²⁰ Francis Bacon: *Novum Organum Scientiarum*, Book I, §124.

³²¹ Op. cit. Cacciari. Emphasis added.

³²² Something that has been demonstrated by science studies scholars since the 1980s.

ontological foundations of classical idealism. This discourse of positivism sought to identify universal, existential foundations in the material universe itself, rather than the cognitive or the supernatural. Therefore, any predictions there are to be made about the future of human life, or guidance regarding its direction, would thenceforth be made by scientists rather than clergy. In the work of the French philosopher Auguste Comte—who coined the term—positivism was a transposition of Hegel’s *Aufhebung* from the realm of cognitive dialectics to the mechanistically ‘scientific’ ‘religion of Humanity’”. That is, as Man progressed through history, as he became more phenomenologically experienced, he got inevitably closer to scientific reality rather than to God.³²³ Comte argued that the passage through these stages was an historical inevitability for all people. Similar to Hegel’s *Aufhebung*, Comte’s *Aufhebung* would ultimately produce a complete, ‘positive’ knowledge of the world and its mechanisms, even if the origins of those mechanisms remained unknowable. There was nothing transcendent, metaphysical, or ‘spiritual’ about the world in Comte’s account. From Comte’s perspective, the scientist is a particular kind of *poiētēs* seeking to *bring forth* a scientifically ‘true’ existential narrative to replace the Abrahamic narrative upon which Western society had thus far developed. According to positivists like Comte, this narrative should take on the role played by the *religio civilis* of antiquity: a secular, yet meaningful foundation for political praxis within a community or a society.³²⁴

In Cacciari’s view, positivist *poiēsis* and *fare* are important critical contributors to the contemporary aporias of bourgeois capitalism. By coupling traditional, Abrahamic faith in the transcendent immaterial to the immediate, materially productive capability of capitalist

³²³ For Comte, this *Aufhebung* progressed through three stages of increasing sophistication: the theological, the metaphysical, and the positive. In the first stage, because Man is fearful and ignorant in the world, he imagines that meaning must be provided supernatural forces. In the second, Man has begun to study his surroundings but, lacking specialised equipment, his studies are necessarily superficial; he therefore attributes meaning to unseen, but existent, ‘essences’. In the final stage, because Man has developed the technological means to observe and test the world, he taking the absolute measure of its foundational positivities in their total immanence—he can learn how the world works without concern for the secrets of its ultimate origin or end.

[Auguste Comte: *Introduction to Positive Philosophy*, ed. Ferré (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1988); p. 2.]

³²⁴ *Religio civilis* means that all *cives* (citizens)...must recognise themselves as members of such a community [*civitas*], belonging to its destiny, affirming the power of Rome as the supreme good; in no way is it possible to compare it to a ‘state religion’. [Source: Massimo Cacciari: ‘Digressioni su Impero e tre Rome’, *Micromega* (5:2001); p. 49.]

infrastructure, positivism transformed a faith in God into a faith in Science (and Technology) to produce salvation, emancipation, or satisfaction in the world. As Cacciari puts it, this faith developed ‘either through a late positivism or a late Voltairian [i.e., atheistic] enlightenment filtered through positivist scientism...a secularism...that retains a relic of the dimensions of religion and faith in the age of technology’.³²⁵ In his view, this faith is not based on any transcendental revelation or scientific discovery: it is a specific form of *fare* carried out within a larger bourgeois *poiēsis*, a form of *fare* undertaken ‘[d]espite all the failures of history, it is a position that recurs and unfortunately history is full of historical recurrences’.³²⁶ In other words, positivism was not a radically alternative way to approach human interaction and the mysteries of existence. It was an attempt to transform the relations of power within (primarily) Western European societies, reallocating power from clergy to scientists *without changing the foundational assumptions of those societies*. Positivism was therefore a reactionary, bourgeois secularism—a specific counter-hegemonic project by specific people to dominate other specific people in specific places at a specific time.

As a result, Cacciari argues that the positivist-scientist-as-*poiētēs* must be a tyrant who must achieve and maintain his position of domination. The work of the positivist *poiētēs* is not radical because it did not change the foundational assumptions of Western philosophy, opting instead for a reshuffle, changing power centres rather than power structures. That is, positivist logic, like those that preceded it must obey three foundationally absolute ‘laws of thought’. Usually attributed to Aristotle, Bertrand Russell summarised them as follows: ‘(1) *The Law of Identity*: “Whatever is, is”; (2) *The Law of Contradiction*: “Nothing can both be and not be”; (3) *The Law of Excluded Middle*: “Everything must either be or not be”’.³²⁷ To ensure that there is no possibility of any non-binary ‘thirds’, the three laws of thought must be tyrannically enforced.

As long as this logic is tyrannically enforced, Cacciari argues, the *poiētēs* can *bring forth* secure predictions about the future based upon what he or she knows about the past. In the

³²⁵ ‘Etica e laicità: Intervista a Massimo Cacciari’, *Aggiornamenti Sociali* (03/2009); p. 175.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*

³²⁷ Bertrand Russell: *The Problems of Philosophy* (New York: Cosimo Classics, 1912/2007); p. 63.

contemporary world, Cacciari argues that bourgeois capitalism and its offshoots rely on this kind of foundationally tyrannical, teleological understanding. The *poiētēs* can make such predictions, Cacciari argues, because he or she takes for granted that the world is teleologically reducible, and that, if we know its origin—and therefore both the project the teleology is carrying out and the way in which it must be carried out—we know how it must ultimately be fulfilled. One might argue, adopting the vocabulary of bourgeois capitalism, that the scientist therefore becomes an executive, helping manage the teleological project as it approaches its ultimate fulfilment.

Cacciari suggests that the foundations of modern, contemporary *fare* may well have been overlooked by capitalist *poiētēs*, possibly strategically. But these foundations were not wholly overlooked by ‘radical’ natural and social scientists at the beginning of the twentieth century, who criticised the soundness of the aforementioned presupposition upon which our ancestors began the project that has produced our modern, contemporary civilisation. Within secular, bourgeois hegemony, the scientist was now the *poiētēs*, taking Jesus down from the cross and replacing him with Leonardo’s Vitruvian Man, ‘mortalising’ the proportions according to which all things are measured. Because no one could die for Man’s sins except Man himself, Man had no choice but to save himself through objective science, and the imposition of secular, scientific dogma as what Comte called the ‘religion of humanity’. The scientist was now a secular messiah, delivering the Positive news about the world and the direction of human life. Indeed, as John Zammito explains, ‘[p]ositive science offered a more certain predictive grasp of reality and concomitantly such knowledge was utility in a Baconian sense: prediction was power. The conquest of ever new domains, ultimately the sphere of human conduct itself, by the methodology of positivism was both inevitable and welcome’.³²⁸ According to positivist discourse, science equals progress; thus to do science is to do progress. In this approach, there is no room for any reflexive inquiry or critique.

The philosopher Edmund Husserl, however, sought to negate positivism and any sort of compromise that would render *social* science subordinate to, or ultimately dependent upon, the Truth as defined by positive *natural* science. In the terms proposed by Cacciari, Husserl was

³²⁸ Ibid.

arguing that positivists refused to recognise that natural science was a form of *poiēsis*, and that natural scientists were engaged in their own sort of *fare*. Furthermore, they refused to acknowledge that centuries of philosophical reflection had not led humanity closer to any ultimate knowledge or ontology. On the contrary, by assuming that the social and the natural were discrete rather than reciprocal entities, it had produced an epistemic and ontological crisis. In the early 1930s, Husserl described this crisis as ‘The Crisis of the Sciences as Expression of the Radical Life-Crisis of European Humanity’. This is the intellectual crisis produced when the foundations of knowledge and meaning are revealed to be contextually contingent, irreducibly plural, ‘material-semiotic’ discourses —what Zammito calls ‘a nice derangement of epistemes’³²⁹—rather than a single, absolute ontological bedrock. Coping with the consequences of this crisis—and the foundational aporia it reveals—has been a central concern of postwar, ‘post-positivist’ scientific and social scientific enquiry. One might add that positivistically-minded thinkers who ignored this crisis condemned themselves to the production of ‘socially weightless’ conclusions.

The crisis of foundations revealed that ontogeny does *not* recapitulate phylogeny, in evolutionary biology, physics, or social praxis. Instead, it revealed that *poiēsis* (whether biological, physical, or creative) emerges reflexively and contingently. In no case does it result from a transcendental encounter with an absolute totality of any kind. The crisis of foundations therefore constitutes a moment of *schismogenesis*—the creation of division—in Western philosophy because a second form of *poiēsis* emerged to challenge its predecessor. Cacciari argues that this is a watershed *not* because people suddenly experienced a metaphysical or transcendental epiphany about the reality of human *fare*, but rather because, in the face of compelling evidence, people *decided* to begin approaching human *fare* upon foundations that were *different to* those used prior to that point. The consequences of this decision are the development of two antithetical forms of *fare*. Put as simply as possible, the first form is one of ‘mind over matter’, in which the *cogito* must

³²⁹ Op. cit. Zammito.

dominate the natural;³³⁰ the second is productive, in which we make use of the natural in order to produce what we think will be of use. This latter form is the contemporary one, Cacciari argues, whose main consequence is a feeling of entitlement among people that their right to their *fare* should be unconditional. That is, people should be able to do however they like. The reality, of course, is that material resources are finite, and in many cases, increasingly scarce. Logically, then, the contemporary *poiētēs* must employ the latter form of *fare* to produce the things people need from a nature the *poiētēs* has produced.

To avoid radically uncomfortable questions about material finitude and scarcity, Cacciari argues, bourgeois capitalists must strive to keep those they dominate convinced that their *fare* will, one day, become unconditional. To achieved this goal as quickly as possible, bourgeois praxis entices the dominated to devote their material-semiotic resources to improving the bourgeois task at hand rather than devoting them to developing non- or a-capitalist alternatives—non-binary ‘thirds’, in other words. This delaying tactic, as Cacciari explains, slows down the march towards its fulfilment by getting people to stop and think about the moral enrichment of bourgeois praxis rather than questioning the foundational contingency of bourgeois hegemony:

as philosophers always mention, thought is arresting. Thought has always had a delaying effect: we still say “when you stop and think about it”. “You stop and think”; when you think, you stop. In my view, this is one of the...fundamental factors that determine the European-Western lateness regarding new influences [*potenze*].³³¹

Within bourgeois hegemony, it is Cacciari’s view that ‘stopping to think’ becomes ‘to stop thinking’. This is because bourgeois hegemony must stop all radical, reflexive, critical thought, lest a counter-hegemonic challenge emerge. To avoid this, bourgeois hegemony works best when individuals stop thinking radically in order to start thinking strategically: how to make capitalism better, more efficient, more productive: how the individual’s wants and desires can be more

³³⁰ Cacciari notes that this ancient understanding of *fare* has produced the German word for reality, *Wirklichkeit*: ‘*Wirklichkeit* means *Werk* [‘work’]. The root is *Werk*, whose root is the Greek *erg* [in Ancient Greek, *érgon* (ἔργον) is ‘work’]. That is, reality is *Werk*. Reality is what I have made fact [*fatto*], there is no longer any entity outside my *fare*. My *fare* has subsumed the totality of entities into itself. [Op. cit. Cacciari, *Poiēsis e le forme del fare...*]

³³¹ Ibid.

efficiently and more maximally fulfilled. Strategic considerations aside, Cacciari considers this sort of operative thought a philosophical waste of time because it asks no radical or reflexive—foundational—questions of capitalism. Instead it only produces responses to questions that capitalism itself asks: ‘how can you make me more efficient?’ ‘what can *you*, the individual, do to help capitalism?’

It is clear that many, even among the currently powerful, hope that we stop thinking as quickly as possible. And maybe they’re right. Because if our *telos*, our end, our idea of being complete...is maximum production, etc., enough—it’s good not to think. I do not mean that ironically, I mean it seriously. Because thought has always had a precise restraining function... What did Socrates say? “Stop a second, let’s chat...”³³²

The ‘Western lateness regarding new powers’ to which Cacciari refers is an example of the aporias with which political theorists are currently struggling. For instance, Anglophone political theory may be said to be ‘late’ in addressing the possibility that many non-binary, so-called ‘third’ possibilities (or ‘influences’) are to be found along the continuum between thesis and antithesis. This may be because it ‘stopped to think’ about thought that is based on the abstract, absolute pre-crisis foundations, and never started moving again. Now, however, some ‘radical’ and ‘realist’ Anglophone political theorists have gotten restless and are starting to stir, turning to contemporary social science for guidance and support. This may be because much social science never ‘stopped’ to think about thought. Rather, following the crisis of foundations, it has kept moving, remaining steadfastly reflexive and disenchanted in its attention to material-semiotic praxis.

The crisis of foundations has revealed that *poiēsis* is not based on dualism—that there are more than two ways for a contemporary *poiētēs* to go about his or her *fare*. As a result of the crisis of foundations, Cacciari argues that the *poiētēs* has been transformed once again, this time into an ‘author’ that comments on what he or she encounters contingently in the world: what he or she ‘inherits’, experiences, learns, or feels. Such an author is different from a creator who draws truths from the well of transcendent universality. This new *poiētēs* is a social scientifically-informed scholar or artist. ‘This’, Cacciari argues, is ‘how we understand our *fare*’ nowadays:

³³² Ibid.

[a]s the conscious acquisition of prior forms, acts, elements *which precede us*, that are not our own work, that are not the work of an author, that are not the work of the *poiētēs*. The *poiētēs*, and the work of the *poiētēs*, consists precisely of taking these elements on, and giving them new form. So the *poiētēs* is a “creator” in this very precise, and limited sense. In this sense, the *poiētēs* does not bring [something] from non-being to being. He or she brings elements which are, by themselves, autonomous, to a form in which the *poiētēs* imprints his or her character, his or her *daimōn*. It is this way, on the basis of this image of the poet, that we can understand our *fare*: this is how the poet *does*; this is how the artist *does*.³³³

In the Hegelian terminology discussed in Chapter Two, *poiēsis* is now understood as a kind of reflexive, material-semiotic *Aufhebung*: the *poiētēs* encounters something that already exists in the world, decides to ‘digest’ it, and in so doing, consciously and deliberately transforms it into something else. The *poiētēs* then communicates this new understanding to other people who, in turn, *hebt* it in their own ways *auf*, and the process continues. Cacciari’s reflexive understanding of *poiēsis* is as transformative, material-semiotic praxis: ‘nothing *ex nihilo*, nothing from nothing, no invention in an abstract sense, but transformation. This is *poiēsis*, this is our *fare*’.³³⁴ Cacciari’s more radical understanding of *poiēsis* owes a great deal to Martin Heidegger, whose definition of *poiēsis* can be paraphrased as a reflexive act of human creation which brought the contradictory, ‘dissonant’ human experiences of being (*Sein*) and time (*Zeit*) together in a ‘harmonious’, subjective impression (or ‘hypothetic metaphor’—see below) of *Dasein* (being-there). His definition is reflexive and material-semiotic because other people and other parts of the world are a constituent element of *Sein* and an irreducible specificity of *Dasein*. This, Cacciari points out, is a stark contradiction to the preceding, romantic notion of the poet ‘who imagined himself to be autonomous’. This imaginary autonomy resulted, he argues, from ‘a low fever’ [*una febbriattola*] caused by the modern and the contemporary.³³⁵ This contradiction between the romantic poet and Heideggerian *poiēsis* is of critical importance, Cacciari argues, because it reveals

the consciousness of belonging to tradition, to acquired languages, and to working *within* that language rather than inventing a new language. The contradiction means—entails—an essential relationship with that which one contradicts: if the constituent element of my

³³³ Ibid,

³³⁴ Ibid.

³³⁵ Here, too, see op. cit. Latour.

fare is to contradict your position, you are essential to me because my art is born of contradicting you....³³⁶

'The real is rational and the rational is real', as Hegel put it, because one is constantly sublating—responding reflexively and dialogically to or against whatever it is one experiences. *Poïēsis* is therefore contextually situated, but it is not limited—even if efforts are made to censor its products—by getting people to restrain themselves (perhaps by inviting them to stop to think and chat or, perhaps, by censoring them in some way)—in any given situation.

If a persuasive argument can be made that the epistemological and ontological foundations (protologies, eschatologies, teleologies, causes, *topoi*, moralities, ethics, and so on) upon which lies one's entire understanding of human *poïēsis* and one's own *fare* rest are not stable and eternal, then this means that they must be susceptible to reflexive, material-semiotic testing. It also would seem to suggest that those who continue to insist, despite all evidence and argument to the contrary, that the foundations remain (or must remain) stable and absolute, are succumbing either to a form of philosophical enchantment or to naked individual ambition. By contrast, acknowledgement of the contingency, instability, and contradictory character of traditional foundations could be described as a kind of 'disenchantment'. Although Cacciari does not highlight the links directly, disenchanted philosophers, social, and physical scientists are those who argue that foundational stability cannot be taken for granted, and that foundations must be tested continuously for stability as the circumstances of life and its contradictions evolve and change over time.

The crisis of foundations—whether the crisis of social foundations brought about by bourgeois capitalism and industrialisation as studied by Hegel or the crisis of empirical intellectual foundations brought about by the 'scientific' crisis of foundations that followed a few decades later—has caused many to ask, to use Cacciari's term, 'what is contemporary *fare*'? If we live in a bourgeois society, what is bourgeois *fare*? Of what does bourgeois *poïēsis* consist? How does it produce and *pro-duce*? These questions have been asked by many 'disenchanted' scholars: by

³³⁶ Op. cit. Cacciari.

Gramsci, as described in the previous chapter, and by the scientists who have grappled with the crisis of foundations and post-positivism mentioned above.

Disenchanted Poïēsis and Fare

Across the social sciences, a common product of the twentieth century crisis of foundations is a material-semiotic definition of human *fare* that is contextually relative and contingent, learned (rather than transcendently bestowed or somehow biologically or psychologically innate), and 'hegemonic'. Put differently, *fare* is a contradictory, socio-cultural—and therefore material-semiotic—praxis. The scholarship in this area is vast, and ranges across the social sciences, including anthropology, sociology, economics, philosophy, psychology, law, geography, architecture, and science studies.³³⁷ These are socially 'weighty' discussions because their analysis relies on the *fare* of real human beings in real places at real times doing real things rather than abstract, subjunctive predictions. By *deflating*—rather than *annihilating*—the superposition of intellectual prediction, presumption, and prognostication within philosophical inquiry, this analysis reveals the possibility 'of learning [some]thing from others that we did not already presume'.³³⁸ One does not know what one might learn from one's inquiry into the unknown or the 'foreign'. This disenchanted, *differently foundational* understanding of *fare* is the one upon which contemporary social science began a long time ago. There are, therefore, many contemporary social scientists—most notably perhaps, social anthropologists—whose understanding of culture, society, and praxis overlaps with Bakhtin's dialogic *heteroglossia*, Husserl's anti-positivism, Gramsci's discussion of material-semiotic, hegemonic praxis, and Cacciari's discussion of *poiēsis* and *fare*.

Because Cacciari understands *poiēsis* and *fare* as inextricable, circumstantially contingent aspects of reflexively critical, material-semiotic praxis, his understanding of praxis can therefore be defined as a disenchanted one. Human beings cope with what there is to cope with, not what they

³³⁷ I have appended a summary bibliography of this work as an endnote.

³³⁸ Op. cit. Zammito, p. 275.

would like to cope with or what they think they should cope with. The character of this disenchantment is an engaged, unsentimental criticism which is also open-ended, precisely because Cacciari recognises human beings as foundationally open-ended material-semiotic critics rather than teleological, deontological reductionists. To Cacciari, reductionism is a particular *kind of fare* within in particular *kind of poiēsis*: an *enchanted* praxis which seeks to allocate power based on intellectual prediction, presumption, and prognostication. It is one that assumes, desires, or requires these to be both possible and necessary before any material action can be taken. By contrast, Cacciari's understanding is disenchanted because it refuses any enchantment with the possibility of *pre hoc* security—of any guarantee that desired outcomes will necessarily materialise.

Historical experience plays a critical role in the development of this intellectual disenchantment precisely because the end of enchantment is not the end of history. Rather, disenchantment marks a break with the past and the opportunity for the development and beginning of innovative political praxis on new, *alternative* foundations. This disenchantment was not limited to post-*Risorgimento* Italy. Instead, it was a common product—or side-effect—of bourgeois life across Western Europe. In Germany, for example, such reflexive disenchantment—*Entzauberung*—with the translation of cultural meaning by capitalism into individual utility became the foundational characteristic of the sociology of Max Weber, Georg Simmel, and Werner Sombart among others.

The most extreme example of this translation began to manifest itself in Germany in the years after the Treaty of Versailles, as capitalist rationalisation and its productive infrastructure merged with national, material desperation. A German of Jewish origin, Husserl wrote the *Crisis* as National Socialism was beginning to metastasise in Germany. Not surprisingly, his foundational critique of Nazism echoes in many ways Gramsci's earlier foundational critique of Fascism in Italy. For both of them, totalitarian political praxis provided real-world, experimental evidence of the ways in which ideological discourse, unjustified by any foundational grounding in observable, measurable reality, could be mobilised in the service of specific, transformative political ends.

Disenchanted scholars like Husserl and Gramsci were deeply suspicious of any political assertions that made 'objective' predictions about future outcomes based on allegedly absolute foundations; if such assertions were not challenged, this was the consequence of *hegemonic praxis* rather than the consequence of their self-evident epistemological or ontological correctness.³³⁹

Cacciari's disenchanted understanding of praxis is neither risk-free nor risk-averse. As a hegemonic, material-semiotic understanding of praxis, it recognises that there is never any guarantee that a predicted (or predictable) outcome of specific action will necessarily materialise—or, equally, that it will not: how real people will react is never certain. The only outcome of which one is assured is that there will be consequences: predictable, unpredictable, surprising, ambiguous, irrelevant, and so on. His is therefore an open-ended understanding because, by recognising that risk is unavoidable, one takes risks in one's praxis, ready all the while to cope with the consequences of the risks one takes, foreseen and unforeseen, whatever they may be. And, of course, how one copes is also not guaranteed or predictable because one does not know in advance with what one will have to cope.

Sobering Disenchantment

As I will discuss in detail below, the 'different' foundations of Cacciari's philosophy are the product of his disenchanted praxis. But the discovery that such 'different' foundations are to be had at all requires a willingness to throw traditional foundational limitations into crisis, to seek out and experiment with the robustness of alternative ways of justifying political actions. Like the lineage of Italian leftist thinkers with whom he is allied, Cacciari is deeply suspicious of those who seek to impose a set of universal principles, or universal feelings, as the foundation on which all political reasoning must rest. He and his allies associate this foundational thinking especially with the

³³⁹ Indeed, as Gramsci wrote in his *Prison Notebooks*,

[a]nybody who makes a prediction has in fact a program for whose victory he is working, and his prediction is precisely an element contributing to that victory. . . . If one excludes all voluntarist elements, or if it is only other people's wills whose intervention one reckons as an objective element in the general interplay of forces, one mutilates reality itself.

[Op. cit. Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, p. 171].

Western project of bourgeois capitalism and political liberalism. But, as the philosopher Peter Sloterdijk explains, the attempt to secure political reason on unassailable foundations is not unique to the European West. Rather, state systems throughout history and across space have regularly attempted to establish unshakable foundations—what he calls ‘authoritative monovalent theses’ on which to justify their own political praxis on ‘an *inconcussum* that would be reached not through the introspective self-confirmation of the subject, but rather by ecstatically overwhelming it. A foundation is considered unshakeable once it makes the breakthrough to an absolute anchor point’.³⁴⁰

What Sloterdijk calls ‘authoritative monovalent theses’ might, from the perspective developed so far in this chapter, be considered ‘enchanted theses’. Cacciari’s disenchanted engagement emerges as a form of reflexive, material-semiotic *poiēsis* that tests for ungrounded, ‘weightless’ enchantment in discursive *fare*. His is a methodological praxis designed to critically review—to ‘throw into crisis’—the authoritative, monovalent ‘enchanted’ theses and practices that have been devised to anchor human existence in the absolute. Unlike a positivist scientist who takes certain monovalent principles and practices for granted as foundational assumptions, Cacciari’s own praxis is similar to that of a disenchanted, reflexive scientist who is willing to test not only proximate hypotheses, but is also willing to question the ultimate foundational assumptions within which those hypotheses are framed. Indeed, writing against the confident desperation of enchanted Modernist-positivist discourses, Cacciari argues that ‘[n]o philosophico-scientific foundational *inconcussum* can avoid research, can stop investigation. The human is essentially a kind of *insecurus*, always anxious, always worried about something’.³⁴¹ In Cacciari’s own hands, this anxiety is transformed into a critical, reflexive anxiety about the assurances one is given by those who dominate (or would dominate) them. Negative *thought* is thus transformed into material-semiotic negation, a sturdy, disenchanted, radically reflexive, critical praxis; into the praxis of negating any such assurances based on a foundational suspicion of *all* intellectual or ideological dogma. For

³⁴⁰ Peter Sloterdijk: *God’s Zeal* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), p. 109.

³⁴¹ Massimo Cacciari: ‘L’incerta speranza del credente’, intervento alla *Settimana Alfonsiana*, 2005.

Cacciari, a *poiētēs* that has lost his or her enchantment with the possibility of resolving this fundamental *insecuritas* once and for all becomes a reflexive, material-semiotic critic—an anxious, reflexive ‘negator’: a *critic* of all *fare* and all *poiēsis*—including his or her own—and of the foundations upon which they begin.

Cacciari’s philosophy thus can be described as taking shape within—indeed, embracing—the *dissoi logoi* or the ‘irreducible plurality’ (or ‘irreducibly plural positivities’) of life and knowledge on earth rather than attempting to reduce it to an *a priori* positivity, an empirical monad, a logical proposition, or an essential biological or psychological (pre-)disposition. For Cacciari, politics is the reflexive, material-semiotic praxis of negotiating between these knowledges, practices, and ways of life. Such politics is based on the understanding that people engage in forms of *fare* that intertwine meanings and experiences. *Potere Operaio*, for example, used the general assembly as a trading zone in which such meanings and experiences could be shared among workers in different trades and different industries, to foster the kind of dialogic agreements that made collective material action possible. But because these meanings and experiences are multiple and varied, similar experiences need not lead to similar definitions of meaning.

This state of affairs is what moves Cacciari, similarly, to observe that, after the crisis of foundations, ‘[t]he philosopher can only do phenomenology’.³⁴² At the same time, Cacciari insists that such disenchantment need not lead to a dualistic choice between hubris and despair. On the contrary, for Cacciari ‘doing phenomenology’ turns out to be critically important because it teaches one to cope reflexively with irreducibly plural contradiction, to *bring forth* critical *distinctions* amongst one’s experiences rather than categorical *separations*.

The motion of interminable and infinite research, the motion that always casts you back against your finitude, your “sin” in the Greek sense of the term (missing the mark, never being that which you want to be, always missing that which you desire: this is the definition of Greek *amartano* [αμαρτάνω]); this very feature, which is never perfect desperation because you constantly cherish something that you are not able to reach, can, when you feel yourself suffocating from this condition—at the height of anguish as Thomas [Aquinas] would say—open you up.³⁴³

³⁴² Op. cit. *L’incerta speranza...*

³⁴³ Ibid.

In Cacciari's view, therefore, because philosophy is an ongoing, reflexive involvement with life understood as a form of *poiēsis*, of material-semiotic *fare*, it is political. 'Political passion is immanent to life itself, passion understood as a Spinozan hot passion, something vital. Not libidinous power over another, [or the] will to triumph, but a common interest in taking part, each with the other [*l'un l'altro*], of the selfsame poverty. Not forgetting that it is from Penia's womb, from sister Poverty, that Love is born'.³⁴⁴ He therefore renounces 'authoritative monovalent theses', absolute, monolithic concepts, principles, propositions and other encumbrances of infallibility. In his view, they are antiquated forms of enchanted intellectual opulence; but at the same time, he reconceives them as contingent—and therefore purposeful—hypotheses located within specific material-semiotic hegemonic discourses and political praxes. Having achieved this transformation, he is able to engage with the impoverished uncertainty of 'the problem of serious contemporary science, which like that of true philosophy, is the overcoming of the subject-object discourse. *There is neither subject nor object; there is a relationship*'.³⁴⁵ An example of this engagement is his critical study of the entangled, material-semiotic relationship between bourgeois (liberal-capitalist-democratic) *poiēsis* and the specific *fare* of the bourgeois (liberal-capitalist-democratic) individual—the praxis of what Alexis de Tocqueville described allegorically as *Homo democraticus*.

Homo Democraticus

To overcome the subject-object dualism in his own work, Cacciari studies the relationships between real human beings and the world around them. His concern with contemporary life led him, naturally, to a study of how capitalist, liberal, socialist, and communist philosophies affected political praxis—how ideological *poiēsis* affected material *fare* and vice versa. Similar was the nineteenth century enquiry into the post-revolutionary *doing* of France and the United States by Alexis de Tocqueville, the French politician, philosopher, and historian.

³⁴⁴ Nadia Fusini: 'L'impossibile ricerca dell'armonia perfetta', (intervista a Massimo Cacciari), *La Repubblica* (1 agosto 2012).

³⁴⁵ Bruno Giurato: 'L'antiberlusconismo? Un antidoto di c...' (intervista a Massimo Cacciari) *Il Giornale Off* [<http://ilgiornaleoff.ilgiornale.it/column/antiberlusconismo-un-antidoto-del/>]. Emphasis added.

Suspicious of abstract idealism, Tocqueville's comparative study was phenomenological rather than deontological. Because he derived his conclusions based on the evidence he had himself experienced during his travels around the United States, his work might be read today as radically disenchanted, material-semiotic, hegemonic, and ethnographic (or socially 'weighty')³⁴⁶—despite its mobilisation by conservative American exceptionalists to contrary ends. This is because it exposed and engaged with the foundational ambiguity and contradiction between liberal-democratic *poiesis*, which sought to reform the pre-revolutionary allocation of political and economic power, and its quotidian *fare* as experienced by real people living in both countries (and notably, to the north and to the south of the Mason-Dixon line in the United States). Although Tocqueville is better known for describing this day-to-day *fare* as the 'tyranny of the majority',³⁴⁷ more attention should be paid to his nuanced qualification of this *fare*—anticipating Gramsci's discussion of hegemony—as 'the rule of those who are strenuous partisans of the majority'.³⁴⁸

Further, rather than trying to resolve this contradiction once and for all according to some abstract principle, logic, or teleology, Tocqueville emphasised the importance of *maintenance* of the Union by real American people, of adapting to changing social, political, economic, and geographic circumstances in order to maintain the American Union over time.³⁴⁹ For Tocqueville, the United States was an open-ended work-in-progress rather than a manifest destiny.

Cacciari argues that many of Tocqueville's insights about liberal-capitalist-democratic—bourgeois—*praxis* have been forgotten. In his view, the collapse of the Soviet Union and its counter-hegemonic contraposition of what one might call a '*Homo comunisticus*' to the Western *Homo democraticus*, had a transformative effect on these praxes. Without the gravitational pull of the Soviet Union, these philosophies were left to realign themselves amongst themselves (as ally and adversary alike): many argued that *Homo democraticus* and liberal democracy had triumphed

³⁴⁶ Cf. David Riesman: 'Tocqueville as Ethnographer', *The American Scholar* (30/2, 1961), pp. 174-187; Jason Edwards: *The Radical Attitude and Modern Political Theory* (London: Palgrave, 2007).

³⁴⁷ Alexis de Tocqueville: *Democracy in America*, trans. Reeve. (New York: George Adlard, 1839); p. 255, *inter alia*.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 415.

³⁴⁹ E.g., *ibid.*, p. 379.

and that history had ended. In Cacciari's view, the material consequences of the collapse of totalitarian discourses—that is, their failure to deliver utopia—meant that the intellectual foundations upon which those discourses had been developed needed deconstruction and examination.

I think...that the critique of “strong subjectivities”, of the “totalitarian” decline of political subjectivity, has not gotten us very far. We have painfully overcome the delinquent illusion that it was the “great tyrannical conglomerates” that produced war, intolerance, enmity, aggression, and that, as soon as they were broken up, it would finally be possible to inaugurate an era of peace, communal life, and reciprocal understanding.³⁵⁰

As *fare*, disenchanted engagement means to begin one's critique with the recognition that the discourses of capitalism and the liberal subject—the rational, autonomous individual who is an unimpeachable judge of his own interests, or *Homo democraticus*³⁵¹—are hegemonic discourses.

They must therefore be understood as forms of *praxis*, as contingent, material-semiotic *poiēsis* and *fare* and an examination of the consequences of attempts at realising *Homo democraticus*'s *praxis*.

Cacciari defines Tocqueville's allegorical figure of *Homo Democraticus* as being

[i]ntolerant of any dependency, dogmatically certain of the “natural goodness” of his own appetites (as certified by economic “science”), [*Homo democraticus*] is also, simultaneously, in want of protection, incapable of true solitude, yet ready, as soon as he feels his “rights” are threatened, to transform himself *en masse*. His presumption of complete “liberty”, which means the will to immediately establish his particular interests as universal, leads necessarily to the organisation of those interests, to the “swamp of cliques”, which affirm as legitimate only that power which immediately represents them—and which, for this reason, leads to the destruction of the very idea of representation.³⁵²

From within bourgeois epistemology, that these ‘tyrannical conglomerates’ had mutilated the natural, harmonious order of things into these monstrous perversions is taken for granted, meaning that it was taken equally for granted that once the monsters (the Central Powers, the Axis, and the Cold War Soviet Union, and so on) had been slain, peace and harmony—as defined by bourgeois capitalism—would return naturally, without any deliberate, material intervention by human

³⁵⁰ Ibid.

³⁵¹ Cf. Pierre Schlag: ‘The Empty Circles of Liberal Justification’, *Michigan Law Review* (96/1, 1997).

³⁵² Massimo Cacciari: ‘L’invenzione dell’individuo’, *MicroMega*, *Almanacco di Filosofia* (1996); p. 1.

beings. History, as Francis Fukuyama stated notoriously, had reached its end.³⁵³ To Cacciari, what had ended—or had been brought to a close—were specific, contextually contingent historical narratives within the larger, aggregate histories of human *fare*:

[τ]ο be *politai* in the *polis* has nothing to do with being *cives* in the *civitas*; to be citizens of a modern State has nothing to do with the two preceding forms, and it is debatable whether or not the diverse forms of domination in which the modern State-form expresses itself produce completely distinct forms of citizenship in their own right.³⁵⁴

Thus, in order to examine what it means to be a citizen in a *modern* European State—that is, one emerging from the withered remains of totalitarian hegemonic discourses—Cacciari argues that one can no longer take for granted assumptions established within the frameworks of twentieth century *fare*, Capitalist or Communist. It had been bad enough, in his view, that they had been taken for granted at the time; but this was to be expected within the hegemonic circumstances of that era. Because that era had ended (or been ended), he argued that one must critically analyse the ways in which definitions of identity and ascriptions of meaning were being translated and transformed in the aftermath of the Cold War.³⁵⁵ This, Cacciari argues, means critically analysing how communities and the individual human beings that make them up have been redefined, endogenously and exogenously, in the contemporary world. Such an analysis has led Cacciari to argue that, despite the indispensability of *Homo democraticus* to capitalist discourse, he is absent from discussions of politics within capitalism. He argues that

Hence the aporias from which democratic discourse suffers. They ignore him, or they “suspend”³⁵⁶ him, his traits, and in this way “remove” the fact that all contemporary power systems are founded upon “interaction”, upon “exchange” with this figure—that all contemporary “leaders” have also been “led” by its unstoppable (“terrifying”, to Tocqueville) advance.³⁵⁷

³⁵³ Francis Fukuyama: *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1992). He has since attempted to reframe his argument, cf.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/19/magazine/neo.html?pagewanted=all>.

³⁵⁴ *ibid.*

³⁵⁵ Following Catherine Lutz, one must ask, who, for example, is now considered the ‘one’, and who constitute ‘the many’?

³⁵⁶ Here Cacciari uses the neologism, *epochizzano* [literally, to ‘epochise’]. The term is derived from *epoché* (ἐποχή), particularly as used by Husserl: as the ‘suspension’ or ‘bracketing (off)’ of judgement in order to analyse conscious meaning.

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.2. This statement clearly applies to the aporia identified by Philp and Galston, a connection I will make more explicit in the conclusion.

And yet, Cacciari argues, contemporary democracy is unthinkable without *Homo democraticus*, because it has been theorised and built with him at the centre; had the rational, autonomous, capitalist individual never been invented, ‘democracy’ would look very different. It is for this reason, he explains, that the aporias of contemporary democratic discourse emerge: *contemporary democracy is designed around a fundamentally anti-democratic individual*. ‘What fundamental pact, what “oath” matters to an individual who is inclined to measure its efficacy solely in terms of the *imperativeness* (*indifferibilità*; ‘undeferability’) of his goals?’³⁵⁸ That is, what material, limiting power can any cooperative agreement have on the behaviour of *Homo democraticus*, who is, by definition, wholly uncooperative? He will only cooperate to the extent it serves his purposes: he has no concern whatsoever for those around him and their needs. Whatever he is in theory, *Homo democraticus* is *Homo anti-democraticus*—a tyrant—in practice. And it is because of this real contradiction between bourgeois *theory and praxis*, between harmonious monolithic ideology and dissonant, plural reality, Cacciari argues, that contemporary Europeans find themselves in foundational crisis, trapped in the aporetic consequences of the fact that bourgeois democracy is actually anti-democratic.³⁵⁹ This is because, as suggested above, Cacciari understands that the foundations of bourgeois *poiēsis* assume (demand, even) that the human *cogito* can and must dominate the material world. As a result, he argues that, because it is built upon capitalist ideological foundations, contemporary democracy cannot but commit authentically Capitalistic ‘patricide’: just as Marx argued that Capitalism’s only enemy is its own limitation,³⁶⁰ Cacciari states that ‘[t]he democratization of Europe will never find a limit outside of itself, in “foreign” princes who are not of the same nature—but *will implode, iuxta propria principia* [according to its own

³⁵⁸ Op. cit. *L’invenzione dell’individuo*, p. 3.

³⁵⁹ As I will discuss in detail in the conclusion, these are the very aporias identified by political theorists like Honig, Stears, Philp, Galston, and others.

³⁶⁰ Cacciari explains that this is ‘perfectly *analogous* to Marx’s position on the confrontation of the development of relations of capitalist production—that it knows no other real Enemy other than its very own limits, and that which its very “energy” creates, constructs, and reinforces. Authentic patricides, both of them!’

principles], it will find in its own end within itself, it will produce of itself the cause of its own catastrophe'.³⁶¹

Rather than simply identifying this crisis and scolding people for having let their abstract enchantment render them complicit in its production, Cacciari adds *Homo democraticus* to the scholarly and political discussions from which he was absent, confronting the consequences of his influence as a first step towards developing disenchanted solutions to these problems. He therefore begins his investigation of the material effects of this reductionistic, self-contradictory—aporetic—discourse in material, urban realities, where ideological attempts have been made to make the cosmos into a city. In his view, these attempts are no different than the historical attempts to unify an archipelago in relation to an absent 'centre'. They are the same struggle, attempted by different means: in both cases, the person who articulates that centre can only do so tyrannically: a total centre is total only so long as it remains unchallenged. Therefore, the local political apparatus becomes a hegemonic mechanism for imposing the tyrant's abstract will—even, as Cacciari says, if that will is a 'democratic' one, like liberalism—in which (abstract) rational, autonomous individuals who know their own interests are free to pursue them. From the perspective of Gramscian material-semiotic hegemony—that is, participatory domination—the tyrant becomes the hegemon at the moment when those he rules agree *not* to challenge the tyrant as long as he complies with certain 'popular' demands.

At the same time, from Cacciari's perspective, it is important to emphasise that the aporetic gap produced by an attempt to use emotion to pick up the slack between the material (the empirical 'fact') and the semiotic (the meaningful, intellectual 'ideal' or psychosomatic emotion) is not an intellectual black hole from which escape is impossible. This is so precisely because the *material* remains even when the *meaningful* is challenged; the two are always connected, in Cacciari's view, as *poiēsis*.

Disenchanted Poiēsis

³⁶¹ Op. cit. *L'archipelago*, p. 127.

We are now in a position to discern the distinct, material-semiotic foundation upon which Cacciari's *fare*, his disenchanted-yet-engaged methodological *poiēsis*, begins. An understanding of both 'material' and 'semiotic' as contingent, reciprocal human fabrications is a disenchanted one; this is because it is impossible for a human being to fabricate a notion of meaning that can anchor itself somewhere beyond human fabrication. To assume otherwise—that is, to assume that metaphor is an aberration or a mutilation of a natural, foundational order, or, as Cacciari put it, that one can utter without transforming the uttered, or engage with the uttered without ever having to utter anything—is to *bring forth* an enchanted misunderstanding of irreducible plurality. From a disenchanted perspective, there are no absolute facts or fetishes: only metaphorical *hypotheses*—hypotheses about reality expressed as meaningful and of materially consequential metaphors by real, reflexive people—of which some are more stable than others, and of which all are vulnerable to interrogation. That is, the results of a scientific experiment are simultaneously hypothesis and metaphor: that an aspect of the world *is like* the gathered data, and that those data *are like* that aspect of the world.

However, experimental skills change as a result of technological advances; and the world itself changes with the passage of time as a consequence, say, of climatic changes induced by human *fare*. As a consequence, the semiotic content of hypotheses and metaphors will also change as the material circumstances in which they are meaningful change, and vice versa. To assume otherwise—that is, to assume that the material and the semiotic are not aspects of one another, or that the link between the material and the meaningful is absolute—is to *do* weightless, enchanted historicism.

At the same time, the disenchanted critic—the disenchanted *poiētēs*—realises that even if authenticity is a myth, such myths are still meaningful to many people who will mobilise them as inspirations for *poiēsis*, for real world, hegemonic (or counter-hegemonic) *fare*. This means that, as a *hybrid* of the ideological and the material—as *Aufhebung* rather than negation or affirmation—human *praxis* is simultaneously and reciprocally material and intellectual: it is a negativity that

affirms itself positively despite whatever inherent contradictions it might contain. An 'enchanted' foundational requires dichotomies between 'fact' and 'fetish', 'theory' and 'practice', 'cause' and 'effect' to remain stable and absolute. By contrast, a disenchanted understanding of the 'real' and the 'abstract' as reciprocal aspects of one another—as distinctions rather than differences—makes it possible to confront *and to test* material-semiotic metaphors, hypotheses, and praxes. Because discursive theoretical and political praxis are contextually contingent on local contemporary knowledge and local material-semiotic circumstances, Cacciari argues that any attempt to retrofit an antiquated *theory*—whether Liberalism, Communism, or anything else—for service in a dramatically changed material world leads to aporia. The old theory and the new world cannot be rendered congruent because the very attempt to do so begins with a denial that the real world foundations upon which the theory was first built no longer exist. To make such an attempt is necessarily to separate and reduce a complex, contemporary—*polyvalent*—metaphoric hypothesis to simple, anachronous—*monovalent*—definitions to which the world no longer corresponds, if ever it did.

To make such an attempt is an attempt at hegemonic superposition, an attempt to assert the primacy of one definition or hypothesis over all others. Such praxis is anachronistic; to reduce contemporary reality to antecedent, idealistic terms is to create a modern simulacrum and claim it as the old antecedent. This cannot but be the case, as far as Cacciari is concerned, because to speak of the past is, inevitably, to speak of it in terms of—and through the speaking trumpet of—the present. Disenchanted praxis, by contrast, is incapable of producing this aporia because it recognises that the contingent, simultaneous reciprocity between the reflexive human mind and the material circumstances in which it exists is irreducibly plural. It therefore does not try to separate them into discrete intellectual or emotional abstractions in order to judge their abstract objective 'truth' in juxtaposition with our abstract, subjective 'values' in order to determine the 'right' subsequent behaviour for all people everywhere. Instead, it looks beyond these conceptual

limitations to find alternative possibilities for meaningful behaviour—*fare*—in relation to material-semiotic matters of concern to specific people in specific places at specific times for specific reasons.

The goal of Cacciari's disenchanted methodological orientation is to deradicalise the possibility of non-binary 'third' possibilities—of solutions that exist beyond the foundational limitations of propositional logic. This deradicalisation is necessary, as Sloterdijk explains, because a non-binary 'third', is an option which exists outside the Western ontological matrix:

While traditional logic stands or falls with the dictum *tertium non datur* (there is no third option between yes and no), everyday thinking has always found ways to reach precisely such a *tertium datur*. The universal procedure in this field is the de-radicalisation of alternatives: if one confronts something with an *either/or* they consider unwelcome, one will observe how they remodel it into a *both-and* sooner or later. If one removes all colours from the world... a halfway world of graded shades of grey mediates between the extremes of white and black. [...] In a world characterized by shades of grey, furthermore, one can predict the appearance of extremists who, weary of intermediate values, fight for a pure black or white world. If a party of radicals comes to power, the grey option will be declared counter-revolutionary propaganda. Generations may pass before a change in the wind once more permits an open espousal of the grey world's merits.³⁶²

Sloterdijk's statement illustrates perfectly the Gramsci dilemma faced by radicals of Cacciari's generation: how to argue for 'polyvalent' Gramscian 'grey' when that 'grey' had been reduced and separated by Togliatti into opposing monovalences of black and white. As I described earlier, Cacciari (and other Italian radicals of a similar inclination) attempted to sidestep the monovalent 'Gramsci' of the *PCI* (and the monovalent Marx of the Soviet Party) in order to return to the source material in all its polyvalent complexity. They wanted to reengage disenchantedly with specific material-semiotic understandings in order to deconstruct, criticise, and reconstruct them.

In Cacciari's experience, there is no 'sphere' of fallible knowledge; *all* knowledge is fallible. Even current judgments about fallibility are fallible, pending future, equally fallible discoveries. Knowledges, therefore, are contingent, material-semiotic, hypothetical metaphors rather than affirmations of (or about) discrete *a priori* absolutes. They are varying shades of grey rather than

³⁶² Peter Sloterdijk: *God's Zeal* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009); pp. 111-112. *Tertia datur* is the plural of *tertium datur*. I am using this term explicitly to indicate that for Cacciari, there is always more than one 'third possibility' once alternatives are deradicalised and put to work in specific material-semiotic circumstances.

black eithers or white ors; they are, to borrow from German, radical *jeins*,³⁶³ situated assemblages of both yesses and noes. Material-semiotic metaphors are *polyvalent* hypotheses because they are assembled to include the reciprocal and contingent relationship between the material and the meaningful at the same time. Any talk of ‘spheres’ of knowledge, therefore, must be understood as strategic *discourse* rather than as empirical statements about the nature of material reality. If all assertions of knowledge are fallible and inseparable parts of strategic, hegemonic discourse, this means that they are also political: the determination of what counts as knowledge, in which spheres it belongs, and which spheres it does not belong are demonstrably contingent and partial rather than necessarily absolute and eternal. Indeed, in his study of *negatives Denken*, Cacciari argued that negative thought *negates* the possibility of a teleological synthesis by revealing the aporias any attempt at such a synthesis leaves in its wake. Therefore, to presume an absolute, *a priori* foundation from which certain outcomes will inevitably flow is, as Cacciari has written, *vulgar*: it is an ideological articulation which has no grounding whatsoever in material reality, and therefore has no place in material political action, no matter how desirable such an articulation might seem.

One could say, therefore, that disenchanted engagement, as radically reflexive, critical praxis, is founded on material-semiotic political praxis and the knowledge(s) gained from it: Cacciari’s is an open-ended, *political* philosophy of politics, because as he put it, ‘...politics is not a science, much less the translation of ideological facts[;] politics is an art, the capacity to grab an unexpected opportunity as it flies past’.³⁶⁴ For Cacciari, there is always a way out: no matter how enchanting any hegemonic sirens’ song may be, one must resist the both the temptation to be enchanted by it and to line one’s ears with beeswax, to paraphrase Homer. A disenchanted critic—a disenchanted, contemporary *poiētēs*—must ask to be bound hand and foot, and lashed to the mast in order to engage critically with the sirens: to hear ‘the honeyed voices pouring from [their]

³⁶³ Just as one can say ‘yes-and-no’ in English to express uncertainty, ambiguity, or ambivalence, in German this is done by combining ‘yes’ (*ja*) and ‘no’ (*nein*) into the single word, *jein*. In Sloterdijk’s terms, the word *jein* is, itself, a *tertium* which replaces a dualistic *either/or* with a *both-and*.

³⁶⁴ Michele Dzeduszycki: *Pagine Sparse. Fatti e figure di fine secolo*, (Empoli: Ibiskos Editrice Di Risolo, 2007); p. 186.

lips', hear them 'to his heart's content [and sail] on, a wiser man'.³⁶⁵ To critique the sirens' song, one must first listen to it. But *doing* entails risks: one must therefore take appropriate precautions in order to survive them (should they be realised) and gain wisdom from *doing*, from investigation and experimentation. As I will describe in a later chapter, once it has been demonstrated in material terms to be a political dead end, the bourgeois sirens' song must be brought to an end—one must decide to sail past it—as the first step of a new, alternative beginning.

The danger of listening to the bourgeois sirens does not mean, however, that no one should ever put to sea in a search of solutions to problems. The shift away from the foundations of liberal justification, whether by the Italian anti-liberals to disenchanted, material-semiotic activists, does not mean that the goals they are aimed to achieve—the ideas or 'values' they intended to support—are necessarily or empirically irrational, immoral, ignoble, or irrelevant. It should not, however, be mistaken for the positivism discussed above.³⁶⁶ From Cacciari's perspective, to argue ideologically in the face of conclusive, contradictory evidence is not to be 'irrational'. It is, as he put it, to be an *idiōtēs* an 'ordinary' individual who lacks specific, expert knowledge of a particular subject. It is to be specifically *ignorant* rather than cognitively deficient—whether innocently or strategically (like politicians who 'doubt' the reality of climate change). It is a strategic way to argue if one is eager to enlist the participation of similarly ignorant people (and to flatter them for their ignorance). Thus, it is because the primarily semiotic *foundations* of capitalism—whether 'liberal' or 'communist'—are based on what are now, thanks to the crisis of foundations, understood to be historical, material, cultural, and biological *ignorance* or *inaccuracy*, and they must be disqualified

³⁶⁵ Homer: *The Odyssey*, trans. E. V. Rieu. (London: Penguin, 2006); p. 202.

³⁶⁶ As Catherine Lutz explains,

What appears to be at the root of the paradox of Euroamerican attitudes toward the morality of emotion is the tradition of positivism. By splitting the world into objective and subjective domains and into matters of fact and matters of value, and by associating detachment and cognition with the former, passionate involvement with and a commitment to a way of viewing and acting in the world is outcast. Science, which defines itself as seeking all knowledge that is important, is declared value-free (or at least ideally value-free). With erosion of faith in positivism in the more recent history of social science and of this culture generally, there has been a concern to reincorporate the concept of morality into the pursuit of knowledge and into social science. The new positions attempt to relate science to value by legitimating criticism and commitment in the pursuit of an understanding of social life or rather by making the goal of knowing the world subserve the goal of eliminating injustice in it (Geuss 1981).
[op. cit. Lutz, p. 302].

from serious consideration as possible means for bringing forth and *doing* a more equitable, less difficult-to-live-in society. It is on these empirical grounds, and on these grounds alone that they can *no longer* be taken seriously by disenchanted, political activists. They must therefore be put to an end.

From a disenchanted perspective, it is not that Liberalism, Capitalism, or Communism failed on theoretical, logical, moral or ethical grounds. Indeed, the binary metric of success and failure—so well developed that it has become *common sense*—is also exhausted. By critically evaluating political praxis in reflexive, material-semiotic, historical terms it becomes possible to measure the extent to which they have developed and the extent to which they have been exhausted. A disenchanted critic is under no pressure to pass final or total judgement; he or she can accept the existence of contradictory and aporetic outcomes and then decide whether a discourse or a form of praxis should be continued or brought to an end; the disenchanted *poiētēs* can decide, on an evidentiary basis, whether to end or continue (or recommend the ending or continuation) his or her *poiēsis*. It is now possible to conclude, as Cacciari does, citing the poet and philosopher Giacomo Leopardi, that Liberalism, Capitalism, and Communism have become ‘illaudable marvels’.³⁶⁷ Rather than universal, eternal, or absolute, the outcomes they produced, instead, were proximate, localised outcomes which, for the good they did, also produced a great deal of debris—the aforementioned unsynthesised remainders—debris which, as the history of the twentieth century shows, often took the shape of millions upon millions of material, specific, dead human bodies. In this regard—and as counterintuitive as it may seem—these totalitarian praxes actually *succeeded* to the best of their limitations, but that success was limited rather than universal, and aporetic rather than synthetic: though these praxes provided *some* people with the outcomes they desired, they simultaneously made enough people unhappy (putting it too mildly, perhaps) enough to fight the people and the institutions they considered responsible for their unhappiness.

³⁶⁷ Giacomo Leopardi: ‘Canto XXX, “Sopra un basso rilievo antico sepolcrale dove una giovane morta è rappresentata in atto di partire, accomiatandosi dai suoi”’, translation, Jonathan Galassi: ‘Upon a Bas-relief of an Ancient Tomb showing a Dead Girl in the Act of Departing and Taking Leave of her Family’ in *Giacomo Leopardi: Canti, Bilingual Edition* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2012); pp. 244-254.

No matter how novel, innovative, or revolutionary they may once have been (or hoped to have been)—and no matter how significant some of the contributions they made towards their theorised outcomes³⁶⁸—as time passed, they exhausted their abilities to offer constructive suggestions for making sense of the human experience of life in the material world, as that world and those experiences changed. Changes which, it must be noted, were in no small measure due to their role as material-semiotic hegemonic practices experienced by real human beings. As time passes and the world changes, the suggestions these totalising praxes offer—which, when new, were mostly constructive—become mostly *destructive*, because they require destroying the present in order to make it more closely resemble the past in which these praxes were at their most relevant. Marvellous though they may once have been, they can be praised no longer. Reflexive, material-semiotic experience over time with these praxes has allowed people to see through them, as Sloterdijk suggests, discovering the ‘fundamental and erroneous nature’ of their utopian promises. The hegemon was revealed to have no clothes. Why, then, do people continue to insist on these anachronistic, inaccurate foundations? One reason, Cacciari suggests, is because of a hegemonic global capitalist praxis which transforms local politics—the participation of the citizenry in the organisation and governance of their own communities—into the political-*economic* praxis of supporting the interests of global capitalism in local politics rather than those of the particular nation or community itself. Cacciari’s argument echoes very crisply—albeit in an updated iteration—the original Italian critique of liberalism:

If the “middle class person” [*borghese*] ceases to act as a citizen and transforms himself into a *bourgeois*, and if, on the other hand, the capitalist, losing his “sense of reality”, “evolves” into a demagogic plutocrat—to a plutocrat, that is, who wants to manipulate public opinion in his own image and likeness—democracy will end, in the most optimistic of forecasts, becoming nothing other than a means to elect groups of administrator-executors of international,

³⁶⁸ Cacciari, for example, feels very strongly that the political institutions developed by liberalism are of great importance to democratic, material political praxis. They become problematic, however, when their praxis fails to evolve with the society they serve. If, that is, they remain orientated towards the specific Cold War contradictions they were originally established to rectify, they cannot *but* produce aporias when confronted with the contradictions of the post-Cold War world. Therefore, if these institutions are not adapted, they will exacerbate contemporary problems rather than contribute anything towards their solution. This is not because formal political institutions are bad, irrational, or immoral *ideas*, but because they are not orientated towards the contemporary world. They must therefore be deconstructed, criticised, and refurbished or rebuilt as necessary, with the understanding that further adaptation will be required in the future—and that what those adaptations will be cannot necessarily be predicted today.

capitalist and financial interests rather than authentic political élites. Is this the process we are living through?³⁶⁹

In his view, the process we are living through is bourgeois *fare*, a process whose fundamental product is the bourgeoisie: us; we ourselves. Within bourgeois capitalism, he argues, ‘the fundamental thing we must succeed in producing is the *cogito*’ because ‘the *cogito* is the master of existence’.³⁷⁰ As long as the *cogito* understands that capitalism and existence are synonymous—and confirmed by (an early, naïve understanding) of natural selection and evolution—there is no reason to attempt to bring forth an alternative form of *fare*. This, Cacciari says, follows logically because ‘the true [capitalist] *poiētēs* is he who succeeds in producing his own things from a nature he himself has made’.³⁷¹ Logically, then, if one begins to think and to do from these premises, he argues, one ends up at these premises because no alternative is possible.

This, Cacciari argues, is a contingent, strategic logic rather than a universal truth. It must therefore be fought—coped with—rather than tamed.

It is a logical and inexorable course that the old churches...tried to slow down. [It is a course] that can be restrained, that can be slowed down, perhaps to a *metanoia*, a *conversio*—a change of mind—only if it is reasoned, thought through.³⁷² You cannot just say “let’s slow down, let’s moralise a little”. All this is the equivalent of putting underpants on Michelangelo’s statues: it doesn’t exist. The problem is if we manage to think it out to its extremes, to its extreme consequences, and if we therefore manage to think of *poiēsis* in accordance with another dimension [from whence truth can be brought forth into the dimensions of our immanent consciousness].³⁷³

Coping means being able to change one’s mind, to disengage from a particular logic, discourse, or praxis in order to engage with another one. Rather than accepting only utopia or dystopia, ecstasy or apathy, something or nothing, to cope is to achieve closure with contradiction and move on: one copes by accepting that a particular praxis has become exhausted and actively closing it off from further discussion. Once this process of *cloture* has been begun, third possibilities start to become

³⁶⁹ Massimo Cacciari: ‘Passato futuro del “borghese” in Zaniboni, ed: *Che fine ha fatto la borghesia? Dialogo sulla nuova classe dirigente in Italia* (Torino: Einaudi, 2004); p. 28.

³⁷⁰ Op. cit. Cacciari, *Poiēsis e le forme del fare...*

³⁷¹ *ibid.*

³⁷² In ancient Greek, *metanoia* (μετάνοια) referred to the changing of one’s mind. It can also imply ‘repentance’ or ‘correction’. The Latin *conversio* (‘conversion’, ‘to change’, ‘to turn around’) is its classical synonym.

³⁷³ *Ibid.*

observable. One must then decide which one to pursue and pursue it actively; one must *de-cide*³⁷⁴—detach oneself—from the old praxis to begin the new, to grab an opportunity as it flies past. Though ‘changing one’s mind’ sounds simple or banal, it turns out to be the powerful and transformative, non-binary *tertium* unveiled by Cacciari’s form of material-semiotic political praxis.

Changing One’s Mind

The possibility to change one’s mind, to reach a non-binary conclusion—whether to reidentify (or redefine), to contradict, or to occupy the ‘excluded middle’ within any material-semiotic hypothesis or, indeed, to step out of the entire hypothesis—is to seek out the *tertia* that are actually present in any particular set of circumstances, but which are, whether coincidentally or deliberately, hidden from view by moralising, ideological briefs of one kind or another. By contrast, Cacciari argues that underpants are a dangerous diversion: we must confront the organs of bourgeois production in all their prurience rather than veiling them in unmentionability. Such intellectual prudery reinforces the foundational, semiotic dualism on which bourgeois capitalism survives: that there are clear, monolithic distinctions between the ‘true’ and the ‘false’, the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’, the ‘mentionable’ and the ‘unmentionable’. To Cacciari, changing one’s mind is, a way of striking back at a hegemonic discourse which says that one cannot, logically, or must not, ideologically, do any such thing. This position has frequently estranged him from his erstwhile colleagues and allies on the left, many of whom appear to equate changing one’s mind with ‘selling out’ to hegemonic domination. In Cacciari’s view, such a binary distinction between ‘friends’ and ‘enemies’ is the *sine qua non* of bourgeois enchantment: to change one’s mind is radical because it demonstrates that that one actually has the freedom to neither ‘buy in’ nor to ‘sell out’. One has the opportunity to experience and express contradiction, to appreciate and cope with complexity and with irreducible plurality by searching for non-binary ‘*tertia*’.

³⁷⁴ As mentioned in an earlier chapter, Cacciari frequently reminds readers that a ‘decision’ is the act of *de-cision*—to ‘tear away’ or ‘to cede’ from something [*de-caedere*] in favour of something else. ‘To decide’, therefore, is to *renounce* one’s affiliation with one thing in order to affiliate instead with something else; to ‘de-side’ from one group in order to ‘side with’ another.

The problem that arises, in other words, is *hubris*: when we think our intellectual foundations are so secure that the extreme consequences of all that we build upon them seem perfectly reasonable. The anti-liberal Italian critics of the *Risorgimento* originally supported unification before changing their minds—not necessarily a complete reversal—in the face of material evidence. To change one’s mind was *not* to suddenly oppose everything liberal or capitalistic, but it was, in Cacciari’s terms, to think about them radically.

If we are able to think of our *fare* in a dialogic, *maieutic* sense, with our past, within our traditions, the environment in which we find ourselves, and in which we are participants...if we are able to feel truly a part of it, [as] elements rather than the *cogito* that lives among beings but is a spirit called to dominate them. [A spirit] which therefore feels and perceives them necessarily as obstacles, as impediments, as a scandal—its own gospel along the path of its affirmation. Thus it is not about trying to slow down, to restrain this process. It is about the opposite: about thinking about it with maximum radicality. It was with maximum radicality that the best European philosophers of the last two centuries have thought about it, from Hegel to Marx to Heidegger.³⁷⁵

To change one’s mind in this way, to modify one’s understanding is not to annihilate an appreciation that liberalism and capitalism had achieved marvellous things, even if they themselves could no longer be praised. In Cacciari’s view, the problem with most European(ist) philosophy—the Anglophone in particular—is that it has avoided this radical *metanoia* at all costs, seeking instead to calm actively radical and reflexive material-semiotic critique into passive, moralistic abstraction. It avoids confrontation with the foundations of bourgeois *Aufhebung* by ‘digesting’ the maximally radical and transforming it into nutrients for the status quo. To Cacciari, this is not philosophy because it does not think an idea out to its radical extremes; it is abstract, weightless ‘gossip’. In contrast, what made the negative thinkers from Hegel to Heidegger significant, he argues, is that they thought

[w]ith maximum radicality; without trying to make [our *fare*] bourgeois [*imborghesire*], to compromise it with a little bit of good sense, etc. as so many other philosophers do, particularly, in my view, the Anglo-Saxons. It’s useless, though. If we think [radically about the contemporary ‘system’ of bourgeois *fare*], perhaps [this radical thinking] can be a counterpunch. Where it might land I haven’t the faintest idea, because philosophy is like Minerva’s owl, which arrives just at dusk and comprehends events when they have already happened... That which will happen, that which I can predict will happen is not a prediction because...it is nothing more than an extrapolation of what has already happened.

³⁷⁵ *ibid.*

That is, what philosophy can say is that the logic of what has already happened leads inexorably there [to *aporia*]. I absolutely cannot predict or foresee *if*, thinking radically about this process, there cannot be any counterpunches; where this counterpunch might lead, it is not possible for philosophy or any other discipline to say.³⁷⁶

To change one's mind is to begin anew, to end one form of *poiēsis* in order to begin a differently foundational *poiēsis*, an alternative form of *fare* in order to bring forth new things: new metaphors, hypotheses, and objects. Changing one's mind to embrace and cope with contradiction requires a differently foundational philosophy, he argues. Rather than a positive or negative philosophy, he argues for a 'distressing philosophy' [*filosofia dolorosa*]. It is distressing—rather than 'peaceful' or 'painful'—because it is disenchanting. Neither dualistic nor teleological, disenchantment is 'distressing' because it is open-ended: the future is ambiguous and uncertain. Within this distress, however, lies possibility: if the future is unpredictable and unknowable, then it can be *made* or *brought forth* in any number of ways. There is, therefore, always a possibility for counterpunches—counter-hegemonic action—there must be the possibility of new beginnings. There have to be possibilities for *tertia*. Disenchanting *poiēsis* and *fare* are open-ended, reflexive material-semiotic engagement with the world as one encounters it.

The possibility of material-semiotic closing—of *doing* closure—is an example of a *tertium non datur* within the binary Western philosophical tradition, which demands all-or-nothing resolution. As I will explain in the next chapter, it is a way to slam the proverbial door on a logic, discourse, or praxis that will not leave of its own free will. It is a socially 'weighty' response to weightless intellectual abstraction because it uses the weight of material-semiotic evidence to counterbalance hollow, intellectual mass. This counterbalancing act creates a stable platform upon which one can pile up the material-semiotic heft one needs in order to climb out of a massive, but weightless, binary *aporia*.

³⁷⁶ op. cit. Cacciari, 'Poiēsis e le forme del fare...'

¹ **Arjun Appadurai:** *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions in Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); **Zygmunt Baumann:** *Culture as Praxis* (London: Sage, 1999); Steven Best and Douglas Kellner: *Postmodern Theory* (New York: Guilford Press, 1991); — *The Postmodern Turn* (New York: Guilford Press, 1997); **Mark Bevir & R.A.W. 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CHAPTER FIVE

BRIDGING IRREDUCIBLE PLURALITIES

The Geophilosophy of the Archipelago

Thus far, I have focussed attention on Cacciari's reflexive, material-semiotic methodology of identifying and criticising foundational aporias via negative thought, the 'project of crisis', and bringing them to an end in order to begin new praxes on different foundations. However, the image of the archipelago is more than simply an artistic metaphor or scholarly allegory for Cacciari. Rather, as a native Venetian, thinking in terms of archipelagos is also a tool that makes his disenchanted philosophical and political praxis possible.

In this chapter, therefore, I will more fully explore what I term Cacciari's 'geophilosophy of the archipelago', that is, his understanding of the reflexive, material-semiotic relationships between the one and the many in an irreducibly plural, hegemonically negotiated world. Cacciari borrowed the term 'geophilosophy' from the French scholars Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who coined it, only to subject the foundational ontology upon which their geophilosophy was based to severe critique. To avoid a discussion whose complexity would distract from my discussion of Cacciari's geophilosophy, I will not explore his critique of Deleuze and Guattari here.³⁷⁷ I will instead present Cacciari's own version of geophilosophy based on 'disenchanted' foundations: the geophilosophy of the archipelago, which is a reflexive tool for building bridges across irreducible plurality.

Geophilosophy of the Archipelago

Cacciari's geophilosophy begins by taking careful note of the reflexive relationships between the material and the semiotic in specific real-world circumstances. These relationships, he argues, more accurately resemble the relationships in an archipelago between islands, the people who live on

³⁷⁷ Briefly, Cacciari objected to the work of Deleuze and Guattari for three main reasons: in his view, theirs was a reductionist analysis built on an 'enchanted', psychosemiotic—thoroughly bourgeois—foundation; that the 'weightless' abstraction of their analysis totally ignored the difficult material political work required to bring about political change; and that their analysis, when applied in concrete circumstances, could lead to dangerous material outcomes. [Cf. Massimo Cacciari: 'Poder, teoría y deseo' (27/1979); pp. 1-16 (my numbering)].

them, and the sea that connects and separates them. Cacciari addresses the archipelago directly for the first time in a 1997 essay (*L'arcipelago*). The essay begins with a quotation from the poem *Mediterraneo*, by the Italian poet and critic Eugenio Montale, who describes the 'hazardous law of the sea' as being 'vast and various/yet fixed' together.³⁷⁸

Cacciari endorses Montale's view of the relationship between land and sea: because it is vast, various, and fixed within its own limits *as well as being fixed* on earth, in juxtaposition with land, '[t]he sea' is many things, Cacciari writes, and can only be known by many names. It cannot be reduced to any single, universal essence. The ways in which the sea is described and the meanings ascribed to it embody, as a result, contextual and relative *geophilosophies*. To the ancient Greeks, for example, the sea was not a thing, but the maternal goddess *thálassa*, in whose womb they 'grew up... and along whose paths they travelled to explore, fight, and trade'.³⁷⁹ It was also *Pélagos*, which

represents [the] vast expanse, the interminable *region* [*plaga*] of the high seas. When, like a *desert*, the sea embraces us from all sides and at the same time protects us and threatens us, when its limitless being contradicts our 'halting rhythm', our 'stammering' (Montale), it assumes the name of *pélagos*. And the 'briny words' that weave together the song that belongs to the *háls* [salt], to Ennius's 'surging saltwater' [*undantum salum*]. The Sea is like Salt: the difficult-bitter path that always agitates around us, perennially unsettled. Together, they are the movement and the *flavour* of the Sea, its wave that rises and soaks us.³⁸⁰

Such definitions, Cacciari explains, are not simply poetic fancy or semantic play; they are serious, reflexive commentaries on a complex and irreducible material-semiotic reality. They are socially 'weighty'.³⁸¹ The sea is irreducible: it is many things at the same time, yet always within particular material limits. These limits have consequences, both semiotic (defining the sea and its 'meanings') and material, and the two are reciprocal: these limits shape one another reflexively; they constitute

³⁷⁸ Massimo Cacciari: *ibid*, p.13; Montale translation, Jonathan Galassi: *Eugenio Montale: Collected Poems 1920-1954* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1998); p. 69.

³⁷⁹ *Op. cit.* *L'arcipelago*, p. 13.

³⁸⁰ *Ibid*.

³⁸¹ Even if one stays in the Mediterranean, the 'meaning' of the sea is relative and contextual: it depends on one's perspective in relation to it: the same body of water is understood very differently by the tourist watching the fishing boats at the seaside for the first time, the fishermen sailing out of the harbour, the marine biologists operating research equipment on board the fishing boats, and the sailor in the nuclear submarine lurking deep below them.

the heterogeneous material-semiotic assemblage that is the 'sea'. Similarly, the ability to cross the sea to a new port, and to return home again, alters the reciprocal limits of possibility both at home and abroad: new resources, people, and ideas can, for example, be exported or imported.

For this reason, Cacciari's argues that the German philosopher Carl Schmitt's understanding of land and sea as equally opposed monolithic entities—as terrestrial *or* maritime; law and order (e.g., Schmitt's *jus publicum Europæum* and *nomos der Erde*) *or* anarchy—was a mistaken.

By contrast, Cacciari's own geophilosophical discourse begins with an analysis of the reflexive, critical analysis of specific material-semiotic praxis by specific material human beings across time and across Europe. Cacciari's geophilosophy is not simply metaphorical or historical: it is also based, reflexively, in his experience as a Venetian. Cacciari's geophilosophy also rejects Schmitt's dualistic claim that 'World history is the history of the wars waged by maritime powers against land or continental powers and by land powers against sea or maritime powers'.³⁸²

For example, though there are *continuities* between the Venices of the eleventh and twenty-first centuries, they are contingent continuities within fluctuating irreducible pluralities rather than the 'contingent recommencement of a same contingent process, in different conditions'. An archipelago like Venice is, for Cacciari, a more accurate model for the material circumstances of life on Earth than that of rhizome (Deleuze and Guattari) or an 'absolute' land separated by and equally absolute, and opposite, sea (Schmitt). Instead, the sea is a means of possible *connection* rather than necessary *separation*. It can be crossed, but not without difficulty. The same can be said for mountains, deserts, and jungles; and, streets, neighbourhoods, and the built environment. At a more detailed level, it can apply within a particular country, or even within a particular city.

A geophilosophy of Europe will not necessarily be the same as a geophilosophy of any other part of the globe; a universal dualism like Schmitt's therefore risks deforming local geopolitical histories. Further, though all these theorists investigate the relationship between land and the sea, Cacciari does so from a material-semiotic perspective firmly rooted within historical praxes of coping reflexively and disenchantedly with irreducible plurality outside any formal

³⁸² Op. cit. *Land and Sea*, p. 5.

normative discourse or deontology. To be sure, as Schmitt wrote, ‘even the largest continents are but huge floating islands’, but whereas Schmitt considered these islands to be foundational, ordered monoliths separated by an equally monolithic, yet anarchic sea, Cacciari considers that islands are *connected* by the sea; they form an archipelago:

When we can imagine the Sea as a path, when the eye discerns a possible route in the turmoil of the *pélagos* [‘infinite sea’], aims for, and attempts it, it is more accurate to call it *póntos* [a ‘small sea’ which can be traversed]... The sea is also, therefore, a *bridge*—the most necessary and perilous of bridges, and as such, the bridge is the most perilous and necessary of paths marked out by human beings.³⁸³

For their auto-*nomy*, the islands of an archipelago are not autonomous. Rather,

...the space of the Archipelago is, by nature, averse to subordination and hierarchical succession; no island constitutes a fixed axis in and of itself, capable of structuring the complete form of a *State* within itself... the singularities of the Archipelago belong to one another because none of them possess their own Centre, because the Centre is, in reality, nothing but that impetus which obliges each of them to “transcend themselves”, navigating towards the others, and all of them towards the absent [common] Homeland.³⁸⁴

For Cacciari, the sea is a heterogeneous assemblage in which different things coexist together; things that are vast and various, yet fixed together; they are archipelagos. Indeed, *archipelago* was the original Greek name for the Aegean itself, which people had discovered was a sea with many islands; it was not until later that the term came to refer to the islands themselves.

The Geophilosophical Archipelago of Europe

Cacciari’s geophilosophy of the archipelago begins with a material-semiotic example of irreducible plurality, rather than a rhizomic expression of a monistic antecedent. Referring to Plato’s description of the soul in the *Phaedrus* as a ‘pair of winged horses [one good, one bad] and a charioteer’,³⁸⁵ Cacciari discusses of how the charioteer must learn to tame these very different horses to follow his specific instructions, lest the chariot crash. ‘The memorable *mýthos* of the *Phaedrus* (246-247)’, Cacciari states,

³⁸³ Massimo Cacciari: op. cit. *L’archipelago*; p.14.

³⁸⁴ *ibid.*, p. 20.

³⁸⁵ Plato: *Phaedrus* (trans. Jowett): <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/phaedrus.html>.

teaches...that *paideía* [education and upbringing; *Bildung*] is *agòn*, a struggle-conflict in the composite structure of the soul between its opposite powers. It also teaches that this *agòn* is, by its very nature, harmonising: the charioteer can assert his own hegemony and make the connection [between the powers] to mediate the immediate dissonance.³⁸⁶

This harmonising mediation is neither straightforward nor is its outcome a foregone conclusion.

That is, it takes training, tools, and skill for the charioteer to effectively yoke horses, chariot, and himself together before even *attempting* a particular task. And even then, a harmonious outcome is not certain. As Cacciari explains, echoing his material-semiotic discussion of *poiēsis* and *fare*,

[t]he struggle is, in its essence, a *conatus* [an *attempt*] at harmony; no struggle begins without victory in sight, but to win means “to harmonise” the enemy to oneself. Struggles and conflicts are only of use as research into the modes and forms from which a harmony can be produced or revealed. The meaning of the *agòn* consists precisely in the *aletheúein* [‘access to the truth’], in the bringing forth [*pro-durre*], the bringing of harmony to light.³⁸⁷

The experiences of the people who lived on islands of the Aegean were the material foundation—the reflexive, material-semiotic ‘heft’—upon which ancient ‘geophilosophies’ were assembled; their experiences brought their geographic reality—their relationship with both land and sea—to light and vice versa: their own reflections (both practical and existential) from within their material circumstances inspired and contributed to the philosophical discourse(s). Carrera explains that, by exploring the geopolitics of the ancient Mediterranean, ‘the time when the geographical and cultural divisions between Europe and Asia—between “us” and “them”—were still unheard of, Cacciari shows how it was not until

the Greek-Persian wars forced the archipelago to know the enemy, to *name* it, and to know itself in order to defend itself. The result of this epistemological change was the *polis*—which the East never knew—and the birth of politics.³⁸⁸

It was at this point, Cacciari argues, that the history of the human *agòn éschatos*—the ‘supreme struggle’ to harmonise the contradictions posed by human coexistence—began in Europe:

In the very moment the *Two* [a coexistent *Other* to which ‘we’ can compare ‘our’ *One*] emerges...and the *wonder* at this unnerves us and frightens us, the internal search for its

³⁸⁶ Massimo Cacciari: *Geofilosofia dell’Europa*, (Milano: Adelphi, 1994); p. 11.

³⁸⁷ Ibid.

³⁸⁸ op. cit. *The Unpolitical*, p. 38.

origin, its internal relations, its own end also emerges, questioning the power that makes [multiple] twos into *one* Two.³⁸⁹

Put differently, the discovery of an *other* people in an *other* space by a people who thinks itself homogeneous—the discovery of heterogeneity; making ‘first contact’ with the ‘alien’—provokes an entirely new line of existential interrogation:

to pose questions about that which differs requires posing questions about identity; wonderment at multiplicity (that being is manifold) begins at the ‘recollection’ of the One. It will not be sufficient to know the distinctions, to ‘analyse’ them, it is necessary to ask oneself how the scission came about, what *logos* could have produced it. Only if one is capable of a *logos* of scission, can one claim to comprehend it, and understanding it, will be able to lead it back to harmony. It is from the wonder at the emergence of and being of the Two that philosophically-politically imposes the problem of relations between the one and the many.³⁹⁰

Schmitt stated that ‘...all important changes in history more often than not imply a new perception of space’.³⁹¹ Not only did the ancient Aegeans discover that their islands were part of an archipelago, they also discovered that they were also part of a ‘human archipelago’; that they coexisted, at a distance, with ‘islands’ of similarly isolated humanity, sharing some resources and competing for others, and struggling for power. One way of coping with the imbalance of power is to argue for a particular narrative totality—as Schmitt, for example, does in his own way—presenting a ‘veil of unity’ behind which uncomfortable, difficult contradictions can, on the one hand, be hidden and marginalised, and, on the other, the narrators’ power can be declared obvious, legitimate, and inevitable.

Cacciari demurs, countering that all such attempts at harmonisation—whatever their form—are reflexive: they are materially, semiotically, intellectually and historically contingent. That is, ‘harmonising the enemy *to oneself*’ is a tangible, often violent material practice that occurs on many different fronts. Such ‘harmonisation’ is thus quite different from the hegemonic discourse that posits a mythical, common ‘centre’ or totality—present by its very absence, as Cacciari puts it—to which all people, everywhere should be harmonised, synthesising all conflict.

³⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 198.

³⁹⁰ Ibid.

³⁹¹ Op. cit. *Land and Sea*, p. 29.

Cacciari traces the refinement of this latter hegemonic discourse from the Enlightenment through the emergence of bourgeois capitalism. Continuing his allusion to harmony in music, Cacciari concludes that 'European harmony is *diá-logos* and *pólemos*: a tragic dialectic':

Its seas are archipelagos, its cities are archipelagos, its *tópoi* are archipelagos, those places, those forms, those questions, that is to say, that ricochet from epoch to epoch, from nation to nation, that weave spaces and moments together, from Antiquity to the Medieval, from Classical literature to the Romantic, which are referred to unexpectedly from author to author, across the greatest distances. Even this memory of Europe is an archipelago—as great interpreters of its spirit, from Aby Warburg to Ernst Robert Curtius, have taught us.³⁹²

So too Cacciari's reflexive, material-semiotic geophilosophy of the archipelago, which understands the islands of archipelago as interdependent niches: islands and their inhabitants develop their own individual characteristics amongst themselves as a result of their relationships with their fellow islands and the sea that connects and separates them, rather than despite these relationships. In his view, there is no universally foundational vitalism—any *a priori* 'human nature'—indigenous to or expressed identically by all human beings in all circumstances. For this reason, the human experience of making sense of the world is not, as Bonnie Honig argues, a constant re-beginning or starting over: it is beginning again the search for dialogic agreements atop old beginnings by asking *new* questions, as well as re-asking old questions, but asking them *differently*, in search of a different answer. This questioning begins at a foundational level by asking who, for example, are 'we', and what are 'our' concerns?

Following Honig one gets the impression that the only people that share her concerns are people who see the world the way she does (or 'we' do). In *Democracy and the Foreigner*³⁹³ she asks which of 'our' problems those who do not see the world the way 'we' do can 'help us solve'. She does not see the encounter with the foreign as a trading zone in which both 'we' and 'they' can exchange what we have learned, but rather an opportunity for therapeutic self-evaluation: 'what', she asks, 'can that foreigner...teach us about the insufficiencies, challenges, dramas, and dreams of

³⁹² Massimo Cacciari: op. cit. *L'archipelago*; p.21.

³⁹³ Ead. *Democracy and the Foreigner* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

democracy?³⁹⁴ Is that really all ‘foreigners’ have to offer ‘us’? And is the only response to contradiction or ‘otherness’ to subjugate oneself to more deontological self-discipline—to keep repeating and repeating one’s critiques even if they continue to be misunderstood or to fall on deaf ears?³⁹⁵ Is it not possible to throw one’s own assumptions, understandings, foundations, and concerns into crisis in order to evaluate them reflexively just as one would evaluate those of a ‘foreigner’? Is it not possible to forge dialogic agreements—*agonistic* alliances—with the ‘foreign’?

The foreigner Cacciari not only teaches us a great deal about his own life and his own experiences in his own country and the Europe he shares with hundreds of millions of others, but he shows us that, despite the different, irreducibly plural archipelago foundations upon which he encounters the world, he shares many of Honig’s concerns. Why should he not be seen as an ally? It should be clear that, like Honig, Cacciari is as concerned about the marginalisation of ‘the political’ by political thinkers—as well as politicians, and the general public. Cacciari addresses migration, xenophobia, nationalism—Honig’s main themes in *Democracy and the Foreigner*—in his geophilosophy of the archipelago; like Honig, he is also concerned about ‘emergency politics’ and the manipulation and exploitation of emergencies by those in power, as demonstrated in his discussion of crises and catastrophes. Nevertheless, the divergent political possibilities each perceives, beginning as they do from different foundational assumptions, is vivid in the contrast between their interpretations of the classic Greek tragedy *Antigone*.

In *Antigone, Interrupted*, Honig seeks to describe Antigone’s political agency in agonistic terms as a ‘counter-sovereignty’ that subverts or ‘interrupts’ ‘many theorists’ fascination with rupture over the everyday, powerlessness over sovereignty, and heroic martyrdom over the seemingly dull work of maintenance, repair and planning for possible futures’.³⁹⁶ In so doing she also seeks to explore the ways in which the character Antigone subverts or interrupts the sovereignty (or lack thereof) ascribed to her by fifth-century Athenian society. ‘The issue posed by the *Antigone* (as opposed to Antigone, the character) is not whether to lament the dead but rather

³⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 14.

³⁹⁵ Surely this is the very sort of righteous and heroic martyrdom she writes against in *Antigone, Interrupted*.

³⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 2.

how to do so, and what undergirds that question, broached repeatedly in the play, is the knowledge that lamentation stands for certain forms of life, social orders, ontologies, and histories'.³⁹⁷ But Honig's subversion, though well-intentioned and necessary, is disappointingly parochial. She critically explores the many ways the play's question of how to lament the dead has been asked and answered, but she does not undertake an equivalent, reflexive exploration of the foundations upon which that question itself is posed. For Honig, all that 'undergirds that question' is unproblematically monolithic and humanistic: though she challenges certain humanist *interpretations*, she does not challenge humanist *assumptions*, arguing that her radical reading of *Antigone* challenges the binary 'sentimental materialism and moralist humanism' according to which the play is usually understood to a non-binary, 'agonistic humanism'.³⁹⁸

But just how radical or non-binary is a reading which does not at least throw into crisis the primarily semiotic foundations Honig herself is using? By arguing that 'Antigone learns persuasion...succeed[ing] in bringing her sister around to her own views',³⁹⁹ she takes it for granted that individual views are all that cause behaviour, and that to change behaviour requires a change in ideas. According to Honig, Antigone thus persuades her sister to *think certain thoughts* which manifest themselves as certain behaviour, rather than persuading her to behave in a certain way *despite* or *in spite of* what she thinks. This not an argument that can be accepted uncritically: Honig's is a contextually situated, historically relative, and contingently political (and/or ideological) argument about humanity and human beings that has been long since powerfully challenged by social and physical scientific evidence.

Yet, even if we take Honig's point that narrow, ideological receptions or interpretations belie the agonistic realities of the play (and, therefore, human life), she might still expand her critique in order explore the reflexive, agonistic possibilities in the *relationship* between Antigone's thoughts and her actions (or those of any other character or interpreter). She might also investigate

³⁹⁷ Ibid.

³⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 196.

³⁹⁹ Ibid.

the tragedy to be found in the ways in which the characters might have had to struggle to reconcile or justify particular thoughts with (or against) particular actions.

Cacciari, by contrast, does precisely this in the introduction to his translation of *Antigone*,⁴⁰⁰ making the case that the tension and the tragedy of the play is to be found in the conflict that inhabits what I have called the material-semiotic relationship between the reflexive thoughts and praxis of particular people in a particular place at a particular time, rather than just the contradictory ideas they have in their individual heads. Like Honig, he emphasises the agonistic politics explored and expressed in the play. Yet whereas Honig emphasises how Antigone succeeds at persuading her sister to think Antigone's thoughts as her own, Cacciari draws attention to the contextual contingency of the material-semiotic relationships between the characters as they struggle to cope with recent social and political events. Among the consequences of these events is—and I deploy the vocabulary used in the thesis to link the arguments—the *heteroglossia* of commentary, criticism whose potential to destabilise Creon's hegemonic position weighs heavily upon the protagonists. In Cacciari's reading, the Chorus is an irreducibly plural, heterogeneous assemblage rather than an individual voice. It is a group of dialogic, elderly Theban imaginations brought together to advise Creon in the midst of a crisis of socio-political foundations. Functioning as a disenchanted 'open union'—a union established by dialogic agreement—its members do not, like Honig's Antigone, attempt to 'enchant' Creon into accepting its thoughts as his own. In Cacciari's view, the Chorus encourages him to think *reflexively* about what he has done, to criticise, without enchantment, the complicated situation in which he finds himself—including his own thoughts and feelings as much as his deeds. The Chorus then suggests to Creon that he consider engaging in alternative material-semiotic *praxis* by confounding the law and negotiating an agreement with Hæmon, *despite* the potentially severe consequences such an agreement would bring. That Creon does not heed the Chorus' advice intensifies the story's tragic conclusion.

⁴⁰⁰ Sofocle: *Antigone*, trad. Cacciari. (Torino: Einaudi Editore, 2007). Cacciari's translation of the play was adapted and staged that year by the director Walter Le Moli. Both the translation and the performance received critical acclaim.

This comparison demonstrates how Cacciari's understanding of agonism, which is based on the irreducible plurality of archipelago geophilosophy is differently foundational to Honig's. Although Honig allows that contemporary Western society is different to that of the ancient Greeks, she takes for granted that what is 'human' abides. Politics may change, but people do not; universal *foundational* continuities are therefore to be found within the ancient and the contemporary. We can then draw upon those continuities in order to better ourselves today, even if the ancient is essentially 'foreign' to 'us'. Foundationally, Honig's agonism is cognitively monistic and linear; Cacciari's is reflexive, disenchanted, and material-semiotic. This is because, by beginning with irreducibly plural, archipelago foundations, one needs to find ways to communicate and to engage materially across that plurality. This makes his foundations simultaneously material and semiotic. Cacciari therefore would not agree with Honig's semiotic continuity:

The modernity of the classical is a total absurdity. The classical, by definition, is not modern, it belongs to antiquity, to contexts and to structures that lived two millennia ago. One cannot, therefore, talk about contemporary themes, at the most [one can talk about] eternal [themes] and maybe only in this sense are they still current. Wanting to give current connotations to characters that express other times and other realities, like *Antigone's* Creon, is an enormous weightlessness [*leggerezza*] not to be committed.⁴⁰¹

Cacciari therefore considers the ascription to these continuities 'current connotations' in order to suggest the existence of an eternal, unchanging foundation that supports and links these continuities, what they connote, and specific material-semiotic *praxis* at any and every point in history to be a strategic distraction. This is because, in his view, what it means to be human, to reason, to problematise or polemicise, and the stakes—political and otherwise—of publicly expressing these meanings are so dramatically different in the contemporary West from what they were in Sophocles' time (or, indeed, all but the most recent readings of *Antigone*) that they cannot be held constant except in the most transparently ideological terms.

Cacciari justifies this claim by arguing that, historically, the contingency of interaction with the 'foreign' was exacerbated by the absence of a technological infrastructure that facilitated the easy exchange of ideas and resources among human beings across great distances. Trading

⁴⁰¹ Maria Caspani: 'Cacciari: «La mia Antigone è "antica"»' *La Provincia* (17 gennaio 2008).

zones did certainly emerge, but they were primarily local rather than regional or global. As technology improved, the size of the zones in which peoples could trade (and the speed at which they could trade ever-increasing quantities of goods, services, and so on) expanded. To cope with these improvements and increases, bourgeois capitalism transformed these zones of production and trade into hubs at the physical centres of material-semiotic networks of reflexive, bourgeois actors, discourses, and infrastructures. As I will discuss below, these hubs brought people from small, comparatively homogeneous niches (isolated, rural communities or ‘*Gemeinschaften*’) to a specific central location (Metropolitan societies, or ‘*Gesellschaften*’). The material-semiotic praxis that emerges as a result of these homogeneous niches being pushed together—the reflexive, *relationship between them*—is, Cacciari argues, the history of the Metropolis as we now understand it.⁴⁰² In his view, there is nothing ‘natural’ about this Metropolis: it is a dense assemblage of small, heterogeneous niches brought together *deliberately* by bourgeois praxis (its *poiēsis*) to facilitate its ideological and material (productive) ends (its *fare*).

Once brought together, these heterogeneous niches are not synthesised into a coherent homogeneous entity. Instead, Cacciari argues, members of these niches constantly find ways to cope with heterogeneity by adapting their material-semiotic praxis in reaction to one another, rather than by reaching any ultimate conclusion or fulfilment. Though stable—thanks to political, economic, and legal praxes and the police and military forces they endow with the responsibility for their protection—the Metropolis is a *work-in-progress* rather than a completely developed totality. Assimilation, like *Aufhebung*, is hegemonic and material-semiotic—it is contextually relative, impure, and ongoing—rather than an achievable, pure and self-contained material or semiotic totality. People develop, teach, and learn ways of *coping* with contradictions without necessarily

⁴⁰² The etymological history of the word ‘metropolis’ provides illustrative evidence. In ancient Greek, the term was a combination of *μήτηρ* (*mētēr*; ‘mother’, ‘source’ or ‘origin’) and *πόλις* (*pólis*; ‘one’s city or country’ or ‘city governor’). Following the rise of Christianity, ‘metropolitan’ came to mean ‘a bishop empowered to oversee other bishops’. In its bourgeois iteration, the metropolis becomes the source not of people but of fabricated wealth and value. It is therefore transformed from ‘producing’ or giving birth to people, into an entity that ‘mothers’ the value it produces whilst ‘overseeing’ the tired, hungry, and irreducibly plural masses huddled within its limits.

overcoming or synthesising them—‘pragmatic’ coping can reflect an understanding that politics is a work-in-progress.

Therefore, a ‘pragmatic’ approach cannot necessary be equated to political ‘centrism’ or ‘selling out’. Cacciari’s understanding of cities and other urban settlements according to the archipelago model is, thus, differently foundational to the bourgeois, ‘common sense’ definition of a ‘city’ and the distinction between them needs to be examined closely. In what follows, I examine Cacciari’s discussion of the ways we humans build urban environments, exploring his understanding of the material-semiotic consequences of building materially on irreducibly plural ideological foundations. I will then show this discussion led Cacciari to not only *interpret* Venice, Italy, and Europe as archipelagos (or parts thereof), but to *engage* with them as such, on their own irreducibly plural foundations.

Nililism Fulfilled

Based on his intensive critical analysis of urban history, architecture, aesthetics, and philosophy—particularly that of postwar Italy—I show that Cacciari understands urban environments as dynamic *sui generis* products of reflexive, material-semiotic human praxes that bring together labour, imagination, and the natural world. I then turn to Cacciari’s discussion of the emergence and development of the bourgeois, industrial ‘Metropolitan City’, where the city’s *Geist*—the praxis of its *will-to-power*—attempts, but fails, to sublimate irreducible plurality into disposable equivalence, producing unsynthesised aporias instead. The consequence of this reality, Cacciari argues, is that as time has passed, technology has improved, and the aporias produced have begun to pile up, the Metropolitan ‘city’ has expanded and been transformed into ‘post-metropolitan terrain’. I will conclude the chapter by arguing that Cacciari’s disenchanted, archipelago-based understanding of the Metropolis, and hence, of the urban consequences of bourgeois praxis, provide political theorists a ‘socially weighty’ approach for engaging with urban life as the reflexive, material-semiotic praxis. This orientation moves in a helpful direction, I will argue, because it refuses abstract propositional logic as a legitimate methodological starting point.

Instead, it begins with material-semiotic evidence of contingent human political praxis in response to specifically contingent circumstances, highlighting the relationship between political theory and political praxis. Because it focuses attention on the relationship between aesthetics and authority in organisation of communal life within capitalist hegemonic circumstances, Cacciari's understanding also leads political theorists to particular sources of empirical information from the human, physical, and social sciences. In sum, Cacciari's own experiences in real world metropolitan political praxis and his critical scholarly reflection on those experiences provide a fresh orientation toward the Metropolis and urban life, illustrating the social weight achievable when political action is founded on his disenchanted archipelago geophilosophy.

Because Cacciari's understanding of human conurbation is a material-semiotic one, he contends that 'there is no "City", there are different and distinct forms of urban life',⁴⁰³ noting that these various forms of life—and the understanding of what a 'city' should be—are often contradictory. He illustrates this claim by noting that the ancient Greeks, for example, understood the *polis* as a sentimental hearth, home, and history, whereas the Romans understood *civitas* as a functional community of citizens living under certain laws. To this, Cacciari adds that the political boundaries of a city are entirely arbitrary—like weeds, cities will grow wherever they flourish, rather than according to any formal plan. Not only was Rome not built in a day, it was not completed in a day, either: it is, as it has always been, a work-in-progress.⁴⁰⁴ Thus, rather than formal, monolithic totalities, urban spaces must be understood as entangled, material-semiotic agglomerations—heterogeneous assemblages—of reflexive, irreducibly plural human coexistence.

As he writes:

... we would like the city to be like a "womb", maternal, and at the same time, like a "machine", like an "instrument"; we would like it to have an "ethos" in the original sense of an abode or a hearth...we ask it for security and "peace" and at the same time we demand from it extreme efficiency, effectiveness, flexibility. The city is subjected to contradictory demands. The desire to overcome these contradictions is shoddy utopia. They must

⁴⁰³ Massimo Cacciari: *La Città* ['The City'], (Villa Verucchio: Pazzini Stampatore Editore), 2009; p. 7.

⁴⁰⁴ As clearly demonstrated by the anthropologist Michael Herzfeld in his ethnography, *Evicted from Eternity: The Restructuring of Modern Rome* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

instead be given shape. Throughout its history, *the city is the perennial experiment for the structuring of contradiction and conflict.*⁴⁰⁵

In order to discuss Cacciari's understanding of urban politics, we must first study how he understands the 'urban' and urban *praxis*: planning, designing, building, and living within the built environment. As I will show, Cacciari does not consider the Metropolis a static structure. Like the archipelago, he understands the 'Metropolitan city' as a heterogeneous, material-semiotic assemblage: both are cluttered, entangled expressions of human praxis—of *poiēsis* and *fare*—self-organising works-in-progress whose 'work' and 'progress' are circumstantially contingent.

All are, in some way, the products of happenstance or history or evolution or *as well as* the products of deliberate attempts by reflexive people (who contingently happen to find themselves sharing a particular geophysical situation and its resources) to assemble them in certain ways and not others. However, whereas an archipelago does not rely significantly on a foundational philosophy for its existence, the Metropolis does. The emergence and development of Metropolis, Cacciari argues, is a consequence of bourgeois capitalism and its dialectical intellectual foundation—it is a niche constructed by bourgeois actors to protect and nourish bourgeois praxis, to ensure its hegemonic superposition in relation to any and every counter-hegemonic challenge. It is a totalising geophilosophy, in other words: a product of bourgeois *Aufhebung*, produced as a foundation for further production (and *pro-duction*). As a foundation for ongoing production and consumption, the Metropolis is a marketplace producing equivalent goods and services between which consumers might choose in pursuit of the satisfaction of their wants and needs. This foundational equivalency, Cacciari argues, makes the Metropolis the realisation of *nihilism*.

Radical Indifference

It should come as no surprise that the vernacular—abstract and dialectical—definition of nihilism does not satisfy Cacciari because it is wholly semiotic. When he discusses 'nihilism', the

⁴⁰⁵ Op. cit. Cacciari, , p. 5. Emphasis added.

nihil of which he speaks is the material-semiotic ‘indifference of the *Urmöglichkeit*,⁴⁰⁶ the indifference of the ‘original possibility’ to any meaningful beginning human beings might attempt (or any specific outcome they might begin to pursue). Within this indifference, he states that, ‘... every possibility is perfectly equivalent. Omni-compossibility may, in a Leibnizian fashion, sound like the name of the beginning, but holding that this term in no way constrains the transition to being, the possibility of non-being is perfectly compossible.’⁴⁰⁷

Cacciari’s definition of ‘the city’ rests on his understanding of the reflexive, material-semiotic relationship between time, the material (or ‘space’ or ‘place’) and human praxis (both *poiēsis* and *fare*) in the absence of any *a priori* totalities. Cacciari is thus a ‘nihilist’, but not in the vernacular binary, dialectical sense of the term. He is a material-semiotic nihilist. For Cacciari, the ‘nothing’ of nihilism is a meaningful *and* material inchoateness that affords humans an infinite opportunity to fabricate meaningful practice and enact it on the material Earth: the *nihil* is the foundational *silence* within which one can make or *not make* sounds—a non-binary ‘third’ option of ‘nothing’ between ‘something’ and the ‘lack of something’. Understood this way, the *nihil* is full of what science studies scholars call *actants*: anything, living or non-living, that modifies anything else—living or non-living—by acting is an *actant*.⁴⁰⁸ ‘Nothing’ is not, therefore, a metaphysical vacuum, but a landscape, an open field filled with material-semiotic compossibility. An open field in the world is replete with *actants* which exercise a ‘hegemonic’ effect on us when they force us, directly or indirectly, to modify our behaviour. How one engages with these *actants* cannot be predetermined: neither the universe nor the objects themselves could care less about the tasks they are asked to perform. One must then *decide* how to use them, choose to which task an actant will be applied (or with which other actants it will be made to interact), apply it that task at the expense of other potential applications, and then cope with the consequences of that application, whatever they may be.

⁴⁰⁶ Massimo Cacciari: *Dell’inizio* (Milan: Adelphi, 1990); p. 142.

⁴⁰⁷ *idem*.

⁴⁰⁸ *cf. op. cit. Politics of Nature*, p. 75.

For Cacciari, this unending process of decisive endowment—of immanent and reflexive material-semiotic investigation, experimentation, decision, and action—is how human beings begin *Bildung* in the context of foundationally indifferent ‘nothingness’. For Cacciari, no human being is ever fully formed or ‘complete’, nor is any human being ever completely isolated from meaning; we are constantly becoming, constantly transforming in relation to the actants around us. In the face of this situation, Cacciari is disenchanted but not without hope. He engages with the indifference of the *nihil* to give meaning—*reflexively* rather than deontologically—to the life that takes place within it, rather than despairing cynically at its lack of *a priori* meaning or teleological boundaries. In contemporary terms, his view is that this is the only way to challenge—to throw a ‘counter-punch’, as he puts it—at Metropolitan, bourgeois hegemonic praxis.

The Metropolis

Cacciari’s disenchanted understanding of the ‘Metropolitan City’ as a bourgeois geophilosophy provides the basis for his approach to urban politics and urban political philosophy as reflexive, material-semiotic praxis. It constitutes the foundation of his approach to understanding Venice and its challenges, and to coping with them through democratic urban governance. Readers must not, therefore, assume that his ‘Metropolis’—identified henceforth with a capital ‘M’—is equivalent to the colloquial term ‘metropolis,’ often just a synonym for ‘big city’; that is, an abstract term that can be used to identify any monolithic post-industrial, capitalistic conurbation in which antagonistic individual intellects and their personal ideas or beliefs are brought into immanent conflict. In Cacciari’s interpretation,

[t]he city is the place of those differences that, as contradictions, still permit the existence of “magically” self-contained cultural entities; the Metropolis is the place of those differences that, as the measure and calculation of value, integrate every phenomenon in to the dialectic of abstract value. In the first case, what emerges is a contrast; in the second, a necessary and functional relation with the calculation of the *Verstand* [‘intellect’].⁴⁰⁹

⁴⁰⁹ Op. cit., *Architecture & Nihilism*, p. 9. Emphasis added.

The abstract and impersonal character of the Metropolis, Cacciari asserts, is a consequence of the development of the bourgeois project and the expansive hegemonic entrenchment of bourgeois praxis. The aporetic, crisis-based system bourgeois capitalism exploits to maintain its hegemonic superposition—by promising the eventual overcoming of irreducible plurality—has not only altered the relations of production within the traditional city; it has also transformed the traditional city's production of communal social relations. The importance of Cacciari's disenchanted acknowledgement of irreducible plurality is amplified when the parties struggling to cope reflexively with it live in close, material-semiotic circumstances dominated and organised by representatives and institutions associated with bourgeois capitalism.

Cacciari explains that as bourgeois praxis entrenches itself within particular communities within particular societies, the population and material infrastructure of that community and that society are transformed in bourgeois terms; they learn to communicate in the 'language' of capitalism. Historically, for example, as bourgeois hegemony increased, people migrated from the countryside and settled in the cities that became centres of bourgeois power and production. As they grew, these formerly homogeneous cities were transformed into heterogeneous metropolises made up of diverse peoples with little in common other than their material, economic need for employment. To house this influx of people, new architecture was required, and since this architecture was a functional requirement for capitalist praxis (rather than of art for its own sake) it became architecture of no 'value', or 'without qualities', to paraphrase Robert Musil, bereft of intentional aesthetic ornamentation or symbolic endowment. Of such disposable and equivalent architecture is the Metropolis necessarily made. The character of the Metropolis therefore becomes one of nihilistic equivalence—its character is that it has no character beyond its productive potential. Metropolitans, therefore, have no choice but to cope with bourgeois praxis by subsuming it reflexively; by 'digesting' it, adopting—cooperating with—the material-semiotic system of capitalist *Aufhebung* that dominates them. As Gramsci argued, they become complicit participants in their domination by bourgeois praxis.

Cacciari argues that it is according to this Gramscian form of hegemonic negotiation that Metropolitans cope reflexively with the perpetual crises produced by bourgeois praxis. That is, in order to cope with the specificities of these crises, particular residents of particular places have entered into 'open unions' to transform their traditional cities into a capitalistically 'rational' Metropolis in order to survive. This 'rational' metropolis, Cacciari argues, manifests itself as

the phase, or the problem, of the rationalization of all social relations, which follows that of the relations of production ... [The life of the Metropolis is] a process that abstracts from the personal and rebuilds upon subjectivity as calculation, reason, interest. In this sense, the *Geistleben* (life of the *Geist*, i.e., intellectual life) can be understood as the life of the Metropolis itself.⁴¹⁰

Thus, the Metropolitan city is neither a *post hoc* reaction to the new bourgeois needs and interests of autonomous, rational individuals, nor is it a universal concept whose time has come. It is, instead, the realisation of the capitalist *Geist*—its 'spirit'—as both material and as an idea among people, the *Vergeistigung* ('spiritualisation', 'etherealisation'; 'the process of the realisation of the *Geist*') that simultaneously assembles and 'lives' in the Metropolis. Metropolitan *Vergeistigung* is therefore reflexive, bourgeois *praxis*—material-semiotic capitalist *poiēsis*—itself. The Metropolis is a bourgeois project—an example of bourgeois *fare-in-progress*, he argues: 'the *Geistleben* (life of the *Geist*, i.e., intellectual life) can be understood as the life of the metropolis itself'.⁴¹¹

Despite its ideological pretences to the contrary,⁴¹² Cacciari makes it clear that Metropolitan *Geistleben* does not simply take place in the heads of rational, autonomous, bourgeois individuals. On the contrary, he argues that it is a reflexive and irreducibly plural, material-semiotic work in progress, one that is constantly transforming itself to cope with the crises it produces for itself. For Cacciari, the relationships between humans and non-humans are a reflexive and situated process of *becoming*, transforming as aspects or 'traits' of the relationship change over time. Nothing given meaning by human beings is a monolithic, closed entity; because *Vergeistigung* is reflexive,

⁴¹⁰ Ibid., p. 4.

⁴¹¹ Ibid,

⁴¹² cf. op. cit., *L'invenzione dell'individuo*; 'Passato futuro del "borghese"', ('The Past Future of the "Bourgeois"') in Bonomi, Cacciari, and De Rita: *Che fine ha fatto la borghesia? Dialogo sulla nuova classe dirigente in Italia*. (Torino: Einaudi, 2004); pp. 5-32.

material-semiotic praxis, it does not begin or end with capitalism: it is an ongoing human phenomenon through which meanings or *Geister* are constantly being worked out (and reworked out) over time. This does not mean that meaning is so transient and ephemeral that there are no 'facts' and no stable or reliable descriptions of life on earth or in the universe. It is instead, as Bruno Latour notes, that 'facts never speak for themselves without an infinitely complex apparatus which makes them speak'.⁴¹³ When this interpretative framework is taken into consideration, meaning and facts emerge as reflexive and material-semiotic rather than absolute and purely semiotic. As a result, linear, 'evolutionary' existential 'logics' or deterministic deont- or teleologies of cities can be rejected because meanings and facts must constantly be reaffirmed or retested, and then reasserted. The Metropolis is a work in progress—a bourgeois *Geistapparat*, as it were, the material-semiotic apparatus for realising specific *poiēsis* with specific *fare*—that is working itself out over time. From Cacciari's perspective, it is this work in progress and its individual projects that ought to be the target of analysis, rather than its particular component parts, which can only be isolated in abstract (and therefore politically irrelevant) dialectical theory.

The contrast Cacciari posits between the city and the Metropolis echoes Ferdinand Tönnies's generalisations of *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society). A sociologist whose writing was based on critical, empirical study rather than abstract theory alone, Tönnies, (1855-1936), suggested that *Gemeinschaft* (a community of the *Gemein*, the 'common' or 'vulgar') refers to small, rural, self-contained and relatively self-sufficient communities that developed on the basis of tradition, homogeneity and cooperation. In such communities, all resources and information are readily available for all; what happens outside the community's limits is of no particular consequence to those who dwell within them. Cacciari's 'cities' are communities characterised by *Gemeinschaft*, and they are the perfect embodiment of Hegelian logic: whatever contradictions arise in the city are synthesised harmoniously within the city itself. By contrast, Cacciari's 'Metropolis' echoes Tönnies' concept of *Gesellschaft* (a society of *Gesellen*, of

⁴¹³ 'Pour un dialogue entre science politique et science studies', *Revue française de science politique*, (4:58, 2008); p. 674.

'journeymen'), in the form of the *Großstadt*, or large(-scale) city. Unlike the small-scale, *Gemeinschaft* city, the Metropolis is defined by contradiction. Metropolitans live apart, together: although people coexist in the Metropolis, they pursue their own individual ends rather than the collective ends of the community.

But, as Cacciari notes, the emergence of the *Gesellschaft*—the bourgeois work-in-progress—sparked a material-semiotic crisis of foundations for *Gemeinschaftler* like Hegel. It was not simply that their ideas were being challenged, it was that the foundational assumptions upon and with which they made sense of the world were not being borne out in real life: rather than a continuity or symmetry between theory and practice, *Gemeinschaftler* were experiencing on a daily basis that their theoretical apparatus could not cope with these new, alien challenges. As Hegel recounted and demonstrated in his own work, attempts to reconcile or synthesise transcendental reason with immanent capitalist rationalisation produced crisis—*aporia*—rather than harmony. To paraphrase Thomas Kuhn⁴¹⁴ and Gramsci, the existential paradigm of *Gemeinschaft* life was being forced to shift under material *and* semiotic pressure from the *Gesellschaft*; it had to transform itself to cope with the material power of the *Gesellschaft*. The contradictory stresses and strains of life in the Metropolis thus lead its residents to long for relief, but initially the only alternative they can imagine is that of the 'community' of the old *Gemeinschaft*-city they have lost.

Cacciari argues that this nostalgia to return to the old community is based on a linear understanding of history that progresses from one stage to another and promotes a view that one can unproblematically turn around and go back the way one has come. However, such a view is an illusion caused by hindsight, and is therefore self-defeating if used as a foundation for real world political praxis.

The Metropolis, however, is a material-semiotic reality wherein the incessant clash of so many irreducibly plural notions of nostalgia come into contact that people are forced to stop speaking in the nostalgic, universal 'past perfect'. Instead, hegemonic bourgeois praxis forces them into a dialogic agreement to speak about the conditional future for themselves as individuals. As

⁴¹⁴ Cf. Thomas Kuhn: *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

Cacciari describes it, '[t]he metropolis [is] where all the social circles of *Gemeinschaft* have been shattered... the place of communal resolution of conflict, is the city, not the Metropolis. In the Metropolis, these past relations can only appear as ornament... [and] [o]rnamant hides the true metropolitan relations, it falsifies'.⁴¹⁵

As Cacciari explains it, in the absence of any universal *a priori* foundation, people have to struggle reflexively to construct meaning and ways of living in order to survive. In a Metropolitan context, a heterogeneous abundance of such praxes—some old, some new—encounter one another, come into confrontation and contradiction and transform a finite bit of land, infrastructure, and resources into a chaos of untranslatable and unresolvable wills to meaning and power organised—barely—in response to the crisis produced by hegemonic bourgeois praxis. Thus, says Cacciari, the intense aggregation of irreducible plurality in the Metropolis transforms individual distinction into the functional, nihilistic equivalence of the crowd, providing capitalism with the disposable and interchangeable units of labour it requires for efficient production. By annihilating the individuality of Metropolitan residents—by rendering the individually semiotic 'no thing' in comparison to material economic interest, equality has been achieved since all people, as Metropolitans, are equal in material terms to the means of production. For this reason, he argues that:

...the Metropolis appears as the great metaphor of the calculating intellect devoid of all ends, whose *Nervenleben* (life of the nerves) is immersed in the succession of equi-valent cases. The architecture "without qualities" of the Metropolis—a conscious image of fulfilled nihilism—excludes the characteristic of the place; in its project, every place is equi-valent in universal circulation, in exchange. Space and time are arithmetically measurable, detachable, and reconstructable.⁴¹⁶

However, because the world is neither purely material nor purely semiotic, Metropolitans are not bereft or without resources because material-semiotic negotiation is still possible. The result is a form of 'participatory domination', rather than purely semiotic synthesis and consensus that creates the conditions for beginning to cope with these new conflicts. In the absence of foundational

⁴¹⁵ Ibid., p. 112.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid., p. 200.

totality, material-semiotic bourgeois praxis nonetheless provides distinct routes and mechanisms for asserting, developing, imposing, and exploiting meaning and power:

The contemporary Metropolis retains nothing of the [*Gemeinschaft*]. It cannot be confused with any specific type of large city, whether commercial, industrial, or consumption-oriented. Its essence lies in being a system, a multi-articulated urban type—a comprehensive service, so to speak, to the growth of contemporary large capital. It is an ensemble: a qualified organization of the labour force, a scientific reserve-supply for industrial growth, a financial structure, a market, and the all-inclusive centre of political power. In brief, the Metropolis, in order to be called such, must be a capitalist system, in the general sense: a city of the circulation-reproduction of capital, *Geist der Kapitalismus*.⁴¹⁷

The dialectical opposition between traditional community sensibility and calculating, intellectual urbanity in the Metropolitan narrative is easily recognised. Following Simmel,⁴¹⁸ Cacciari insists that, in the Metropolis, the cash economy and intellectual domination are interconnected because all are transformations of the specific forms of individuality that emerged throughout history in the *Gemeinschaft*-city:

The monetary economy formalizes economic relations, just as the intellect formalizes psychic relations and movements [...] the *Nervenleben* corresponds to the continuous and relentlessly innovated transubstantiation of exchange value into use value—that is, it corresponds to the necessary instance in which exchange value becomes real value.⁴¹⁹

It is not simply that time became money (and vice versa): when money becomes equivalent to things (and vice versa), every thing—every *actant*—becomes a commodity with a monetary value. ‘Qualities’ like aesthetic character or material quality are reduced to exchange value in relation to money rather than in and of themselves or in comparison to other objects. Beyond the simple dry goods of the marketplace, the mind, the body, time, health, labour, and knowledge on the one hand, and material consistency, predictability, and reliability on the other—the distance, as it were, between causes and effects—became tragic commodities, because, although they existed for all to see, they became attainable only to those with the money to buy them and the time to use them.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid., p. 32.

⁴¹⁸ Cacciari cites Georg Simmel, ‘Metropolis and Mental Life’, in *On Individuality and Social Forms*, ed. Donald E. Levine (Chicago, 1971). Cited in *ibid.*, p. 6.

⁴¹⁹ Op. cit. *Architecture & Nihilism*, p. 6.

In the course of these tragic developments, many ‘city’-dwellers refused to give up the comfortable and predictable, ‘repetitive’ life to which they have become accustomed. By clinging to the ‘city’, and rejecting its competitor, they reinforced the dialectical distinction between ‘city’ and Metropolis, contributing to the overall crisis of foundations provoked by new, bourgeois praxis. At the same time, the identity of the Metropolis is protected because its system of ‘rationally calculated relations’ drives away those people who reject its particular sensibilities.⁴²⁰ Nevertheless, ‘the problem of the city must be seen in the light of the overall political problem of capitalist development.’⁴²¹ That is, the hegemonic imposition of the ‘rational’, bourgeois transaction upon the everyday existence of ‘ordinary’—that is, non-bourgeois, ‘irrational’—people. Whether this imposition is embraced, rejected, or refused, capitalist transactions force the ongoing transformation of pre-capitalist social relations:

The city tries to desperately resist this assault—but in so doing it already asserts itself as a locus of conflict, as a struggle: in short, as a dialectical structure whose solution henceforth becomes unthinkable within the city as such. The problem of synthesizing the conflict that breaks out in the city becomes subsequently a concern of the State.⁴²²

Cacciari argues, therefore, that one must engage with the relationship between the actual *fare* and the *poiēsis* motivating them, rather than remaining content simply to think about them in the abstract. Rather than relying on ideological rhetoric to do the job, Cacciari argues that one demystifies praxis by using militantly unsentimental and material-semiotic critique to reveal its actual limits of bourgeois *poiēsis* and *fare*. This demystification reveals the non-binary possibilities for maintaining and transforming local heterogeneous conditions, and has the added advantage of avoiding the very dialectical aporias that forced critics to search for transformative *tertia* in the first place. Because it is material-semiotic rather than purely material or purely semiotic, Cacciari’s disenchanted engagement confirms that non-binary ‘thirds’ are to be found, as Latour suggests,

⁴²⁰ Cf. op. cit. Schlag, p. 28.

⁴²¹ Op. cit. Cacciari, p. 29.

⁴²² Ibid., p. 30.

'between hubris and despair'.⁴²³ To refuse the dualism between hubris and despair does not demean the significance of a particular project to the real people for whom it is meaningful, nor does it negate whatever associated epistemologies, practices, and cultures have become attached to such projects. On the contrary, it demonstrates that like real human praxis in the real world, *Bildung* is reflexive, material-semiotic, and irreducible. From this perspective, the contemporary development in urban settings of green spaces, farmers' markets, and so on are all attempts to cope with metropolitan nihilism and the social alienation it produces. Cacciari argues, however, that because the world in which the *Gemeinschaft* flourished no longer exists, these attempts must not be mistaken for 'returning' to or 'maintaining' *Gemeinschaft* life in the *Gesellschaft*. They are instead *refoundations* of old praxes in new, different circumstances.⁴²⁴

This understanding of the 'multi-articulated' Metropolis as an architectural construction—a transformation in bricks and mortar for *Gesellschaft* at the expense of *Gemeinschaft*—directly informs Cacciari's methodological foundation for coping with bourgeois praxis as mayor of Venice. Indeed, we will see in the following discussion about the construction of a new bridge in Venice how Cacciari concretises the geophilosophy of the archipelago, providing an example of how a reflexive, disenchanted political actor *criticises*, sometimes harshly sometimes lightly; he or she neither denounces nor worships: he or she always finds a way to cobble together a way of coping with conflicts to keep him- or herself from getting trapped in the despotic extremes of either hubris or despair.

Building Bridges

Cacciari understands discourses of totality as deliberate, hegemonic attempts to 'blackbox' contingency and precariousness. As we saw above, he relies instead on a geophilosophy of the archipelago, which draws attention to contingent, contextual, and reflexive relationships between

⁴²³ Bruno Latour: 'What is Iconoclasm? Or Is There a World Beyond the Image Wars?', *Iconoclasm: Beyond the Image-Wars in Science, Religion and Art* (Latour and Weibel, eds.), (Karlsruhe and Cambridge, MA: ZKM and MIT Press, 2002); p. 24.

⁴²⁴ Cf. Cacciari's discussions of the *Deutscher Werkbund* and *Verein für Sozialpolitik* in, e.g., *Architecture and Nihilism* (esp. 'German Sociology of the City') and *Posthumous People*. See also Frederic J. Schwartz, *The Werkbund: Design Theory and Mass Culture Before the First World War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

culturally shared semiotics and ways of material living—about the material-semiotic works-in-progress undertaken by material human beings based on contingent material experience, and reflection on that materiality. Some of these works-in-progress are Metropolitan urban settlements. Building bridges across and within the irreducible plurality that characterizes a Metropolis is more than a philosophical allegory or a political slogan (even though Cacciari's 'non-party' electoral list in 1993 was called *il ponte*, 'the bridge'). It is also a *material project*. It is 'socially weighty' because it affects the lives of real people. For example, the network of islands that makes up the city of Venice may be viewed as such a heterogeneous material-semiotic assemblage. People had to build the boats and bridges which connect the islands of Venice, and *where* a bridge should be built has no inevitable or eternal answer. Although topography can certainly present 'obvious' places for a bridge, there is no guarantee that local residents will want a bridge built there. Similarly, even having agreed that a bridge should be built, there is no guarantee that residents will like its design, approve of the amount of money to be spent, and so on. Even if a bridge should need to be replaced, there is no guarantee that it will be replaced immediately, or in the same location. All these options were literally in play in the project to construct a fourth bridge across the Grand Canal in Venice, which Cacciari oversaw as mayor.

In 1999, the city of Venice awarded the design contract for a fourth bridge across the city's main arterial canal, the Grand Canal, to the Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava. To be built between Venice's train station and its bus and taxi terminal (Piazzale Roma), the bridge was intended as a response to the growth of tourist traffic between Venice and *terraferma*.



The *Ponte della Costituzione* in Venice.

[<http://www.dimensioneprogetto.eu/assets/Uploads/07-06-calatrava-DSC5.jpg>]

The story of the *Ponte della Costituzione* is an excellent, materially and semiotically ‘weighty’ example of just how complicated it is in practice to cope with irreducible plurality in Venetian material circumstances. From an engineering perspective, building a bridge in Venice—particularly along the Grand Canal—presents several unique empirical difficulties because of the nature of the already-existing built environment. This is a ‘weighty’ reality that cannot be ignored or marginalised on ideological or aesthetic grounds (as Calatrava is alleged by many to have done⁴²⁵). Therefore, anyone seriously committed to improving pedestrian flows in Venice has no choice but to cope with these difficulties, no matter his or her ideological (or aesthetic) commitments.

There are also specific semiotic questions of politics to be confronted. For example, Cacciari’s attempts to come to a disenchanting political solution to the bridge’s accessibility problem was met with what he considered to be ‘enchanted’, ideological ‘idiocy’ from a disabled activist group. In 2008, a pressure group called FISH (*Federazione Italiana per il Superamento dell’Handicap*; ‘Italian Federation for Overcoming Handicaps’), argued that that, designed without

⁴²⁵ As an engineering analysis of the bridge’s design suggested, ‘It seems as though the aesthetic design might have been more of a deciding factor over the final design than the structural implications’. [Kathryn R. Heath: ‘A Critical Analysis of Ponte Della Costituzione, Venice’, *Proceedings of Bridge Engineering 2 Conference 2011* (April 2011, University of Bath, Bath, UK), p. 2].

handicapped access, the bridge was discriminatory.⁴²⁶ The bridge, in their view, should have been designed to ‘respect the principles of inclusive and universal design and of non-discrimination’.⁴²⁷

FISH argued that, when it comes to crossing the Grand Canal,

Gondolas with a 17-minute travel time, lifts, free tickets on public transport as compensation, do not at all represent a reasonable accommodation. The inaccessibility of the Bridge is of serious detriment to the freedom of movement for the elderly, for the visually impaired, for people with ambulatory difficulty, and for people in wheelchairs. *The Bridge, financed with public funds, should have been designed and realised according to the logic of universal design, which takes into consideration the difficulties of a significant portion of citizens and tourists.*⁴²⁸

In this statement, FISH identify a ‘universal’, freedom of movement for those with impairments of one kind or another which was being unjustly limited by an inaccessible bridge. They resolved to mobilise their members to fight its construction in court, and later, to protest its inauguration in person: ‘[w]ith firm resolution, FISH intends to continue this battle, which is first and foremost a cultural one, for the change that can result from the recognition of the mistakes that have been made’.⁴²⁹

There is no question whatsoever that the built environment can help or hinder the movement of those with limited mobility—FISH do recognise in their statement that the city council had been quite helpful to those with such limitations in other contexts—but there is a difference between building something new within a more accommodating, more modern infrastructure and building something in Venice. Anyone trying to build anything in Venice is severely limited by the natural, material *actants*—the geology, the weather, the architecture, the tourists, and so on—of the area, as mentioned above, but also by the ‘debris’ of the city’s architectural and infrastructural past as well as concerted efforts to preserve it as it is. Put differently, there is nothing ‘universal’ about Venice, which is precisely why many people find it

⁴²⁶ ‘Ponte della Costituzione e ovovia: la FISH rigetta le motivazioni di quell’Ordinanza’ *superando.it*, 5 ottobre 2009. [<http://www.superando.it/2009/10/05/ponte-della-costituzione-e-ovovia-la-fish-rigetta-le-motivazioni-di-quellordinanza/>]

⁴²⁷ FISH: Press release, 6 October, 2008: ‘La FISH e il Ponte di Calatrava’ [Source: <http://robertoscano.info/wp-content/uploads/2008/10/la-fish-e-il-ponte-di-calatrava.pdf> / www.superando.it]

⁴²⁸ *ibid.*

⁴²⁹ *ibid.*

charming and worth visiting. Almost none of the city's 430 other bridges are handicapped accessible, although the city has made attempts to render some accessible with ramps and/or lifts, even though salt water apparently corrodes the machinery very quickly.⁴³⁰ Nevertheless, FISH argued that the new bridge

...stands out disturbingly as an explicit violation of Article 3 [of the Italian Constitution]. It is a wound that cuts beyond the limits to which the laws of the Country apply: it concerns us as citizens of the world and as human beings: the principle of non-discrimination contained in Article 3 of the Constitution is in fact the anticipation of the protection expressed by the Declarations of the Rights of Man and of the more recent and celebrated UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.⁴³¹

Even if one supports wholeheartedly the sentiments expressed in these declarations, that emotional support runs into material-semiotic aporia: eventually, one has to cope with the limits imposed by irreducible plurality in physical and material terms. These limits include the following facts: that there are people who are disabled; that Venice is an ancient city with ancient canals, ancient bridges, narrow, ancient streets, and hordes of contemporary tourists; that there are limits imposed on engineering by the laws of physics and technical capability, by Venetian geological conditions, and by various building regulations (see FN489). In light of these limitations, it was Cacciari's view that to argue as FISH did, that there *is* a single way to reduce irreducible plurality to pure equality—in this case, to build a universally accessible bridge along the Grand Canal in Venice—is politically strategic dissimulation.

For better and for worse, the decision had been taken during the original planning—with which Cacciari was not involved—that *vaporetti* (water buses) would be used to accommodate those unable to cross the bridge on foot. Unwise as this decision may seem in hindsight, it was approved at the time by the various regulatory agencies. This illustrates the tragedy of material-semiotic politics in circumstances of irreducible plurality: it is tough. There is always the risk that some stakeholders will not be satisfied by the decisions taken, even if their concerns have not been ignored by the decision makers. Equally, there is always the risk that decision makers will make

⁴³⁰ <http://www.sagetraveling.com/venice-accessible-travel>

⁴³¹ *ibid.*

what turns out, in hindsight, to have been a bad decision. In this case, activists like FISH began to protest the design's approval and were ultimately able to convince the city to install a gondola to transport anyone with limited mobility across the bridge. Nevertheless, Cacciari's criticism of FISH illustrates the ways in which political leaders must cope with the materially pluralistic questions of discrimination and disability and the limits they impose.



Cacciari and Calatrava on the *Ponte della Costituzione* at its 'secret', late-night opening on 11 September, 2008.
[<http://www.veniceboats.com/images/calatrava-cacciari.jpg>]

Even if one supports making the city more accessible to those with limited mobility, which Cacciari does, there is an empirical reality that different people are differently abled for different reasons, and require different modes of assistance in different contexts. Second, one also has to accept that people whose mobility is restricted in different ways may want to visit Venice, which is not an 'easy' place to navigate for anybody—particularly for those coping with certain kinds of mobility limitations—and which *cannot be made equally easy to navigate for everyone*. Finally, at the time of the FISH protest, this particular bridge, despite its design (and other) problems, had been reviewed, the project had been budgeted, and it had cleared the regulatory hurdles. Construction companies had invested in the equipment and staff they would require to complete the work. Indeed, at the time of the FISH protest, the bridge was *already under construction*. Arguments about whether it could have or should have been designed differently were superfluous abstraction, *particularly since the interests of the handicapped were not being ignored*.

Cacciari's concern, upon returning as mayor in 2005, was to cope with these irreducible material realities whilst ensuring that those with limited mobility would be able to get around Venice as easily and as efficiently as possible. This did not mean that the city council should do nothing to render access to the city more equitable. But to cope with mobility in *material* terms posed an important *practical* question: how were people with reduced mobility to get around the city once they made it across the new Calatrava bridge? The *Ponte della costituzione* was not an interchangeably abstract bridge connecting abstract people to abstract places. It was a bridge designed to link an easily accessed, heavily trafficked, contemporary transportation hub to a very inaccessible ancient city, which is difficult *for everyone* to navigate, even at the best of times. And, if the overall goal is to make Venice more accessible for more people, perhaps those with reduced mobility would be better served by a free, dedicated boat service rather than a bridge. The city had already successfully⁴³² helped mitigate the problem of bridges for those with reduced mobility by adapting and heavily subsidising⁴³³ the public *vaporetto* service to accommodate their needs.

Based on the success of this *vaporetto* system, Cacciari felt that there was no material obstacle preventing people from moving efficiently and equitably from one side of the Grand Canal to the other. On the basis of this evidence, he attempted to negotiate with FISH, but was rebuffed. This suggested to him that these activists were more concerned with the abstract metaphysics of bridge design than with finding ways to get people with limited mobility across the Grand Canal. Finally, the aforementioned, non-binary, 'third' decision was made to install a mechanical gondola on the side of the bridge to transport those with limited mobility. Interviewed by a journalist on the opening of the gondola in 2013, Cacciari described the necessity, difficulties and costs of the gondola as 'a real mess stemming from error and idiocy':

I've always said that the problem is the initial call for tender [which was overseen in 2002 by Paolo Costa, Venice's mayor before Cacciari's re-election in 2005]. The sum for which the project was assigned [€4.04 million] wasn't even enough to pay for the materials. We

⁴³² According to many experts, the city's accessibility plan is quite effective. Cf. <http://www.sagetraveling.com/venice-accessible-travel>

⁴³³ As of this writing, a regular single ticket is €7 and is valid for one hour; a reduced mobility ticket is €1,30, is valid for 75 minutes, and allows a companion to travel for free. [<http://www.actv.it/muoversiavenezia/prezziinvigore#b4>]

strove to complete the work. All we needed was for the politicians to be dragged into this. OK, we're living in a madhouse but still...⁴³⁴

The error belonged to the architect, and was not corrected during the City's call for tenders, for having designed a bridge that was accessible to people with disabilities. The idiocy, on the other hand, belongs to the disabled advocacy groups who did not want, under any circumstances, to accept the proposal I made.

What did you suggest?

The most natural thing possible: to cross the Grand Canal—for free, of course—by boat from the station to piazzale Roma.

Did you try to block the gondola?

It was impossible to do so, I found myself in front of a wall of pure extremism [which] clearly did not want to embrace the idea of substituting the use of the *vaporetto* for the need to cross the *Ponte della Costituzione*.⁴³⁵



The gondola in action.

[<http://www.ediliziaeterritorio.ilsole24ore.com/art/mediacenter/gallery/progetti-e-concorsi/2013/11/Ovovia/Ovovia.php?id=9>]

One must also ask why Cacciari's proposed material solution—which would have provided an on-demand, faster crossing for those requiring it (the gondola takes at least seven minutes; a boat can cross in a matter of seconds)—was so steadfastly refused by the protesters. From Cacciari's perspective, using the *vaporetto* was a reasonable, *disenchanted* 'third' solution to problems raised by an already existing project. It *coped effectively* with the problem of linking the bus station to the train station, even for those unable to use the bridge itself. It did not *overcome* anything more than what it was designed to, the fifty or so metres of Grand Canal between the two stations, even if it did not synthesise material reality with normative purity. If he had the project to do over again, he

⁴³⁴ op. cit. Bottazzo: 16 March, 2012.

⁴³⁵ Francesco Bottazzo: 'Cacciari: "Idiozia dei disabili"', *Corriere del Veneto*, 12 November, 2013.

has said he would either do it differently or not at all,⁴³⁶ though as he has pointed out, he was not the one overseeing the call for tenders, during which process problems concerning access should have been identified and rectified. But neither he nor any other politician was in a position to resolve the situation in binary terms by razing the bridge and starting over from scratch: the money had been spent, the bridge had been built, the gondola was attached and now, for all its faults, it does help people move efficiently between the train station and the bus terminal. Nevertheless, even though the bridge appears to have satisfied nobody with an interest in its construction (except, perhaps, financially) it does move more people more efficiently from Piazzale Roma to the train station, especially with the gondola.⁴³⁷ Additionally, the *Ponte della costituzione* is an important work of Venetian aesthetics. Neither pure perfection nor pure imperfection, the bridge has become part of the material-semiotic, irreducible complexity of Venetian life, simultaneously transforming and limiting the architectural actants with which Venetians must cope in the present and into the future; surely the saga of this bridge will be remembered when the next such infrastructure projects is undertaken. Its stubborn materiality cannot be rearranged at will or marginalised by ideology.

To Cacciari there is nothing theoretical or metaphysical about the Metropolis or any urban life: it is always circumstantially relative and reflexive material-semiotic praxis. Thus, the Metropolis is a material-semiotic consequence of attempts to realise bourgeois theory in practice via technological means, and the subsequent efforts to cope with the consequences of those attempts. As such, the Metropolis is an experiment, an empirical test of its bourgeois, ideological, justificatory claims. As far as Cacciari is concerned, the Metropolitan experiment has failed every time it has been attempted. It is not that the Metropolis is an *a priori* evil or that no good has ever come of it. It is, instead, that, having failed so compellingly so many times to deliver the utopia it promises, the time has come to find an alternative. What the Metropolis proves—the evidence it

⁴³⁶ He has made such comments repeatedly. See, for example, this report from Antenna 3 news: 'Calatrava: Cacciari difende l'opera': [<http://youtu.be/iMj0MmKNLiE>]

⁴³⁷ When it is actually working. The breakdown reported here, in May 2015, appears to be a common occurrence: <http://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2015/05/24/venezia-turisti-bloccati-nellovovia-da-2-milioni-del-ponte-di-calatrava/1714479/>

provides observers—is more than just the failure of *bourgeois* utopias. It uncovers irreducible plurality and the material-semiotic nature of human praxis in the world, which in turn, expose the socially weightless foundations of dialectic utopian theory—that theory and practice are distinct, self-contained, equally opposed, entities locked in a zero-sum, dialectical struggle according to which one must overcome the other. The irreducible plurality of the Metropolis demonstrates that such overcoming is impossible; that certain conflicts, contradictions, and differences simply cannot be synthesised or overcome because theory and practice are both aspects of reflexive, material-semiotic human praxis. As reflexive, material-semiotic contradictions, they are not absolute—there are ways to *cope* with irreducibly plural conflicts and contradictions without annihilating them. The Metropolis also shows in the *sui generis* ways in which Metropolitans organise themselves, accommodating the irreducible and conflictual pluralities of Metropolitan life in order to create non-binary ‘third’ ways of living meaningful lives in the circumstances in which they find themselves. I will now expand my examination of how Cacciari coped with the realities of governing a Metropolitan work-in-progress in the next chapter with examples from his tenure as mayor of Venice.

action, taken from his tenure as mayor, highlights one example of his disenchanted, material-semiotic engagement with the real world crises that his philosophy argues are produced by aporetic, foundationally bourgeois praxis. It is therefore an example of his attempts to achieve non-binary 'third' solutions to problems produced by binary aporias; a specimen to which political theorists might refer and consider in their own attempts to move beyond such aporias.

Go Down MOSE

Since its founding, Venice has found itself locked in a literal, material struggle with its equally literal, littoral foundations. Unlike Honolulu or Hong Kong, which are built upon tectonic plate boundaries on the earth's crust itself, Venice is built on alluvial deposits transported and deposited by rivers, creating a 'layer' of water and sediment on top of the earth's crust. Put more simply, Venice's islands are thick mud rather than solid rock. Because of its squidgy foundations, that Venice exists at all today is due to a long practice of *niche construction*⁴³⁸—of deliberate material intervention by human beings in response to specific natural processes in order to ensure the continuity of an established way of life. Thus, because alluvial mud is not a good foundation for building, ancient Venetians drove wooden piles into the water and mud in order to create an artificial foundation upon which to build. Therefore, as Cacciari himself has said, Venice is 'a completely unlikely, entirely artificial city...a technical masterpiece, the purest expression of our capabilities, our mental potential'.⁴³⁹

But this is not the only geological reality Venetians have had to overcome in order to live in the lagoon.⁴⁴⁰ Venice's geophysical instability has increased due to global climate change: as the

⁴³⁸ Cf. John Odling-Smee, et al: *Niche Construction: The Neglected Process in Evolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

⁴³⁹ Hans-Jürgen Schlamp: 'Sinking Feeling: Venice's Eternal Battle against Water' *Der Spiegel* (15 June 2012) <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/venice-s-struggle-against-the-water-a-838713.html>

⁴⁴⁰ Venice's infrastructural history cannot be overlooked. As the geologist Antonio Brambati and his colleagues explain, Venetians long ago began impeding natural geological processes which were shrinking the lagoon:

Venetians, considering the lagoon a source of security against enemies and power with its channels and port, began to carry out several hydraulic works to preserve it. Mostly, the diversion of the major tributaries into the sea was started in 1400 AD and concluded in 1600 AD. They avoided making the lagoon a marshland, but also induced an abrupt reversal in its natural evolution. With

polar ice caps melt, sea levels rise, and the world's coastal cities are threatened with increased inundation. Although Venice has always flooded, the increasing periods per year of 'high water'—*acqua alta*—caused by climate change increase the damage done to Venice's ancient and fragile built infrastructure. In addition to the salty seawater, pollution in the water from Marghera and the many boats and ships that trawl the lagoon is extremely corrosive and destructive. Additionally, should any major storms brew in the northern Adriatic, Venice is essentially defenceless before their wrath, as the infamous storm of 1966 demonstrated.⁴⁴¹ This storm convinced many that there are moral and ethical elements to Venice's precarity: in addition to the risks such storms posed to Venice's human residents, the storm surge caused some \$6 billion in damage to artwork stored or displayed at or below ground level. This damage caused many people—a significant number of whom, it should be noted, were wealthy foreigners—to panic: because Venice is a monumental repository of so much extraordinary art, architecture, and culture—its houses and buildings as much as whatever they may contain within them—to lose Venice would be to lose a great deal of human historical and cultural patrimony. As the art historian John Pope-Hennessy wrote in 1968, the true significance of this storm

was not just a matter of the flood; rather it was a matter of what the flood revealed, of the havoc wrought by generations of neglect. For centuries Venice lived off tourists, and almost none of the money they brought into the city was put back into the maintenance of its

the passing of time, sea properties began to prevail, enhanced further by human interventions. In fact, since 1800 man has newly altered the lagoon setting very intensely. He dug new deep canals and modified the sea openings, both in the number and the setting, to serve the industrial harbour; occupied intertidal flats to provide the necessary areas for new industrial and urban centres, and permanently closed areas for fish farms. These changes were decisive in spurring the lagoon hydrodynamics, accelerating erosion and modifying the flora and fauna habitat. Furthermore, in the last decades the industrial water supply was provided by rash exploitation of artesian aquifers causing a serious land subsidence. An induced consequence is a weakening of the littoral system...with a deepening of the sea bottom that also contributes to the instability of the lagoon itself...

[Antonio Brambati, et al: The Lagoon of Venice: Geological Setting, Evolution and Land Subsidence, *Episodes* (26/3, 2003); p. 264].

⁴⁴¹ On 4 November 1966, a tremendous storm blew into Italy from the Adriatic, 'producing 118 victims and widespread damages [sic] in Tuscany, at the northern Adriatic coast and in the north-eastern Italian Alps. The storm was produced by a cyclone which formed in the western Mediterranean and moved eastward towards Italy, reaching the Tyrrhenian Sea, and then northward'. The storm surge reached 194cm (6 feet 4 inches) above the city's normal canal level ('mareographic zero'). Brief newsreel footage of the aftermath can be seen here: [<http://youtu.be/CQQwfiACtzo>].

monuments. And that had been aggravated by problems of pollution, an issue of the utmost gravity.⁴⁴²



Acqua alta in Piazza San Marco, 1966.
[<http://www.destination-venise.net/2011/01/lacqua-alta-de-1966-venise.html>]



And again, in November 2013.
[http://tg24.sky.it/static/contentimages/original/sezioni/tg24/cronaca/2013/11/15/acqua_alta_venezia_2ansa_jpg_1.jpg]

⁴⁴² John Pope-Hennessy, cited in John H. Stubbs and Emily G. Makaš: *Architectural Conservation in Europe and the Americas: National Experiences and Practice* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2011); p. 28.

However, as people began to recognise the connections between pollution, weather, and storms like that of 1966, many began to ask what use it was to restore monuments and works of art if the lagoon was becoming more dangerous as a result of pollution.⁴⁴³ The storm of 1966 provoked a rearticulation of Venetian mythological discourse.⁴⁴⁴ Whereas such discourse had traditionally described Venice and Venetians as a place and people whose character calmed the might of nature, history reveals that it took a tremendous amount of reflexive, material-semiotic *praxis*—political, geophysical, and *mythological* projects—for Venetians to establish, maintain, and protect their *anti-natural* way of life. Nature, people were beginning to argue, was now threatening to destroy all that this venerable work had achieved. In this vein, Standish has concluded that ‘these claims [about Venice’s peril]...reveal more about how environmentalism permeates our culture than about objective threats [to Venice]’.⁴⁴⁵ Thus, whereas ancient Venetians were concerned that Venice would be swallowed up by dry land as its lagoon contracted *naturally* according to processes explained by Brambati, et al., (see FN429) Venice and Venetians were recast after 1966 as *victims* of external, *unnatural* processes of global warming for which we ourselves are responsible. Within this narrative, Venice becomes an enchanted metaphor for the fate of humanity in the wake of its industrial, bourgeois hubris. That Venice is in danger at all was because *we*, in our blind devotion to progress and profit at all costs, have been destroying our own history and culture. To save Venice is therefore to redeem ourselves from the damage we have wrought.

After 1966, the Venetian and Italian governments began searching for a technical solution to the problem of flooding, but it was not until the late 1980s that a technological prototype was designed and tested. Approval was finally granted in 2002 to the *Modulo Sperimentale Elettromeccanico*, (‘Experimental Electromechanical Module’), a system of 78 mobile floodgates

⁴⁴³ As Dominic Standish explains,

Following the 1966 high floods, the priorities of activists in Italia Nostra [a Venetian environmental organisation which focussed on restoration projects within the city] started to move away from restoration and heritage towards wider political questions of protecting the environment. [...] After 1966, prioritising restoration work seemed to make little sense unless the bigger questions of protecting historical sites from flooding and pollution could be addressed...

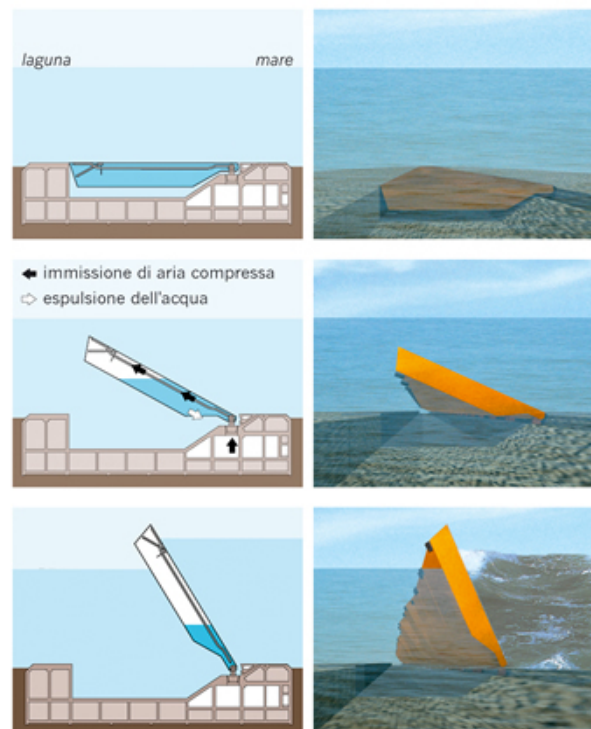
[Dominic Standish: *Venice in Environmental Peril?* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2012); p. 126].

⁴⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁴⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

which would rise from the lagoon's floor to block any incoming surge from reaching Venice. The system, which would part the lagoon's waters by creating a 'high' side and a 'low' side, is therefore known anagrammatically as 'MOSE', as 'Mosè' is Moses in Italian.

Cacciari's opposition to MOSE, which began while he was a member of the Venice city council in the 1980s, was based on this understanding of Venetian history and contemporary material reality.⁴⁴⁶ His attitude was not that Venice should 'die', nor was it that it should be 'saved'. He felt that Venice needed to be *sustained* through processes of renewal and renovation on a multiplicity of fronts—environmental, socioeconomic, and so on—something MOSE could not possibly do given the budgetary restrictions imposed by its cost.



An illustration of how MOSE gates work.
[<http://www.venicethefuture.com/images/base/1649.jpg>]

First, MOSE was irrelevant to the serious day-to-day maintenance problems caused by water *inside* the lagoon—water which would cause these problems whether MOSE existed or not. Second, MOSE was so expensive that the city would not be able to carry out this day-to-day maintenance

⁴⁴⁶ The journalist Alberto Vitucci has provided a chronology of MOSE's political development, Cacciari's objections and alternative proposals annotated by Cacciari himself. 'Cacciari sul Mose: "Quando Prodi non volle neanche ricevermi"', *La Nuova di Venezia e Mestre* (6 giugno 2014).

effectively if it was required to divert funds to MOSE, meaning that the danger was merely being passed on to future generations. Third, there was no empirical evidence that MOSE would *actually* work, or that the protection it would provide would be worth its not-inconsiderable environmental consequences—especially when considered in relation to the consequences of all previous human intervention into the natural development of the lagoon.⁴⁴⁷ Finally, MOSE would not actually prevent all occurrences of *acqua alta*—just the most severe cases. As Cacciari explained in 2006,

You're still going to have to wear your wellies in Venice, even with MOSE. [...] MOSE will only rise once or twice a year at most—that is whenever the tides are over 100cm above average, as it is designed to do—for all other *acque alte* you're going to have to put your wellies on: sorry.⁴⁴⁸

Cacciari has often repeated that *acqua alta* is not actually dangerous. Nobody in living memory has died as a result of it, not even in 1966. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, the city and its inhabitants were so well prepared that Cacciari found the immediate need for a project like MOSE to have been mitigated.⁴⁴⁹ The question preeminent in Cacciari's mind, therefore, was how to make Venice itself as robust as possible to withstand the inevitable water which, even with MOSE, will continue to find its way in. Combining these doubts—which were informed by the studied, empirical conclusions of many technical experts⁴⁵⁰—with the project's cost, Cacciari determined that MOSE was a mistake: because so much money would have to be diverted from maintaining the city's day-to-day sustainability, it would do more damage than good to Venice's future. In 2006, when the Prodi government agreed to consider suspending or ending MOSE, Cacciari explained that, compared to 1966,

[t]oday Venice is without doubt safer than it used to be forty years ago. Protection from the sea has been reinforced and the essential services (electricity, telephone, etc.) have been

⁴⁴⁷ Cf. Luigi d'Alpaos: *Fatti e misfatti di idraulica lagunare: La laguna di Venezia dalla diversione dei fiumi Alle nuove opere alle bocche di porto* (Venezia: Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti, 2010); op. cit. OECD, p. 170].

⁴⁴⁸ ADNAgenzia: 'Infrastrutture: Cacciari, Con o senza Mose a Venezia useremo ancora stivali', *adnkronos*, (23 maggio 2006).

⁴⁴⁹ In fact, any tourists visiting Venice during *acqua alta* are actually experiencing an ancient, and wholly authentic Venetian phenomenon: one copes with water in Venice in the same way that one copes with snow in Verbier or Vail. One might even argue that traipsing around Venice in wellies is far more authentic than the vast majority of 'Venetian' souvenirs which are, these days, actually made in Asia.

⁴⁵⁰ Cf. Massimo Cacciari: *Discorso del sindaco in comitatone del 22 novembre 2006*, Città di Venezia, [<http://www2.comune.venezia.it/mose-doc-prg/documenti/Discorso%20del%20Sindaco.pdf>]

brought up to standard. Extensive city areas have been raised. The forewarning alarm system had been improved and is increasingly precise, however, Venice needs to be looked after in many other ways. First of all it is essential to understand that Venice is in the water 365 days a year and that the foundations of Venice are in the water and this generates extremely high maintenance costs. Besides, we are the ones who have to contend with the tides: the 20 million tourists arriving in the city each year increase maintenance, waste disposal, and public transport costs. Venice, more than great works [like MOSE], needs numerous daily, small, ordinary, and extraordinary interventions. The funds destined to carry out the work on the mouth of the harbour have by now exhausted the funds for the ordinary and extraordinary maintenance work, including the ecological ones namely for lagoon maintenance, reclamation and restoration of the vast lagoon areas, and also land for settlement and receptive purposes. So therefore also from this point of view it is necessary to change the strategy that has been followed in the past few years and to understand that the funds destined for maintenance and the morphological reorganisation work of the lagoon habitat are of the utmost importance for Venice.⁴⁵¹

If Venice is a triumph of an *anti*-natural dissonance over natural harmony, the only way for it to survive as the world changes is to *sustain* that dissonance. In Cacciari's view, this meant that the Venetian archipelago had to stop thinking of itself in mythological, isolated terms and recognise that it is a part of a larger, metropolitan archipelago.

⁴⁵¹ Massimo Cacciari: 'Conclusions of Massimo Cacciari', published on website *Venice and its Lagoons: World Heritage, a Dialogue Between Cultures, What Future?*, [<http://www.venicethefuture.com/schede/uk/357?aliusid=357#>] Cacciari's analysis is supported by an OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) territorial review of Venice and its environs: OECD: *Territorial Reviews: Venice, Italy*, 2010; p. 104.



From the Riva Cà di Dio, looking west towards Piazza San Marco during *acqua alta*.
[http://cigno.ve.ismar.cnr.it/static/mostra/img/acqua_alta.jpg]

A striking juxtaposition of (a contributing) cause and effect:



[<http://ecovenezia.files.wordpress.com/2012/11/grande-nave-acqua-alta2.jpg>]



[<http://www.esseresostenibili.it/wp-content/uploads/acqua-alta.png>]

Towards a Venetian 'Metropelago'

Cacciari argues that there is no such thing as a 'city', but that there are instead 'different and distinct forms of urban life'⁴⁵² which are, themselves, 'perennial experiment[s] for giving shape to contradiction'.⁴⁵³ Upon becoming mayor in 1993, Cacciari said that it was time, in Venice, for the 'metropolitan city'—a regeneration and reorganisation of Venice in order to sustain it as a viable city in the twenty-first century. At first this overture seems surprising in view of Cacciari's criticism of the metropolis and bourgeois *Vergeistigung*. However, we must keep in mind that Cacciari's critique of the metropolis at the turn of the twentieth century was retrospective; by the end of that century, the metropolis was a firmly-entrenched material-semiotic reality that was beginning to transform into what Cacciari identifies as 'post-metropolitan territories'. Thus, his call in the late 1990s for a *metropolitan* Venice should not be juxtaposed with a nineteenth century metropolis or a pre-industrial *Gemeinschaft*. His attempts to keep Venice a sustainable, viable urban centre must be considered within—and against—a wider trend of *post-metropolitan* transformation. To Cacciari, post-metropolitan territory 'is the negation of every possibility of place' brought about by the continued growth of the 'metropolis of the abstract intellect, dominated only by the "ends" of production and the exchange of goods'.⁴⁵⁴ As a result of this growth,

the city is everywhere, *ergo*, there is no more city. We no longer live in cities but in territories (to use a bad etymology! territory from *terreo*, to be fearful, to feel fear). The possibility of setting boundaries for the city seems inconceivable today, or rather it is reduced to a technical-administrative matter. We call this 'area' a city entirely by chance. Its boundaries are nothing but mere artifice. The post-metropolitan space is a geography of events, a practical implementation of 'connections' which cross hybrid landscapes. The "limit" of post-metropolitan space is not established by anything other than the "boundary" to which the communications network is attached; as the network gradually thins out, we can speak of 'exiting' the post-metropolis, but it is clear that it is a *sui generis* 'boundary': it exists only to be overcome. It is in perennial crisis.⁴⁵⁵

Thus, from Cacciari's perspective the attempt to separate Venice from Mestre in a 1994 referendum could also be understood as a fully post-metropolitan stratagem—at least from a

⁴⁵² Massimo Cacciari: *La Città*, (Villa Verucchio: Pazzini Stampatore Editore, 2009); p. 7.

⁴⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁴⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁴⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

Mestrian point of view. As a geography of events, it is impossible to determine where one city starts and another ends except in superficial political terms: this side of the railway line is Mestre, that side of the line is Marghera. In a post-metropolitan territory, the fact that one dwells physically in Venice, Mestre, Marghera, or smaller towns like Gazzera, Carpendo, or Favaro Veneto is much less important than it used to be: one need not live where one works, have one's family there, or any historical association with these entities. One need not identify with the place one lives; one lives where one does because it is affordable enough and near enough to where one works. Therefore, no matter what their administrative address is the, people living within the 'territory' in and around Venice—which is, itself, part of the larger Venice-Padova-Treviso 'metropolitan area'—are so similar that their interests and their fates are almost entirely shared and practically equivalent (which is to say heterogeneously *equi-valent*). Thus, to divide them into discrete, monovalent municipalities competing for funds, businesses, and so forth transforms a relatively common, shared fate into an adversarial one—like the assembly of the European Union or the United States, but in reverse. Further, to cope with the effects of post-metropolitan sprawl by struggling to isolate one's community from the rest is misguided in Cacciari's view because 'the development of the city from metropolis to territory' Cacciari says, 'is not programmable':

this is the drama of all architects and town planners. The difficulty is not contingent upon their incompetence or on the political will of administrators, it hinges on the impossibility of programming. Not least because it goes beyond every administrative boundary; administrative boundaries are totally fictitious, artificial, but they continue to exist, and that makes serious programming even more impossible because in no way is it possible to know-calculate where, for example, the boundaries of Florence end and where Scandicci begins.⁴⁵⁶

Thus, as discussed above, it is Cacciari's view that even Venice's great aqueous boundary could not insulate it from the post-metropolitan praxis going on across the lagoon, the rising levels of the Adriatic notwithstanding. From Cacciari's point of view, any attempt to isolate an urban centre from the archipelago around it—to ignore the material networks of people, places, and things of

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 52.

which it is a part—is a ‘malicious utopia’⁴⁵⁷ because it leads not to resolution but to aporias and lacunae which are very difficult to cope with in practice.

Noblesse Oblige

Cacciari’s attitude put him at odds with conservationist groups (some of the largest and most influential of which are Anglo-Saxon) dedicated to ‘saving’ Venice and its patrimony. Whereas some MOSE advocates felt that the flood barriers would allow life in Venice to continue *mutatis mutandi* as it always had, conservationist groups offered their support to MOSE as part of a larger movement to ‘save’ Venice from its mythical and environmental ‘peril’ by conserving it as a cultural heirloom, like the many works of Venetian art they and their organisations had been conserving since 1966. The history of conservation in Venice is as old as *acqua alta* itself, although awareness of the precarity of Venice’s cultural patrimony did not become widespread until 1966. What ‘conservation’ *means*, however, is contextually relative.⁴⁵⁸ For example, the conservation of Venice became a foreign preoccupation during the nineteenth century as a reaction to the development, transformation, and modernisation sweeping across Europe as a result of bourgeois capitalism—to the emergence of the bourgeois metropolis discussed in the previous chapter. Conservation therefore became a process of sustaining Venice *as it then was*—decayed but not dilapidated—rather than of restoring its buildings to their original, pristine states or replacing them with new, modern buildings.

Not surprisingly, Cacciari’s approach to Venice’s future frequently clashed with that of Anna Somers Cocks, former chairman of the Venice in Peril Fund, who stated in 2004 that ‘the Venice we’ve got is the Venice we want’.⁴⁵⁹ To Cacciari, no city is a static entity that can be frozen in time. Though he is a steadfast proponent of conservation and restoration, he is a disenchanted

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁸ As Standish notes,

Before the fall of the Venetian Republic, Venetians typically built and remade their city through demolition, rebuilding and intervention to curb nature’s impact and to develop. The ancient Venetians believed they had achieved a privileged state of development and transformation was considered more important than conservation.

[Op. cit. Standish, p. 101].

⁴⁵⁹ Geraldine Bedell: ‘That Sinking Feeling’, *The Observer* (12 December 2004), [<http://www.theguardian.com/travel/2004/dec/12/venice.italy.theobserver>].

proponent. Cacciari considers conservation to be a deliberate form of praxis that determines what is remembered, rather than any comprehensive form of universal salvation. Of any conservation project, he argues that one must ask

...what is the purpose of this conservation? Does it aim to remember everything? But to remember everything means to forget. I can conserve everything but I certainly cannot remember everything for a fundamental reason of logical origin: because memory is intention.... But this is an antinomy: our era, that wants to remember everything, is destroying everything. In this sense oblivion is a gigantic creative force, because it permits memory to have a purpose.⁴⁶⁰

As Standish suggests, the fear of near-term environmental oblivion for Venice as a result of climate change 'permitted' patrimonial conservation groups to transform themselves from small charities of elite artisanal scope into zealous environmental organisations whose purpose was to protect Venice from oblivion in the same way that they conserved an antique sculpture. In Cacciari's view, this attitude was counterproductive because it was destructive. Indeed, we saw in an earlier chapter, Cacciari views all conservation, whatever its scale, as a form of *transformation*:

It is our memory that reproduces, but this reproduction is never a static imitation, it is an imaginative, transformative reproduction, and thus the very [attempt at] conservation should be understood as a continuous process of metaphorisation [*metaforizzazione*]. We cannot say anything without transforming inherited language before falling in one way or another into a kind of fetishism for the work. We can utter nothing without transforming the uttered.⁴⁶¹

From his perspective, to comprehensively 'conserve' Venice (or its *memory*) once and for all was utopian, eschatological taxidermy: an attempt to kill a living city before it died in order to preserve its memory.

One such effort took place in London in the spring of 2006, when a debate organised by the Venice in Peril Fund was held at the Royal Geographic Society. Timed to coincide with a suspension and review of the MOSE project ordered by the European Union on alleged violations of EU environmental regulations, the motion to be debated was 'enough money has been spent saving Venice'. One of the speakers for the motion was the British economist John Kay, who

⁴⁶⁰ Massimo Cacciari: 'Conservazione e memoria' in *ANAFKH* (1/1993); p. 22-25.

⁴⁶¹ Massimo Cacciari: 'Le metamorfosi dell'autenticità' *ANAFKH* (2/1993); p. 13.

argued that the only way to 'save' Venice meant recognising that Venice was no longer a 'city' in any colloquial sense of the word:

Venice is already a theme park. As a centre of business, politics and culture, it died centuries ago and only the flow of visitors brought it back to life. Today, most people in the city are tourists and most people who work there have come for the day to service the needs of tourists. No one goes to Venice to have their hair cut or buy their groceries. The economics of the city are the economics of Yosemite and Disneyland, not the economics of Bologna or Los Angeles.⁴⁶²

True as this statement may be for tourists, the 60,000 native Venetians do indeed get their hair cut and buy their groceries in Venice on any given day. Many tourists also patronise these shops seeking trendy, Italian hairdos or because they cannot afford to eat every meal in overpriced tourist restaurants. Nevertheless, Kay argued that

If Venice were owned by the Disney Corporation, the city would not be in peril. Venice is threatened by crumbling infrastructure and rising sea levels and by inexorable growth in the number of visitors. With effective management, one problem solves the other. Gates that let the tourists in pay for gates that keep the water out.⁴⁶³

Actually, the question of charging 'admission' to Venice had been on Cacciari's mind for many years, and on that of the Venice city council for many more.⁴⁶⁴ He was fully aware of the problems posed by increasing numbers of tourists and the wear and tear they inflict upon Venice's ancient and fragile infrastructure. But to Cacciari, neither global warming nor tourism—or for that matter a city's 'character'—are abstract, monolithic entities for which a solution can only be intellectually derived. They are instead questions of reflexive, material-semiotic praxis:

Tourism is the biggest industry in the world. In the past, the cities had factories; today we have hotels and restaurants. These are two different industries. What, then, is the problem? The problem is how to manage things so that these industries coexist with the maintenance and protection of cities, that the environment is not spoiled, that cities are not razed or destroyed, but transformed and inhabited as far as is possible. Because it is clear that in a city that attracts many tourists, property prices rise, the cost of living increases

⁴⁶² John Kay: 'The Magic Kingdom could save Venice from destruction' *The Financial Times* (13 June 2006).

⁴⁶³ *Ibid.* He therefore suggested that,

If tourists paid 50 euros (about £38), which is similar to the price of entry to Disneyland, as an admission fee to Venice, the proceeds would fund the barrier needed to protect it from the sea, finance urgently needed conservation, and build better facilities to meet the needs of tourists while preserving the character of the city.

[John Kay: 'Welcome to Venice, the theme park', *The Times* (1 March, 2008)].

⁴⁶⁴ Cf. Luciano Ferraro: 'Mille lire di tassa per visitare Venezia', *Corriere della Sera* (25 agosto 1999).

and, therefore, it is difficult for working class people to continue living there. But we are talking about pragmatic issues. It is necessary to control and regulate tourism by carrying out restoration and by developing other non-tourism related activities. This means having access to the necessary financial resources and having adequate plans to protect the urban landscape, architectural protection, urban protection... It is necessary to maintain our cities and, at the same time, to transform them. This means historic buildings being adapted for new uses, and not just as hotels. It's about being thoughtful and intelligent. But it is absurd to demonise tourism. It is not the tourists who are destroying our cities; perhaps it is we who fail to produce architectural, development or mobility plans that can cope with these flows. Just as before cities had to be prepared for large industry, now they have to adapt and respond to these influxes. ... what really damages our cities is not tourism, but bad tourism policies.⁴⁶⁵

Kay did not entirely disagree: Venice was also in danger from Italian politicians like Cacciari who, as he wrote in 2008, '...care about re-election, oppose the barrier in favour of something better and less costly, without being specific about what that is'.⁴⁶⁶

In reality, Cacciari and his allies⁴⁶⁷ had been quite specific about possible alternatives to MOSE, and their proposals had been available to the public—including online at the *Comune di Venezia's* website⁴⁶⁸—for years. While Kay and others were suggesting in London that Venice could only survive if it were run by Mickey Mouse himself rather than the *Topolini*⁴⁶⁹ outfits currently running the city and the country, Cacciari travelled to Rome to present those very alternatives and the evidence justifying them to Prime Minister Romano Prodi and his government as part of the aforementioned EU-mandated review of MOSE. Briefly, Cacciari argued that those in favour of MOSE had never provided any evidence that the system would work, and that experts

⁴⁶⁵ Op. cit. Casals, 'Entrevista amb Massimo Cacciari...'

⁴⁶⁶ As he explained,

The problems of Venice are not problems of technology or finance, but problems of politics, organisation and management. A sad series of accidents has placed so many of the jewels of western European culture and civilisation in the hands of western Europe's most dysfunctional political system. [...] Europe's man-made wonders belong not just to the people who live near them, but to the inheritors of European civilisation. Europe as a whole has both rights of access and responsibilities of management. Disney is not the best answer: but anything would be better than the squabbles, corruption and delays of Italian politics.

[Op. cit. Kay, 'Welcome to Venice...']

⁴⁶⁷ Cf. Cesare De Piccoli: Venezia Portualità e riequilibrio lagunare acque alte e portualità un nuovo equilibrio possibile [http://www2.comune.venezia.it/mose-doc-prg/documenti/mose/4_VEPERLA.pdf]

⁴⁶⁸ The information was also reported in the media. Cf. e.g. Alberto Vitucci: 'MoSE: Contro la ragione vince la lobby del cemento', *La Nuova di Venezia e Mestre* (23 novembre 2006). Today, more than twenty years of information can be found on the *Comune* website's MOSE page: <http://www2.comune.venezia.it/mose-doc-prg/>

⁴⁶⁹ 'little mice'. *Topolino* is the Italian name for Mickey Mouse.

in hydrodynamic engineering argued that MOSE would do more damage than it would prevent.⁴⁷⁰

Despite this presentation, Cacciari's words landed on deaf ears.

In 2008, following the publication of Kay's *Times* article 'Welcome to Venice, the theme park',⁴⁷¹ the Venetian Institute of Sciences, Letters, and Arts (*Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere, ed Arti*) awarded Kay the institute's journalism prize, praising it for its polemical approach to the city's reality, claiming that 'that the alarm and provocation raised by the article will stimulate valuable reactions and encouragement in the discussion on the preservation of Venice'.⁴⁷² Cacciari was dumbfounded, and his office released the following statement:

I find it simply "comical" that a cultural institution that rebuilds in the name of Venice, that gives life to cultural initiatives of great depth and that counts among its members some of the most prestigious cultural and scientific figures of our city and our Country, should award a journalist for a work which, lacking any literary merit whatsoever, courts the worst clichés, the most kitsch images of Venice and its future....⁴⁷³

Somers Cocks, an ally of Kay's—and also a winner of the *Istituto's* journalism prize⁴⁷⁴—accused Cacciari of deliberately misunderstanding Kay's polemic. For Somers Cocks as for Kay, Cacciari's 'deliberate misunderstanding' was due to his role as a politician. For example, following the *acqua alta* in 2008, Somers Cocks wrote that

The mayor of the city, Massimo Cacciari, who has always opposed the barriers, makes political capital out of the fact that the city's ordinary budget has been drastically cut to finance their construction and he encourages a popular belief in Venice and beyond that they are not necessary. He even made the illogical remark after this latest flood that they were a waste of money since it was 23 years since the waters had risen so high. The estimated cost of the barriers is €4.272 billion. To date, €2.443 billion has been voted, of which €1.963 billion has been spent; 46% of the work is complete.⁴⁷⁵

⁴⁷⁰ The content of Cacciari's presentation can be found in EN01.

⁴⁷¹ cited above; the article was an edited and expanded version of the 2006 *Financial Times* article, also cited.

⁴⁷² Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere, ed Arti: 'Newsletter 13', (ottobre 2008).

⁴⁷³ Comune di Venezia: 'Premio a John Kay, una dichiarazione del sindaco Cacciari', (28 settembre 2008). [<http://www.comune.venezia.it/flex/cm/pages/ServeBLOB.php/L/IT/IDPagina/20159/UT/>].

⁴⁷⁴ In 2013, for her article 'The Coming Death of Venice?' published in the *New York Review of Books*.

⁴⁷⁵ Anna Somers Cocks: 'Chairman's Message: What prospects for Venice at a time of financial crisis?' *Venice in Peril Newsletter* (Winter, 2008/9).

For Somers Cocks, not only was Cacciari a feckless politician, he was a feckless politician with a destructive, cynical despair about the fate of his city⁴⁷⁶ who was ideologically predisposed against all private sector intervention. As reported in the *Guardian* in 2004,

[f]or Anna Somers Cocks, though, much of the opposition - whether it takes the form of environmental or engineering objections - is rooted in ideology: “an objection to private companies, a sense that there is a capitalist plot”⁴⁷⁷.

If Cacciari was cast as just another left-wing Italian cynic, then Somers Cocks and organisations like Venice in Peril cast themselves as the romantic heroes who understood that while Venice ‘had lived, and not... lived in vain’, its ‘mind [had lost] its force, [and its] blood its fire’⁴⁷⁸. Living, contemporary Venice must ‘sink’, beneath the waves ‘like seaweed into whence she rose’⁴⁷⁹ in order to rise again as a wholly conserved ‘memory of the city that was the triumph of art’⁴⁸⁰. From her perspective, that climate change posed a certain, immediate and mortal threat to Venice and its treasures should have been obvious to any observer uncompromised by political and/or ideological commitments. It should have been equally clear to any uncompromised observer that ‘Venice is not just another city, it is the “fairy city of the heart”’⁴⁸¹. For Somers Cocks, what is threatened by global warming is not ‘ordinary’ Venice, but the enchanted ‘fairy city of the heart’. In Cacciari’s view, by contrast, this enchanted entity exists only in the minds of outsiders or those who rely on

⁴⁷⁶ In an interview with the ‘Bookslut’ blog, Somers Cocks stated that

There is indeed a long history outside Venice, dating back to Lord Byron, of getting a romantic frisson out of the thought that so much beauty might die. But Italians are less romantics than cynics and I have often heard them say that the city has been so ruined by tourism that no one discriminating would want to have anything to do with it now and the Venetians are so feeble and few that there is no hope. That is perhaps an even more destructive attitude. The previous mayor of Venice, the university philosopher Massimo Cacciari, thought like that.

Her fundamental inaccuracy regarding Cacciari’s attitude towards Venice should be abundantly clear to anyone reading this thesis.

[Source: Vladislav Davidzon: ‘An Interview with Anna Somers Cocks’ *BookSlut* (November 2013) http://www.bookslut.com/features/2013_11_020398.php].

⁴⁷⁷ *op. cit.* Bedell.

⁴⁷⁸ Lord Byron (George Gordon Byron/Noel): *Childe Harold’s Progress*, (CXXXVII, 1225), ed. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1913); p.173.

⁴⁷⁹ *ibid.*, (XIII, 113), p. 132.

⁴⁸⁰ Tony Tanner: *Venice Desired* (Cambridge, MA; Harvard University Press, 1992); p. 31.

⁴⁸¹ *Op. cit.* Byron, (XVIII, 155), p. 134.

the city for pleasure rather than welfare.⁴⁸² Indeed, when defining Venice as the ‘fairy city of the heart’, Byron was referring to the *enchanted image* he had of Venice *before ever experiencing it in person*.

Therefore, in her arguments for ‘saving’ Venice, Somers Cocks was not really arguing for salvation; she was, instead, arguing for the ‘preservation’ or ‘conservation’ of an enchanted artefact.⁴⁸³ Thus, what needed to be conserved against the effects of climate change was what the eighteenth century British aristocrat Hester Lynch Piozzi described in 1789 as ‘[t]he general effect produced by such architecture, such painting, such pillars; illuminated as I saw them last night by the moon at full, rising out of the sea, produced an effect like enchantment’.⁴⁸⁴ In Somers Cocks’s view, to interfere with this general effect is to interfere with Venice’s ability to enchant. For example, she reprimanded Cacciari in 2009 for agreeing to a sponsorship deal with the Coca-Cola Corporation⁴⁸⁵ (among others) in order fund restoration projects within the city by placing advertising on the construction shrouds of the buildings being restored. As reported in the *Italian Insider* newspaper, Somers Cocks ‘expressed outrage at the mayor’s fund-raising scheme. “I think it’s an absolutely appalling decision. Cacciari is not worthy of being mayor of this incredibly beautiful city”’.⁴⁸⁶

Cacciari however, argues that Venetian enchantment—to the extent it exists at all—is something that is *produced* rather than an *a priori* state of being. Because Venice is entirely artificial, whatever sense of enchantment it may arouse in the hearts and minds of visitors is a result of the reflexive, material-semiotic *praxis* by material Venetians (or the material people living and working in the city). Cacciari therefore has no patience for the views of those like Somers Cocks who advocate raising as much money from as many patrons as possible to restore and maintain the

⁴⁸² Somers Cocks, for example, has family ties to Venice and has lived there herself. While her love for the city is not in doubt, it does not seem that she has ever had to *depend* on it for her own material welfare.

⁴⁸³ This is perhaps not surprising, as Somers Cocks is highly regarded in the art world as a former curator of the Victoria and Albert museum in London, founder of *The Art Newspaper*, and Governor of the Courtauld Institute of Art at the University of London, among other things.

⁴⁸⁴ Hester Lynch Piozzi: *Observations and Reflections made in the course of a Journey through France, Italy, and Germany*, Vol. I. (London: A. Strahan & T. Cadell, 1789); p. 151.

⁴⁸⁵ Cf. Phoebe Natanson: ‘Coca-Cola takes over Venice’ *ABC News*, [<http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/headlines/2009/02/coca-cola-takes/>].

⁴⁸⁶ Philip Willan: ‘Coca-Cola deal enrages Venice’s British champions’, *Italian Insider*, 24 February 2009.

city's architectural patrimony, and who then criticise any attempts by the city itself to raise money to those very same ends:

The idea that such objectives can be guaranteed free from patronage is simply unrealistic or motivated by pure bad faith. The “beautiful souls” who protest such strategies, which have already been adopted in every place and in every city in the world, should at least have the manners to suggest a few alternatives or, better still, cough up for the mandatory needs of their city.⁴⁸⁷

When knowledgeable people like Somers Cocks criticise the efforts of Venetians to manage their own city it confirms to Cacciari that they can only be concerned with their own utopian Venetian ‘fairy city of the mind’ rather than the Venice of the real world. As discussed earlier in this thesis, it is clear from Cacciari’s scholarly work on aesthetics on architecture that he does *not* ‘like’ such advertising by Coca Cola, or think such sponsorship is ‘desirable’ in any abstract sense. Nevertheless, Cacciari has stated matter-of-factly that,

[t]oday raising sponsorships is an essential financing strategy for the safeguarding of our historic and artistic heritage and absolutely in line with the policy of the Italian Ministry for Culture. All agreements have been signed with the approval of the Italian Monuments and Fine Arts Office and the funds have been used for the safeguarding and conservation of the City with the highest transparency.⁴⁸⁸

Thus, these ads were not, as Somers Cocks argued, a ‘slap in the face of the visitor, who may be seeing Venice for the one and only time in his life and will [therefore] be bitterly disappointed’.⁴⁸⁹ On the contrary, this slap wakes up visitors of a Byronic predisposition to the reality that that there is no enchanted ‘fairy city of the mind’: the *real* Venice is imperfect, requires significant maintenance in order to present itself to the public, and is not so enchanted with itself that it refuses to accept financial help when necessary.⁴⁹⁰

⁴⁸⁷ Comune di Venezia: ‘Partnership di Coca-Cola, una dichiarazione del sindaco’, [<http://www.comune.venezia.it/flex/cm/pages/ServeBLOB.php/L/IT/IDPagina/24519>]. A more diplomatically worded English translation can be found in the translation of this press release, cited in the previous footnote.

⁴⁸⁸ Comune di Venezia: ‘Partnership agreement between City of Venice and Coca Cola declaration and interview (in Italian) with Mayor Cacciari’ [<http://www.comune.venezia.it/flex/cm/pages/ServeBLOB.php/L/IT/IDPagina/24537>].

⁴⁸⁹ Op. cit. *Venice in Peril Newsletter*.

⁴⁹⁰ This image of a sudden disabuse of intellectual enchantment resulting from being ‘slapped’ by material reality reminds one of the story about John Ruskin, another great British lover of Venice, who apparently ‘rejected’ his wife on their wedding night upon discovering the phenotypic realities of the living female body.

While Somers Cocks, Kay, and Cacciari share much in their criticisms of Italian and Venetian politics, and their concerns for its cultural patrimony and its environment (as well as that of the planet), Kay and Somers Cocks can remain enchanted activists supporting an enchanted Venice because they are not in any position to make decisions on behalf of the city and its residents. Their political relationship with the city is always, therefore, at arm's length: as outsiders they can only speak in abstract, counter-hegemonic terms about how Venice belongs as much to outsiders as it does to Venetians themselves: as a jewel of 'humanity' Venice must be protected by humanity, especially because they consider that Venetians and national politicians are incapable of doing it themselves. Indeed, Somers Cocks suggested in 2014 that,

it would not be a sign of weakness on the part of the Italian government if it entrusted the task to an EU organization on the model of CERN; rather, it would prove that it had recognized the extreme gravity of the Venice problem and the importance to the whole world of solutions that are yet to be discovered.⁴⁹¹

Though one can certainly agree that the Italian and Venetian governments are in crisis, Cacciari has been a tireless and consistent advocate for keeping Venice alive by coping disenchantedly with reality as it presented itself. To him *acqua alta* is an annoyance that can be managed and whose damage could be mitigated on a day-to-day basis with proper funding. As described above, Cacciari argued that MOSE was unnecessary and a waste of money because there was no guarantee it would work, it exacerbated damage to the already fragile lagoon, and cost a tremendous amount of money for something that would only be temporary fix. His opposition to MOSE was not politically compromised: it was based on material scientific and budgetary evidence. If MOSE was unable to solve Venice's *acqua alta* problems, the city would, ironically, be left high and dry: with an infrastructure that had been underprotected due to the years of funding MOSE, any subsequent failure by MOSE to keep the city safe would put the city in real peril because there would be no protection and no money in the coffers to construct any. Based on this evidence, he concluded that neither MOSE nor the *Consorzio* is the *katechon* that will prevent the

⁴⁹¹ Anna Somers Cocks: 'Venice: Devious and Destructive', *The New York Review of Books* (25 September 2014).

arrival of end times for Venice; rather, keeping the Anti-Venice at bay—as it were—requires day-to-day maintenance, not epic and expensive feats of hubristic engineering. The city's resources could therefore be used more efficiently and more effectively by scrapping MOSE and diverting its funds to the smaller, proximate programmes suggested by scientists like Luigi D'Alpaos (see FN569) and undertaken by INSULA (see FN568). Cacciari's arguments were not ideological, nor did they deny that Venice faces unique existential challenges. In Cacciari's view, to surrender to these challenges in the ways advocated by Kay or Somers Cocks would be to sign an execution order for Venice in an act of woebegone urban taxidermy, replacing a living city with an enchanted simulacrum based on nostalgia (and the desire for reaping gondola-loads of tourist Euros) rather than reality. Historically speaking, his view was not at all radical: it was, in fact, a Venetian tradition.⁴⁹²

Cacciari felt that particular chronologies had to be 'put to death' in order for people to begin new ways of life. For Venice, to transform itself, phoenix-like into a metropolitan, Second Republic Venice, it was time for First Republic Venice to end.⁴⁹³ As mayor, Cacciari was ready to deliver the *coup de grâce* by beginning a metropolitan Venice.

There is, thus, a foundational distinction between Cacciari's understanding of Venice and that of conservationists like Kay and Somers Cocks. As far as he is concerned, they evangelise in support of an enchanted, psychosemiotic myth of Venice, whereas he counters with a reflexive and disenchanted material-semiotic account of Venetian reality. Somers Cocks holds that Cacciari is

⁴⁹² For example, the chronology of the *Serenissima Repubblica de Venessia—The Most Serene Republic of Venice*—which began in 697 when Paolo Lucio Anafesto was elected as governor of the entire Venetian lagoon, and reached its imperial height during the Renaissance, was ended on 12 May, 1797 when Napoleon conquered the city and forced Doge Ludovico Manin to abdicate. By the 1990s, the passage of time and the evolution of geopolitical and economic realities since the establishment of the ('First') Italian Republic's chronology in 1948 had caused Venice and its political organisation to wear a bit thin. The consequences of the *tangentopoli* ('bribesville') scandal and the subsequent *mani pulite* ('clean hands') investigation into institutionalised government corruption had dragged it to its deathbed. It was therefore in need of a regenerative transformation and reinvigoration.

⁴⁹³ The metaphor is deliberate. As mentioned in an earlier chapter, Venice's *La Fenice* ('The Phoenix') opera house was destroyed by fire in 1996 (and not for the first time; hence the name). Although the cause was determined to be arson, local magistrate Felice Casson indicted Cacciari—who, as mayor, was also president of the *Fenice* board of directors—on charges of criminal negligence. In 2005, Casson would run for mayor on the centre-left, splitting apart the alliance Cacciari had first assembled in 1993, making it very likely that the *Lega* or *Forza Italia* would win the election. Cacciari claims that this was his motivation to stand at the last minute; one wonders, however, if Cacciari's counterinsurgency was entirely political.

‘cynical’ because he is a politician and a melodramatically disconsolate metaphysicist. But as I have explained across the preceding chapters, reflexive and material-semiotic—evidence-based—disenchantment is not the same thing as cynicism, for cynicism is based on the same reductionist, chiefly semiotic foundations necessary for the assembly of narratives of enchantment—a foundation Cacciari has long rejected. A cynic would claim that in these circumstances, there is no point trying to affect alternative praxis because any attempt will inevitably fail. Cacciari’s scholarly and political records indicate quite clearly that he is no cynic; on the contrary, he exercises his agency, enlists allies, and gets involved *because* of his disenchantment. Cacciari’s reflexive methodological approach to Venice’s aporias and its foundational *lacuna* is therefore identical to his approach to aporias and lacunae in philosophy and human knowledge because *they are identical*: how one understands Venice is relative to how one understands the world and what it means to be a human being in that world. Because in his view, to live in the world means to cope with *dissoi logoi*—with irreducible plurality—he *engages* with them in disenchantment.

Cacciari’s efforts to keep Venice united and to oppose MOSE were entirely consistent with his assertion that to assemble a ‘metropolitan city’ was to make possible a multi-faceted, polyvalent foundation from which *contemporary* Venice could stay afloat. By *not* isolating itself as a theme park, Venice could begin to engage with the *contemporary*, post-metropolitan world. Once again, no matter what one *thought* or how one *felt* about post-metropolitan reality, Cacciari understood that

In a post-metropolitan territory we need the *architecturae scientia* that the ancients spoke about: the capacity to construct buildings suitable for use, places which correspond to the demands and problems of their time. Politicians and architects must therefore attempt to overcome monofunctionality and think about buildings that are really polyvalent. ...they must be polyfunctional, they must cater to many uses, which can be utilised by different people for different purposes (the young, the old, somebody who does one job, somebody who does another), which would make the building more coherent with the contemporary form of life.⁴⁹⁴

And so must it continue to adjust and transform itself argues Cacciari, if it is to remain a viable city—a dynamic, living artefact rather than static, heavily lacquered artifice. By no means does the

⁴⁹⁴ Op. cit. *La Città*, p. 60.

sort of disenchanting adaptation, transformation, and adjustment advocated by Cacciari require the abandonment or annihilation of its many histories. Quite the contrary, it is to accept them as part of Venice's living historical praxis as a project, as an ongoing, material-semiotic work-in-progress which is itself part of an ever-larger foundation upon which to build for the future. Cacciari understands such praxis as a polyvalent attempt to make Venice capable of sustaining itself through cooperative interdependence with Mestre and the wider metropolitan area which includes Padova and Treviso. This interdependence would involve embracing the digital economy, managing the tourist industry, and building affordable housing so people can come back to living in the lagoon itself—something, as Standish points out, conservationists have thus far made impossible. It also involves engaging with the irreducibly plural scientific realities with which it is faced in order to cope with them. For these reasons Venice is, as the engineer Paul Linden, puts it 'a moving target':

The city is sinking because of overuse of groundwater and because rerouting of rivers that once carried sediment has caused the Lagoon to deepen. Dredging to allow the passage of cruise liners stirs up sediment polluted by industry. The local ecosystems are under threat and this will be exacerbated if rising sea levels increase the salinity of the Lagoon. There is a growing recognition that the biology, physics and chemistry of the area are interconnected and that environmental sustainability can only be a 'whole-Lagoon' concept.⁴⁹⁵

Additionally, thanks to the city's experiences with MOSE and the professional environmental and engineering interest in Venice and its lagoon, Cacciari would like to see the city transform itself into a laboratory for hydrological and global warming research. Cacciari's disenchanting idea of Venice's future is neither abstract ideology nor a utopian vision of the future; it is based on compelling empirical evidence of what is actually possible. Indeed, Linden provides support for Cacciari's view:

Venice and its Lagoon illustrate the complexity of the sustainability issue and the trade-off between economic development and safeguarding the environment: any management plan first has to start with the question of what we are trying to sustain.... Cities worldwide are strengthening their preparations against sea flooding. Each must develop its own adaptation strategy but in many ways Venice can be regarded as a "laboratory" for

⁴⁹⁵ Paul Linden: *Sustaining flood-prone Venice* [<http://www.cam.ac.uk/research/features/sustaining-flood-prone-venice>].

activities aimed at coping with climate change and sea level rise. Venice could lead the way in connecting interdisciplinary science with practical use.⁴⁹⁶

Cacciari is therefore not alone in recognising Venice as a living, material work-in-progress rather than a city that is dying or already dead. Serious though the environmental and infrastructural threats to Venice are, it is not actually ‘in peril’: it is *threatened*—and in ways distinct to elsewhere in the world—but so has it always been. History has shown that it can transform itself to cope with the threats it faces. As mayor, Cacciari was trying to fight the nihilistic equivalence of the bourgeois metropolis—the once and final commodification and monetisation of Venice as a theme park. In his view, to ‘save Venice’ was to keep it struggling—in fighting form—as a counter-punch to external bourgeois hegemony.

EPILOGUE

Despite Cacciari’s 2006 presentation in Rome, the Prodi government decided to resume the MOSE works. On 29 June 2013, as the project was reaching its final stages, Giovanni Mazzacurati, the president of the *Conorzio* abruptly tendered his resignation. Two weeks later, more than 500 officers of the Finance Police conducted a second round of raids across Italy in relation to the investigation of bid rigging in relation to the MOSE project. In an interview the following morning, Cacciari explained that he was not particularly surprised to hear of the arrests because the lack of oversight in the Italian political system fosters this kind of corruption:

it was clear that something was going to happen sooner or later. This investigation shows evidence of an original sin that few have denounced over the years. The mother, and indeed the father of all the problems: the situation of absolute monopoly in which the *Conorzio* operated for thirty years.

And politics indulged it?

Well...have we lost our memory? The few critical voices for the truth always went unheard. It just so happens that among the critics was yours truly, who was at the time mayor of the city the MOSE works concerned.

Responsibility for this scandal, Cacciari continued, could not therefore be laid squarely at the feet of individual malefactors like Mazzacurati because individuals rely on opportunity and networks of

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid.

actors to support them in their malefaction. Indeed, Cacciari argues that the lack of institutional oversight that provided leeway for just this kind of corruption was formalised in parts of the 1984 'Special Law for Venice', which allocates extra national funds to Venice to defray the local costs of its maintenance.

Additionally, he argues that hegemonic discourses of urgency contributed to the creation of this 'criminogenic' *trading zone*: 'where works are undertaken in states of emergency', such as the aftermath of the *acqua alta* of 1966, and that described by Venice in Peril in support of MOSE, there can be no transparency, there can be no oversight.⁴⁹⁷

In response to this scandal, Cacciari called for the assembly of a general alliance across local and national government. On the one hand Prime Minister Renzi should intervene, Cacciari argued, by reviewing 'the entire public works sector and writ[ing] simple codified laws that allow things to be done quickly and well. Otherwise we'll keep finding ourselves in the situation we're currently in'.⁴⁹⁸ On the other hand, Venetians should not simply assume that Renzi will appear, like a *deus ex Chigi*,⁴⁹⁹ to resolve the problem once and for all. Why this is the case has to do with the aporia at the heart of contemporary Italian society, initially created by the post-*Risorgimento* centralisation of power in Rome. For example, although Renzi provided a magistrate with special powers to combat corruption, and asserting that corrupt politicians should be tried for high treason, Renzi has also stated that the rules and laws governing business are not the problem, only those who break them.⁵⁰⁰ As far as Cacciari is concerned, Renzi is avoiding confrontation with the foundational aporia upon which those very rules were written. In a perfect example of the bourgeois *Aufhebung* that Cacciari wrote about forty years ago, Renzi appears to be taking a road less risky, attempting to renounce the recognition of a foundational catastrophe by plodding through one bite-size crisis at a time.

⁴⁹⁷ Laura Pertici: 'Mose, Cacciari: "Lavori in regime d'emergenza criminogeni per natura"', *La Repubblica* (4 giugno 2014).

⁴⁹⁸ Tommaso Cinquemani: 'Scandalo Mose a Venezia, Cacciari ad Affaritaliani.it: "Ora deve intervenire Renzi"', *Affari Italiani* (4 giugno 2014).

⁴⁹⁹ The Palazzo Chigi in Rome is the residence of the Italian Prime Minister.

⁵⁰⁰ Redazione ANSA: 'Mose: Renzi, corruzione è alto tradimento' (5 giugno 2014).

CONCLUSION

REFLEXIVE AND DISENCHANTED MATERIAL-SEMIOTIC POLITICAL THEORY

Based on the evidence and argument provided in this thesis, I suggest that if Anglophone political theory is to enhance and sustain its relevance to those engaged in political *praxis*, it must be refounded in a way that allows it to move beyond the binary limitations of discourses of abstract reason and the socially weightless, glaringly insufficient primarily semiotic foundations that make them possible. Such a transformative refoundation would open political theory towards the multiple *tertia* achievable within the reflexive, material-semiotic praxis of real, irreducibly plural, human beings. I argue that Cacciari's work provides considerable support for such refoundation because it demystifies the enchanted intellectual commitments upon which this disciplinary isolationism has been justified. Indeed, the ways in which I have sought out, organised, and structured the material in this thesis is as an experimental example of the kind of reflexive, material-semiotic approach political theorists might use to cope with the discipline's foundational aporias.

In response to several historically interrelated crises of foundations in Italy and academic philosophy, Cacciari has sought to expose the inner workings of Western ontology as the calculated expression of historically contingent, hegemonic praxes shrouded strategically in a foundational discourse of universal logic, rationality, and inevitability. Cacciari's work also makes it clear that Anglophone political theory takes for granted the post-Enlightenment concept of the rational, autonomous, individual 'subject'—a concept that has been called into question by decades of rigorous, disenchanted social and natural scientific research. As a result, because it is so out of touch with this research, the *foundational understanding* of politics *and* political actors used in the discipline to justify its isolation is unsuitable for use in the contemporary world. Cacciari has never been isolated in a towering, ivory *paradiso* from whence to 'gossip' about what is and what is not *inferno*. As a consequence, his is the philosophy of a lifelong participant-observer and reflexive critic

of Venetian, Italian, and European politics, and his political activities are those of an academic philosopher actively engaged at the forefront of disciplinary research and debates. Cacciari has always been reflexively critical of ideologically enchanted foundations (dialectical, normative, or otherwise). Therefore, his work can be studied as a specific example of how to engage critically and reflexively with the aporias produced by bourgeois praxis and the crises of intellectual foundations these aporias then provoke. Their consistent commitment to reflexivity can, thus, be understood as a commitment to disenchantment: rather than trying to overcome or 'synthesise' these crises according to a concept of utopia, the members of these movements sought instead to confront specific problems in specific circumstances with reflexive, methodologically disenchanted material-semiotic *praxis* in order to throw them into crisis, study them and then transform them into something else.

Cacciari's experiences have taught him that political praxis outpaces the instantiations of its own ideology. It is therefore a serious mistake to take for granted any ideology, methodology, or political group that originally emerged in response to material-semiotic political circumstances that no longer exist. To do so is to attempt to shoehorn a new world into old dogma. And in his view, old dogmas cannot be taught new tricks. Indeed, he has argued repeatedly that the categories of 'left' and 'right' are no longer relevant to the world in which we currently live. To explain why they are anachronistic, he shows in his work how discourses founded upon the abstract Modern subject—and even the very *praxis* of abstraction itself—are discursive hegemonic praxes which contribute to the maintenance of bourgeois hegemony. Cacciari argues, therefore, that 'the word "left" does not help us anymore, it has been deboned, desemanticised, to continue using it is harmful, it blurs the vision of reality'.⁵⁰¹ This is the case he argues, because those terms date to the aftermath of the French Revolution, during which time they came to represent two sides of a binary political opposition: 'left' became associated with democrats, and the 'right' with monarchists. In Italy, during the first part of the twentieth century, these terms came to represent

⁵⁰¹ 'Massimo Cacciari: La parola "sinistra" non serve più, che la usa è un conservatore' *La Repubblica* (31 luglio 2013).

the binary opposition between democrats and fascists, and later, between democrats and communists

I was taught that a word has meaning within a sentence, not on its own. Left was a word in a Keynesian, democratic-antifascist sentence, that is no longer helpful; there are no more fascists, we are all democrats. If I insist on saying left, I carry around a dichotomy that is steeped in history, I anchor myself to the past. Today, anyone who says they are “of the left” is a perfect conservative, hiding behind simulacra. It is a word that comforts bureaucrats, I know very well why they use it, because they have nothing else up their sleeve. It’s pure inertia.⁵⁰²

This inertia is achieved by the enormous mass of bourgeois praxis. As we know from physics, the greater a body’s mass, the greater its resistance to being accelerated by an external force; the more massive a body, in other words, the less inclined the body is to be moved from its current position. Translated into Gramscian terms, the greater a hegemonic stability, the less likely it is to be transformed by counter-hegemonic challenge. Thus, the extent to which bourgeois discourses succeed in keeping those they dominate enchanted by enlisting their participation with a promise of (eventual) utopia in return for their continued support, the dominated restrain themselves from seeking out *tertia*—from seeking to push the bourgeois mass from its dominant (super)position. So well entrenched is bourgeois capitalism—as discursive ontology and epistemology (*poiēsis*) as well as material-semiotic praxis (*fare*)—in the Anglophone world that Anglophone political theory has become trapped in aporias caused by its inertia. However, radical democrats, realists, agonists, and others within the discipline have been discovering, intellectual mass does not equate to social weight, and disciplinary inertia is difficult to redirect.

As I argued above, this recognition does not, by itself, make a critique radical. No political theory that takes bourgeois foundations for granted can be considered in any way radical because it will contain no self-reflexive, material-semiotic challenge or critical investigation of the *radix*—the root—from which their own understandings of the world sprout. By contrast, the work of Mouffe, Schaap and Warner—as well as the work of Christian Bueger and Trine Villumsen Berling

⁵⁰² Ibid.

inspired by Bruno Latour and Actor-Network Theory,⁵⁰³ and the ethnographic explorations of Mark Bevir and R.A.W. Rhodes⁵⁰⁴—are radical because they are engaging in reflexive critique, throwing their assumptions into crisis and beginning to experiment with *tertia*, beginning to do things *differently* on *different* foundations.

The history of similar crises of foundations in other scholarly disciplines have demonstrated that such radical transformations of ‘monovalent’ or ‘bivalent’ disciplinary momenta into non-binary ‘multivalent’ momenta are possible and have proved themselves beneficial to human knowledge and human experience. I have argued, therefore, that political theorists who find themselves caught within the aporia of mainstream Anglophone political theory, particularly those concerned with disciplinary ‘social weightlessness’, would benefit greatly from critical engagement and experimentation with the vast, interdisciplinary array of tools made available by the Cacciari’s work, tools which I have identified and laid out across this thesis.

To paraphrase Cacciari, political theorists like Galston, Philp, and McNay argue that the work of many—even most—political theorists ‘revolve dizzily around their insurmountable aporia, without succeeding at recognising it’.⁵⁰⁵ They do not succeed in recognising it because the bourgeois aporias are, to use Gramsci’s term, ‘common sense’ to these theorists. As ‘common sense’ they do not see any reason to challenge what Bakhtin might have called the ‘open union’ of bourgeois stability as the foundation of their scholarly praxis. By accepting these foundations as they are, these theorists contribute to its stability; their refusal of reflexivity contributes, therefore, to the aporia. Thus, by developing theories of ‘emancipation’ or ‘liberation’ from domination, power, or inequality, political theorists are actually working to reinforce the aporetic foundations upon which certain hegemonic praxes arise and from which they gain strength. The disenchanted, material-semiotic (self-) reflexivity of Cacciari’s work shows us that, much as we might wish it were otherwise, the cold, disenchanted, material-semiotic reality of irreducibly plural human life in the

⁵⁰³ Cf. Trine Villumsen Berling and Christian Bueger: ‘Practical Reflexivity and Political Science: Strategies for Relating Scholarship and Political Practice’, *PS: Political Science & Politics* (46:1, 2013); pp. 115-119.

⁵⁰⁴ Cf. Mark Bevir and R.A.W. Rhodes: *The State as Cultural Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁵⁰⁵ Massimo Cacciari: *Icone della Legge* (Milano: Adelphi, 2002); pp. 71-72.

world is that no one individual is ever ‘free’—not from other people, from the natural world, from power, from limits, or from themselves. However, because these interconnections are hegemonic and material-semiotic rather than deterministic and purely semiotic, these relations of power can be coped with and transformed in any number of ways—often for the better for those suffering at the hands of others. But these changes merely *transform* specific relationships from one thing to another. Because they are hegemonic these relationships are also precarious. Furthermore, as Schaap, Warner, and many others make clear, these transformations are not merely cognitive, which is why they require *material-semiotic praxis* to maintain them if they are to resist counterhegemonic challenge. Because they require material-semiotic *bricolage* over time as circumstances change, they cannot eliminate, overcome, liberate, or emancipate anybody from a particular form of oppression, persecution, or other form of suffering once and for all. Tragic though this is, it is not a binary, semiotic tragedy which can only be despaired. As a material-semiotic tragedy, it can be coped with and transformed by reflexive, material-semiotic praxis.

Therefore, having recognised the aporia, political theorists must expand the scope of their inquiry to begin to move beyond it. Cacciari’s work suggests that such a beginning requires throwing foundational and methodological systems into crisis by engaging in reflexive critique. This critique clearly carries risk because there is no promise that the outcome will be straightforward, let alone utopian. This can be threatening. However, this critique does promise that new vistas and resources can be identified and brought into consideration as possibilities for ways to move beyond the contemporary disciplinary aporia. This means that the extent to which Cacciari’s archipelago geophilosophy can be translated to other circumstances should not cause undue concern: clearly what works in Venice will not necessarily work elsewhere in the world. Cacciari’s experiences demonstrate, however, that, as Antonio Machado put it, *el camino se hace al andar* (‘roads are made by walking’),⁵⁰⁶ and, as the popular phrase has it, *en el camino se arregla la carga* (‘the cargo adjusts itself along the road’). In Cacciari’s view, one has to begin walking in a new

⁵⁰⁶ Antonio Machado: Proverbios y cantares XXIX’, in *Campos de Castilla* (Madrid: Ediciones Catedra, 2005).

direction to make a new path, even if—especially if—its destination is unknown. Indeed, Cacciari has argued that his own path has led to failure: announcing his retirement from electoral politics, he claimed that he was tired of failing—that despite ‘busting his ass (arse)’ [*aversi fatto il culo*] for years, ‘no one ever paid me any attention, even when I was right’.⁵⁰⁷ He was quitting politics because he had learnt that ‘in politics you have to be on time, not ahead of it—at sixty-five I’ve learnt that I am not capable of doing politics’. Presumptuous and self-serving as this epitaph may sound, Cacciari might be said to have been ahead of his time. Indeed, as Europe struggles to cope with the effects of the global financial crisis, it is becoming increasingly clear that a twentieth-century political organisation cannot turn to the theories of the nineteenth century in order to cope with the problems of the twenty-first. In this sense the ‘time’ of Cacciari’s irreducible archipelago foundations may be arriving: urgent contemporary questions—how, for example, a supranational entity balances sovereign member-state debt within a common currency or copes with a massive influx of non-European refugees seeking the benefits of European life—are recast when approached in terms of reflexive, material-semiotic praxis; though this does not offer a specific solution to these questions, it does offer new ways to illuminate possible answers to them.

I have sought to convey this by introducing Cacciari’s work as fairly as and accessibly as I can to an Anglophone political theory audience. But, as I have noted, the strengths and weaknesses of Cacciari’s work are reciprocal: on the one hand, the density and complexity that characterise it make it difficult to study. On the other, this density and complexity ensures that his work does not fall into the aporias produced by the reductive epistemologies it criticises. These contradictions and difficulties, therefore, make it possible for his work to reveal possibilities to its readers which more totalising or linear discourses would mask or disqualify. For this reason, and in consideration of the fact that his work is both informed and corroborated by contemporary social and physical science as well as his own political experience, I am convinced that his work can be put to productive use by political theorists concerned by the aporias of contemporary disciplinary activity—agonists most

⁵⁰⁷ Monica Guerzoni: ‘Cacciari: addio alla politica Sconfitti tutti i miei progetti’, *Corriere della Sera*, 02 novembre 2009 [<http://goo.gl/cyGwhL>].

immediately, but also other ‘realists’ and ‘radicals’. Because this is an introduction, the extent to which Cacciari’s work is or is not effective to Anglophone political theorists remains to be seen. Despite its difficulties, I have found Cacciari’s irreducibly plural, archipelago foundations to be adaptable: if plurality cannot be reduced, it can be coped with in any number of ways as long as one engages it without enchantment.

Anglophone political theorists have identified this aporia and are coming to recognise the foundational crisis it incites. By isolating itself from the social scientific research of the last century and focussing on theoretical abstraction alone, the discipline has built a wall around itself. Cacciari’s work is therefore useful because it identifies the same problem, and suggests ways to cope with it. The first step is reflexivity about their own material-semiotic praxis. But this is only a first step. Cacciari’s reflexive, disenchanted encounter with irreducible, material-semiotic plurality makes it possible to disengage this process of mutual shaping from deterministic outcomes. Because it is disenchanted, material-semiotic critique is ‘cold’, but it is not without proximate satisfactions of its own. There is a kind of hope in knowing that we can start immediately to repurpose what has been left behind via material-semiotic praxis—moving into caves when our houses are reduced to rubble—and that *how* we repurpose what we find is not limited to a deontological instruction manual of one kind or another. That is, following Robert Musil, who stated that ‘if there is a sense of reality there is also a sense of possibility’, and like Tony Judt, who said, ‘You can’t have a tragic vision in politics: not if you wish to intervene and convince...’,⁵⁰⁸

Cacciari can offer the tools necessary for refounding the discourse and praxis of hope on reflexive,

⁵⁰⁸ For Cacciari, it is a ‘tragic view’ (in the Nietzschean sense of accepting the tragic as something with which one must cope without despair) that one *should* have. Though their vocabulary differs, he and Judt have made very similar arguments. For clarification, I therefore include the rest of Judt’s comment:

What I am against is false optimism: the notion that either things have to go well, or else that they tend to, or else that the default condition of historical trajectories is characteristically beneficial in the long-run. I think that in order to sustain such irenic visions one has to have been born at very particular historical moments and in fortunate places. Just now I think we have very good grounds for pessimism. And...I’ve tried to write an intervention that turns pessimism into a political programme rather than a despairing sceptical dismissal of all possible programmes...we must learn how to make a better world out of useable pasts rather than dreaming of infinite futures. It’s a very late Enlightenment view that says that the only way to make a better future is to believe that the future will be better.

[Peter Jukes, ‘Tony Judt: The Final Interview’, *Prospect* (173): 21 July, 2010. <http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/2010/07/tony-judt-interview/>].

disenchanted, material-semiotic foundations—on the real possibility of improvement without ever overcoming conflict and contradiction.

In and of itself, taking Cacciari seriously and experimenting with his work guarantees no particular outcome. His work will not help political theorists develop contradiction-free solutions to all problems, nor will it suggest a way to think more effectively about solving all problems without contradiction. At the same time, the approach he makes available can be used to move political theory away from social weightlessness. Anglophone political theorists have a great deal to gain by engaging with his work. Though it entails risk, should political theorists risk such an engagement, they will discover that they have nothing to lose but their enchantment.

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