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I remember when Thatcher waded onto the intellectual / political horizon with her now infamous remark “there is no such thing as society.” I was with Ernesto Laclau and the entire ‘Hegemony Group’ that he had established – committed, feisty, politically sussed “organic intellectuals” – artists, journalists, curios, theatre directors, historians and philosophers, including the wonderful Stuart Hall, as well as of course, Chantal Mouffe, Simon Critchley, Jeffrey Weeks, and every now and then, Homi Bhabha, Slavoj Žižek, as well as a few other well-known (and lesser well-known) souls. Ernesto thought Thatcher’s remark was rather clever and even a mark of serious political intelligence, a kind of ‘dog whistle’ to those in the know (the newly organising right), a call to arms (as it were) – that the time was ripe for engineering a new (old) social agenda. She was on a roll, and she knew it. Come to think of it, we knew it, too.

The conversation was not unlike the entire set of premises outlined by Hall in his *The Meaning of New Times*. Discussions about the rise (or re-emergence) of ‘the Subject’, the differing (yet similar) role of mass production, now in the form of a ‘Post-’ to which one could add -Fordism or -modernism or -structuralism (or for that matter -Feminism or -identity or -public or -politics or -history, etc). The general set of positionalities taken ranged from re-thinking what is ‘reason’, ‘totality’, ‘universalism’, ‘massification’, ‘civil society’, ‘State’, ‘the party’, ‘revolution’, ‘war of position’, ‘dialectical historical materialism’, ‘ontology’, ‘the object’ to ‘empty signifiers’, ‘quasi-transcendental movement’, ‘becoming-x’, ‘groundless grounds’, ‘what is left of the Left’ and so on and so forth. Thirty-some odd years ago I was deeply troubled by the discussion and the way it unfolded. For all the critically important tools (not to mention profound dedication to up-end the Right especially by Hall’s re-think of racism, fractured class identities, sexualities, alongside Gramscian notions of culture, mass, education and movement) it seemed to me that there was a bit of ‘old wine in new bottles’ on offer. Scroll forward to ‘now’: and this ‘old wine in new bottles’ seems ever more present, ever more pernicious, deadly. It almost beggars belief that not only are we having to return to fighting for safe abortions, freedom of speech, healthcare, anti-war, climate change and the lot, but for the very core of classical liberal (yes liberal) values around the body, personhood, state and society. As if this were not bad enough, there seems also to be an unrelenting nostalgia on the part of many leftist organic intellectuals to support the fight with a return to dialectics (speculative, material, virtual) with all the trappings of ‘subject’, ‘object’, ‘abyssal logics’, ‘lack’.

The question was (and remains) what to do about it.

One way forward – albeit an uneven, dislocated, diffractive, and sometimes seemingly a dead-end track – has to do with ditching dialectical systemising altogether, and making a strategic-analytical practice-led [re-]turn to the question/s of ontology (and possibly epistemology)

where a wholly different 'reason' or 'logic' is urgently required. Whatever else it may do, that reason or logic or intelligence, must not resurrect totalities, universalisms (and with it, binary oppositions, contradictions or even 'antagonisms'). For me, this has meant rethinking materiality as a radical matter. It requires stepping onto the immanent planes of discursive logics of sense, initially set out by Foucault, Lyotard and Deleuze, and Deleuze and Guattari, but since then developed by Barad (diffractive logics), Stengers (spells, cosmopolitics), to name but two.

So as not to get stymied by this rather overarching remark, I would like to put forward one main 'talking point' which includes (or may include two others). The main one has to do with the use of the counterfactual, first in the work of Stuart Hall, and then as developed in the work(s) of in particular, Foucault. Related to my concerns around the counterfactual are two connected aspects: first, "intelligence" as a form of knowledge (and particularly artificial intelligence as a form of knowledge); second circulation (as in circulation of knowledge via 'the' network and related derivatives market economies).

My initial thoughts on the counterfactual (and its use in political theory) are as follows: all political theory, and especially modern political theory, begins with a counterfactual or set of counterfactuals sometimes disguised as myth, allegory, fable, fiction, poetic license, straw dogs or downright invention, closely resembling a lie.¹ All require a leap of faith as the single most important condition of acceptance to an otherwise relentless and impeccable logic. In the case of 'early capitalism', as the story goes, classical liberalism emerges in the wake of a rising mercantile class disrupting the *ancien regime's* feudal order, and, in so doing, foregrounding the rise of the individual, the separation of church and state and the importance of change as the fundamental driver for a truly well governed society. Hobbes' 1651 *Leviathan*, arguably the first detailed modern theory of human sociality (now framed for the first time as a science; that is, as a *political science*), relies on a variety of counterfactuals, including the privileging of an entity that heretofore never existed though – irrespective of this logical fiction – enables a raft of legislation enshrining inequality, loss of freedom, penury. In the case of classical liberal theory, that particular counterfactual is called 'the state of nature'. It conjures a palatable, easily digestible imaginary that any 'natural' environment prior to a civilising covenant is famously, *ipso facto*, "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short" (Hobbes: 1651, 78).

Logically speaking, then, if one wishes to move away from this nightmare, one agrees 'in principle' to a social contract that establishes a covenant whereby people leave the state of nature, join civil society and in exchange for protection, give up typical liberties inherent to the

¹ Cf the pathbreaking work by David K. Lewis (1973), *Counterfactuals*, (Blackwell: London). Initially described by David Hume in his 1748 treatise, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, it has since taken on a peculiarly haunting twist when linked with Artificial Intelligence; namely, the automatic generation of default rules which condition the improbable 'as if' true. For an interesting (and indeed early) assessment of that twist, see, M.L. Ginsberg (1986), "Counterfactuals," in *Artificial Intelligence*, (Elsevier Science Publishers: Essex), 30: 25-79.

state of nature – say, for example, the right to plunder, pillage, and put one's self-interests above and beyond any communal approbations. Importantly, too, it expresses what would become the 'wild sciences' of the times; namely that bodies are always-already in motion and as a result require an open-ended possibility / infinite access to movement (read: an infinite right to so-called progress, development, resources, always-already in counter position to a 'nature' that must be dominated, tamed, expunged). Here the very notion of the classical liberal commonwealth demands, on the one hand, a tiny almost unnoticeable exchange: that all commoners trade their individual stakes in society (read: individual self-interested liberties) for the overall benefit of society; that is to say, for one's own and the community's *protection* in the form of order and good governance. Here also, and on the other hand, the nation-state, comprised, as it is meant to be, of 'bodies in motion', requires also a certain manifest destiny now pictured as 'natural' to the social order. This 'manifest destiny', this so-called 'right' includes embarking on the ruthless and infinite expansionism of a nation's boundaries, an expansion otherwise known as colonializing and plundering – and often includes grotesque internments of whole swathes of humanity who might otherwise refuse to play the game (or not realise there is one).

My question/talking point would be: what are the counterfactuals that generate a 21st c political theory and practice in the face of relentless big data circulation and exchange?

An initial educated guess directly follows from Foucault's 'speaking truth to power' where Kant's knowledge-reason-change (Enlightenment) as core to being 'human' is reformulated by Foucault (and others) as knowledge-ethical-community-sensuous-political-intelligence-change; that is, a certain kind of sensuous plurality of intelligence (stylistics of existence), one that is distributed, circulated, entangled; perhaps a 21st c form of democracy.

My fear is that with the brick by brick (as it were) entrenchment of cybernetics ('the human' v 'machine'), and the rise of the technosphere, the 'new' counterfactual so effortlessly developed poses as ever-onward and relentless an 'artificial intelligence' (the 'machine') poised to destroy the world ('natural intelligence') with its bloodless instrumental binaric reasoning. Counterfactual 'creep' in the form of 'the new normal' (these days called fake news)- a kind of super-ego cum concierge this strange, headless, aliveness to presence; one that manages to strengthen the collective mindless 'will of the people'. *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, move over; there's a shiny new update ready, willing and able.