

A Trialectical Turn: Plasticity, Space Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor (Penn State University)

In “The Meaning of New Times,” Stuart Hall asks, in 1988, “Are we thinking dialectically enough?” (260) — and in the next paragraph suggests that the dimensions of these new times “require new ways of thinking”. Along similar lines, Catherine Malabou argues that we need to develop a “new definition of critique” based in her notion of (neurobiological) plasticity. Malabou redefines critique in terms of the “plastic” subject, embracing the posthumanized human—that is, the human who recognizes, as Hall suggests, that Nature and Culture are not, and never were really, separate forces working “in opposition”, nor precisely in apposition, but—to update Hall a bit—entangled. Malabou proposes the possibility of a new notion of “critique” that resists and reforms the critical logic(istics) developed by Western philosophy. In its place stands the epigenetic—which she describes as the capacity a self-interpretation of life, by or as a series of differentiations. She ascribes to the epigenetic a “biological resistance to biopower.” In a recent article, I argued that this plurality of contingency represents/instantiates/simply *is* a utopian directive/-tion—which Hall’s article seems to anticipate:

And it no longer operates along one, singular line or path of development. Modern technology, far from having a fixed path, is open to constant renegotiation and re-articulation. ‘Planning’, in this new technological environment, has less to do with absolute predictability and everything to do with instituting a ‘regime’ out of which a plurality of outcomes will emerge. One, so to speak, plans for contingency. This mode of thinking signals the end of a certain kind of deterministic rationality” (260)

The phrase “instituting a ‘regime’” cannot help but sound antithetical to what Hall is actually proposing, but of course the point is that the concepts of “institution” and “regime” would shed, in the “new times”, their current biopolitical connotations of control and hierarchy. Hall asks, “are we thinking dialectically enough”—but should the question be, “are we thinking *too dialectically*?” Can we think post-oppositionally—at last? Hall also suggests this possibility when in speaking of – if not a co-constitution of “the objective” and “the subjective”, at least the disabling of the “old distinction” between them: he refers to a “blurring” effect that includes “the slippage of hitherto stable meanings, the proliferation of difference, and the end of ... the ‘grand narratives’ of progress, development, Enlightenment...” (253). Hall proposes we seek out “the ‘leading edge’ of change” (259), or at the very least, keep uppermost in our minds the question of where the ‘leading edge’ is “and in what direction it is pointing” (259).

Given the complex layering of temporalities (or “time-scales”) that he sees as the grounding of history, though, we might ask, must there be “*the* ‘leading edge’”? Just one? Hasn’t that been just the issue all along? Given what Hall has to say in the next pages about proliferation and/of

positionings, politics and power, such that we must understand “there is always an engagement with politics as a ‘war of position’” (264), are *dialectics* the answer, or a reframing of the problem? Again, are we thinking *too* dialectically? Given this slippage and blurring, given the “proliferation of difference,” Hall considers how we might think about “the cultural dimension” – and particularly “the arena of social reproduction” as “critical ‘new’ sites of politics” (261), a politics that might offer “a social committed to, rather than scared of, diversity and difference” (261). Here he seems again to distantly anticipate Malabou’s turn to plasticity and epigenetics, as when he describes this “area of social reproduction” as “both material and symbolic, since we are producing not only the cells of the body but also the categories of the culture” (262). Malabou’s appeal is to the life drive of plasticity as a generative (productive) essence: and a refusal of the death drive of capitalist (re)production.

Hall does not mention plastic here – but certainly he could have. The quotation above continues: “Even consumption, in some ways the privileged terrain of reproduction, is no less symbolic for being material. We need not go so far... as to say ‘the object is nothing’ to be able to recognise that, in the modern world, objects are also signs, and we relate to the world of things in both an instrumental and a symbolic mode” (262). This was the whole point of Roland Barthes’ *Mythologies* collection—and in particular, his essay on plastic. No thing in the modern consumer world more essentially instrumental *and* symbolic, simultaneously, as plastic, each object of which is a *betrayal of plasticity*. Plasticity is the capacity to give form (we could think of this as a kind of subject-ification), and to take form (object-ification); never a “resistance to change” because its very essence *is* change, the structuralization of form—not the final (over)determination of form. This Malabou calls negative plasticity, which reveals itself as the very character of capitalism—even as that character is masked as *positive* plasticity (i.e., “novelty and innovation”). She would concur with Hall in characterizing the proliferation of manufactured products as almost totemic objects of “novelty and innovation – but driven by what often appear to be false needs” (256). Plastic represents capitalism’s “bad faith,” it functions as materialized symbol of the “modern lie” or “myth” informing modern and contemporary politics. As Roland Barthes says—in *Mythologies*—it seems that plastic’s sole function under capitalism is to *be used*: utility informs the instrumentalization of all things—including people—under capitalism. What is wanted, then, is not simply another model of “reproduction” but of regeneration.

If according to Malabou *epigenetics* (as plasticity) is a “self-interpretation of life, ... life forming itself by a series of differentiations,” far from risking the dissolution of difference into everything and nothing (a positions, she correctly claims, that Barthes expresses in his short essay on plastic), *plasticity*’s resistance to the programmatic, its insistence on the openness of a system, situates life “both biologically and symbolically” in difference, but also in continuity, contingency, and futurity. *Epigenetics* provides a model for generative thinking, for a certain kind of creative evolution, for *life*. Or speaking of positioning and spatiality, enter (in place of

dialectics) the notion of *trialectics*. Henri LeFebvre's theorization of spatial production impacted not only architecture and urban planning, as in the work of postmodern geographer Edward Soja, but cultural theorists such as Homi Bhabha. A "relational and emancipatory view" (Sandin) of spatial production joins LeFebvre *and* Malabou in their visions of an *architectonics* of cultural (re)generativity, which at the very least—in acknowledging the critical relationship *between* subject and environment (rather than the one *over* the other)—might allow for that "third space" of negotiation and play. The third space is the spatializing potency and potentiality of the "new times." This space is also:

- a hospitable space (because relational, both for the subject and for their environment)
- an aesthetic space (because while not necessarily "manufactured" it is formed)
- a utopian space—not the blueprint kind of utopia, but the process kind; and as such,
- a space – a spatializing? – of hope.

I think that it must also be a queer space. I appreciate Hall's acknowledgement of the critical role of feminism and "the woman's movement" in "unsettling" disrupting the myths of modernity; and the "recognition" that "all social practices and forms of domination ... are always inscribed in and to some extent secured by sexual identity and position" (263). *Now*, yes. But in the future? *Always*? Are we to correct Marx's relative uninterest in gender and labor by claiming that twenty-first century socialism "must stand" on "the feminization of the social"? What exactly constitutes a "feminization" of the social? If we are looking toward a nonoppositional form of politics perhaps the binarist conception of gender is not one we want simply to assume. Granted, Hall writes without the last thirty years of feminist *and* queer theory; it is the latter in particular that we need if we are to push past oppositional politics, from a dialectical model to a trialectical. Without the disruption of a "necessary" relation of masculinity and femininity by "the queer" we risk statements such as this: "It can only be resolved by a more human – that is, socially responsible and communally responsive – way of *cultivating* the natural world of finite resources" (262). *More* "human"? And, "human" evidently defined as "social responsible and communally responsive"?

At the very least, if we want to think about (leading) edges (or horizons), we might consider the term "edgework" (Wendy Brown among others) as a way of acknowledging the ongoingness of the effort, the *work* of testing, perhaps exceeding, perhaps simply modifying or stretching, the edges or borders of things. Edgework as I see it is a refusal of finality: the work of blurring the edges of things, including dimensionally. I am back to the process utopia. And looking hopefully toward Frank Moten's opposition to "the limit, the bank, the frame as it is held in the old one-two, that carceral, binary dance"; instead, there is an "interplay," at the margin, "of marginality and limit" (260) which art—for this is his primary concern—documents: art's affirmative space-ing. Thus his question: "Can art be, and show us how to be, something

other than a society 'structured in dominance'?" (256). The space—and the art—of the “new times” must be:

- a plastic space (plaesthetics)
- a dynamic, temporal spatial blur (trialectics)
- an affirmative space; and/as an affirmative politics (a la Braidotti)
- edgy.