**Radical Philosophy**

**New York Conference**

Friday 21 October 2011

Columbia University, New York

Titles and Abstracts

**Opening Plenary: Postcolonial Worlds 1**

‘Bilingual Thoughts on Knowledge and Action’

**Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui** (Workshop on Andean Oral History, Bolivia)

The talk will concentrate on aymara concepts such as taypi, ch’ixi, pachakuti, tari and others, reflecting on the aymara modes of knowledge of the pacha (space/time) and on the collective and individual relations with the cosmos through action. A practical example of a localized yet transborderline thought, the presentation will use image, sound and a bilingual textuality to expose a series of “pictures” or representations of these knowledge/action practices through examples taken from Andean history.

I will also try to develop a practical critique of Aristotelian dualism and of the idea of a “strategic essentialism”. Instead, I will propose the concept of ch’ixi at the epistemological, perceptual and pragmatic levels. I will concentrate on exploring the decolonizing potentials of ch’ixi intellectual and corporal practices for the reconstitution of decolonized subjectivities. The power of the clash of contraries that this term implies will be proposed as a decolonizing tool for the reconstitution of a common moral ground in which both the individual and the community are radically coexistent, both free and voluntarily bonded.

‘On the Question of “Political Violence” Today’

**Rosalind C. Morris** (Anthropology, Columbia University)

Liberal concepts of the political depend on an anthropological axiomatic: that the institution of the political is established on the basis of a radical opposition between language and violence. A deconstructionist critique of that binarism must conclude that such an opposition is without ‘grounds’, in Kant’s sense, but an anthropological pragmatism responds by stating that its presumption nonetheless effectuates a category of the political on which basis social worlds are ordered and individuals subjectivated. What’s more, this logic subtends the entire project of humanitarian interventionism—whether in the form of imperial conquest or, today, wars to liberate people for the project of democracy. This talk explores what is necessary for this process to occur, and argues that it rests on the categorical exclusion of two kinds of violence from the realm of the political: on the one hand, all that which goes by the name of ‘domestic violence’; on the other, war. In this context, I examine the recent and continuing US wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, among other places, while analyzing the relationship between this conception of the political and a different concept of democracy. Arguing against a culturalist response to the false universalism of liberal theory, I suggest that we take seriously the proposition (proffered by every religious conservatism in the world) that democracy is a threat, by recognizing its incompatibility with this conception of the political, and, moreover, with every discourse of culturalism.

**Parallel Sessions 1**

**A. Representing Capitalism**

‘Is Representation Possible Without Reification?’  
**Tim Bewes** (English, Brown University)

In his famous essay on reification, Lukács writes that thought and existence are ‘aspects of one and the same real historical and dialectical process’. What are the implications of this statement for the thought-form known as reification? Taking issue with other recent attempts to ‘rescue’ the term, I will argue that only an immanent theory of reification can have any validity today, and consider what this might mean for the critical usefulness of the concept.

‘The Historical Novel of Contemporary Capitalism’

**David Cunningham** (RP/English, University of Westminster)

In a recent survey of the historical novel published in the *London Review of Books*, Perry Anderson charts a history of the genre, indebted to both Lukács and Jameson, which tracks its development from early nineteenth-century narratives of progress and the emergence of nationhood to ‘the ravages of empire’, ‘impending or consummated catastrophe’, in the second half of the twentieth century. What later forms of the historical novel come to transcribe, ‘essentially, is an experience of defeat’. This paper suggests a different angle on Anderson’s characteristic overview by refocusing it on the ongoing question of the novel’s problematic attempts to represent or ‘map’ the social totality of capitalism. In his lecture ‘Reading Balzac’, Adorno argued that, from its beginnings, the novel already depicts, in its ironic repetition of epic ‘wholeness’ and collective ‘fate’, the ‘superior power of social and especially economic interests over private psychology’, in the ways in which, through the ‘form of a medium of circulation, money, the capitalist process touches and patterns the characters whose lives the novel form tries to capture’. As such, the novel necessarily struggles with the problem of how ‘to conjure up in perceptible form a society that has become abstract’. Approaching this problem of novelistic representation from the perspective of some of its most recent manifestations, this paper argues that an alternative trajectory of the historical novel may be located in the ways in which the novel comes to be rewritten as an epic of capitalism itself, which works *to grasp a society’s becoming-abstract* via the narration of its historical emergence and pivotal moments of transition. In this fashion, the transcription of ‘defeat’ also becomes the critical ‘success’ of rendering ‘perceptible’ some aspect of capitalism as an ‘impossible’ object of epic form.

‘Marx’s Realist Intention’

**Kristin Ross** (Comparative Literature, New York University)

The project shared by Marx and his contemporaries, the realist novelists, a project at once analytical and critical of a certain historical process of becoming, is the attempt to grasp the contemporaneous as part of an historical process. If Marx’s ‘circumstantial’ texts like *The Civil War in France* and the letters to Vera Zasulich play, as I will argue, as important a role in that project as a text like *Capital,* then what I am calling Marx’s realist intention is best thought of as one of *narrating* rather than *representing* Capital. It was the Paris Commune that brought Marx to a confrontation with actually existing alternative social forms (freely associated labor) and which I will try to show constituted something of a full ‘redistribution of the sensible’ (in Rancière’s sense) for Marx.

**B. Biocapital and Security**

‘Capitalist Resilience’

**Mark Neocleous** (RP/Politics, Brunel University, London)

The paper will take up the recent rise of resilience as a concept. Resilience has come to the fore as an idea under which security measures are being enacted and the war on terror is being planned for. The paper explores why this has happened by situating the idea of resilience within the wider framework of trauma and anxiety. In so doing, the paper suggests that resilience is fast becoming a key political category of neo-liberal subjectivity. As such, it reveals the ways in which security and capital have conjoined histories.

‘Socialism, Biopolitics, Futurity’

**Claudia Aradau** (RP/International Relations, King’s College London)

‘There is so far no term as useful for the construction of the future as that of genealogy for such a construction of the past; it is certainly not to be called futurology, while utopology will never mean much, I fear’ (Jameson). The construction of the future, whether through ‘taming’ or radical transformation, appears to be in need of (re)naming today: utopia is one of these names; speculation is another. If utopia attends to the cultural mediation of the impossible, of radical difference and transformation, speculation is a technology of ‘taming’ the uncertainties of the future, which is different from prognosis and statistical probabilities. Often motivated by speculative financial practices of neoliberal capitalism, the future becomes an object of speculative, pre-emptive and precautionary governance. Rather than either utopia or speculation, this paper suggests that the name we need to engage with is the one that has been eschewed so far: futurology. As a mode of knowledge focusing on the long-term, uncertain and unpredictable futures, futurology reshapes the continuum of risk, danger and crisis that Foucault associated with biopolitics. Yet, futurology not only shapes the knowledge of global problems, from terrorism to climate change and from sustainable development to biosecurity; its political stakes need to be seen, it is argued here, not only in its current extension through the military-industrial complex in the West and its emergence at the height of Cold War fears, but in the forgotten debate between futurologies in the socialist and capitalist countries in the 1970s and 1980s. The oblivion of socialist futurology, in the midst of the confirmation of the power of capitalist futurology, reduces the possibility of critical consideration of conceptions of the future.

‘Pharmaceutical Crises, Questions of Value, and Biopolitics Elsewhere’

**Kaushik Sunder Rajan** (Anthropology, University of Chicago)

This paper addresses questions of theory and critique through an analysis of global pharmaceutical politics. It will involve three things. First, I schematically outline how the contemporary global terrain of drug development is constituted by different logics of crisis, through a focus on pharmaceutical logics and politics in the United States and India today. This terrain is constituted by interrelations between multinational corporate interests, the local generic drug industry, neo-liberal patient consumers, marginalized experimental subjects of clinical trials, and global civil society advocates for access to essential medicines. Second, I read Marx to argue that a conceptualization of this terrain requires us to theorize value in capital and biocapital. And third, I focus on issues concerning clinical trials and access to essential medicines in India to consider how this theorization of value in the context of politics of health and illness, life and death, requires a modality of conceptualizing biopolitics "elsewhere". At the very least, this involves recognizing that there is a world outside of advanced liberalism; that this world is very often constituted by logics that are hyper-capitalist and hyper-imperialist; and that a theorization of the biopolitical cannot just assume that the rest of the world is a seamless extension of, or exception to, the ways in which biopolitics has been constituted in advanced liberalism.

**Parallel Sessions 2**

**A.****Temporalities of Crisis**

‘On Not Knowing Greek’ 

**Antonia Birnbaum** (Philosophy, University of Paris 8)

For the Greek tradition, crisis is associated with *kairos*; together they point to a decisive moment. *Kairos* is the difficult art of seizing a situation, its sum of uncertainty and unforeseeability, the moment where a decisive judgment will have the most impact. Thus the Greeks often refer *kairos* and crisis either to the image of the boy with locks in front, bald at the back – an occasion to be seized – or to the art of releasing an arrow at the precise moment when the enemy puts one in danger. For us today, crisis often means the exact opposite: a situation where things supposedly can’t go on as before, but where there is no possibility of a break: the economic crisis epitomizes this. To think out a temporality of crisis that does not aggravate a continued state of degradation is thus to question anew the element of decision in crisis. Is there such a thing as a ‘present’ of decision? How does it articulate time? Two thinkers of this question come to mind: Walter Benjamin and Friedrich Schelling.

‘Crisis and Contemporaneity’

**Peter Osborne** (RP/Philosophy, Kingston University London)

Marxist theories of capitalist crisis depend upon the articulation of three levels of temporalization: the *longue durée* of historical time (development of the forces of production/temporality of modes of production), the theory of capitalism (development through ‘periodic’ or ‘cyclical’ economic crises), and the politics of conjunctures (the ‘concrete analysis of a concrete situation’) amenable to decisive action. However, the socio-spatial – and hence temporal – presuppositions of the classical version of this model (national capitals aligned to nation-states, and socialist internationalism) no long hold. Rather, economic crises are increasingly subject to the conditions of a global contemporaneity. There is both an apparent convergence between the temporal structures of crises and contemporaneity, and an increasing disjunction between economic and political temporalities. This paper will reflect upon this apparent convergence and disjunction in temporal form from the standpoints of the ‘normalization’ of crisis and relationship between so-called ‘historical’ and ‘systematic’ dialectic.

‘Presents Past: History and “Time’s Turmoil”’

**Harry Harootunian** (Literature, Duke University)

This paper explores the relationship between history, especially the role played by forms of historical time, and capitalism. Specifically, I am interested in examining the differentiation between history and capital logic and the consequences it had for the status of historical time. I will be particularly concerned with how the former (history) has come to be identified with the retention of traces from modes of production prior to capitalism (embodied in thought, custom and sentiment) within a capitalist present which seeks to subsume them. This perspective, announced by Marx in both *Grundrisse* and *Capital*, together with a priority accorded to the temporality of the present, opens up a vista for comparative possibility by fusing the incidence of a common temporal immanence (a shared contemporaneity between observer and observed) with the recognition that at the same time they occupy different but co-existing temporal registers empowered to mediate and even determine their actions. The example chosen for illustration consists of three attempts by workers in different locales and times to seize hold of their disposable time from the regime of abstract labor by expending it in the pursuit of artistic and cultural activity. These three episodes were initially discounted, if not ignored, in their respective national histories but have been narrativized in Jacques Ranciere’s *Proletarian Nights* (concerning French workers in the mid-19th century), Peter Weiss’s *The Aesthetics of Resistance* (an epic historical novel focused on youthful German workers in the 1930s, putting in question the relationship between fiction and history) and the Japanese journal *Gendai shiso*/*Modern Thought* (concerning the ‘worker’s circles’ of Japan in the 1950s). Each has been released from more recognizable social historical environments and resituated in a terrain and a time no longer shaped by the agenda of national history. The sites are made contemporaneous with each other because they have been retrieved by, for and in our present.

**B. Politics of Information**

‘Speculative Realism As Symptom: Computationalist Ideologies’

**David Golumbia** (English, Virginia Commonwealth University)

The theoretical movement called by its adherents Speculative Realism has at its center a 2008 volume by Quentin Meillassoux called *After Finitude*. This book is said by some to have provided a devastating critique of ‘correlationism’, a term for a philosophical error that Meillassoux says characterizes ‘modern philosophy since Kant’. This judgment plays a role in justifying a self-reinforcing lack of attention to theoretical and conceptual movements outside of Speculative Realism itself. With certain strategic exceptions (especially Heidegger, in the works of Graham Harman), this practice is widespread. In keeping with this strategy, *After Finitude*’s direct attack on Kant avoids all direct reading of Kant’s texts. The failure to read Kant is symptomatic of *After Finitude*, which fails to read much if any of the modern philosophy or poststructuralist theory with which it takes frequent issue and which the critique of correlationism is said to render irrelevant. Despite his invocation of ‘contemporary science’ as justification for his methods, for example, Meillassoux fails to discuss any science that might bear on his questions (and much does, with important consequences). However, his reliance on ‘digitization’ as a criterion for a kind of ‘absoluteness’ meshes with the thinking of computational enthusiasts, and helps to expose some of the deep commitments of computationalist ideologies. Perhaps most importantly, the overall orientation of the attack on Kant, along with the dismissal of but failure to engage with poststructuralism, makes more visible some of the reasons that a certain critical Kantianism has always been vital to poststructuralism, especially as practiced by Derrida and Spivak. It also helps us to understand why there is such avoidance today, in theory, in higher education, and in political discourse, of the critical Kantian currents in Enlightenment.  
   
‘Liquid Crystal Aesthetics’

**Esther Leslie** (RP/English, Birkbeck, University of London)

This paper considers animation as it combines with contemporary digital technologies in entertainment and scientific procedures. It focuses on the ways in which the liquid crystal screen comes to bear on that which is represented and argues that notions of liquidity and crystallization are present in various ways as form and content. From the first moment of its discovery, the liquid crystal has been annexed to concepts of animation in the sense of life in-putted or self-assembled (crystal life, crystal souls) and this does not subside as it is put to use in the service of display and the conjuration of form. What are the politics of liquid crystals? This question gains in resonance as the body becomes screen and container of the liquid crystal as deployed and conceived in the new sciences.

‘Civilizations Without Boats: Security, Property, Piracy and the Walled City’

**Finn Brunton** (School of Information, University of Michigan Ann Arbor)

Spurred by the extraordinary terms of the federal indictment of Aaron Swartz, this talk will argue that we are at a critical juncture, where models and infrastructure are being put into place that may be very difficult to avoid in the future, in which alliances are being formed between security systems and intellectual property and copyright regimes. To counteract this, and maintain open spaces in networked computing against monopolistic consolidation, precarious immaterial labor, and tyrannical political projects, we need something academics are uniquely placed to provide: a positive model of open, post-scarcity intellectual production and distribution. Drawing on projects from pirate radio and amateur telephone networks to the correspondence circles of the Invisible College and the utopian computational cities of the 1970s, I will present possible shapes to add to the project of new discourse online.

**Closing Plenary: Postcolonial Worlds 2**

‘Caring about the Universal?’

**Souleymane Bachir Daigne** (Philosophy, Columbia University)

Emmanuel Levinas has written that the postcolonial world (he actually said "decolonized") is "de-westernized" but also (therefore?) "dis-oriented". By that he meant that innumerable cultures considered equivalent in a postcolonial global world cannot truly meet without some sense of the universal. The questions I will pose concern precisely the possibility and the need for what Merleau-Ponty has called a "lateral universal'."

‘Freedom in Spinoza’

**Marilena Chaui** (Philosophy, University of Sao Paulo)

In the history of philosophy, the radical thought of Spinoza has become one of the most controversial and criticized. Amongst the controversies, one of the most persistent is the so-called ‘the problem of Spinozism’: the apparent impossibility of human freedom in his philosophy, since Spinoza asserts that reality and human beings are ordained and regulated by absolute necessity and he refuses the idea of the free will. We will show that ‘the problem of Spinozism’ is the result of reading Spinoza's philosophy through the images that are crystalized in the philosophical tradition and that Spinoza's idea of human freedom is the opening of a new path in order to understand desire, passion and action both in ethics and politics.