

Politics in a tragic key

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In memory of Joel Olson (1967–2012)

In the quarter-century or so since the obscure disaster of the Soviet bloc's collapse, two words have been pinned to that of 'communism' with liberal abandon: 'tragedy' and 'transition'. Tragedy, to signify the magnitude of suffering, but not the greatness of the enterprise; the depth of the fall, but not the rationality of the ambition. Transition, to capitalism, shadowed by the enumeration of crimes, through a 'transitional justice' that is both an exorcism and a prevention of any attempt to repeat that doomed exploit.¹ On pain of anachronism, I wish to explore a contrary meaning to the pair tragedy and transition, one closely tied to the rifts and articulations between actuality and the idea. To the extent that the problem of actuality and the idea is that of dialectics and politics today, we should note that the origin of Hegel's dialectic is constituted by a certain thinking of tragedy. Tragedy can thus be seen as both the prelude to the modern dialectic and a possible obstacle in its path. Second, one of the principal ways to declare closed – even or especially from the left – the very question of transition, of directed root-and-branch change, of emancipation as something other than resistance or apocalypse, is to call for an acceptance of our tragic predicament, generally coded in terms of the lessons of defeat and the invariable fact of finitude. My tactic in what follows is not to reject the tragic, but to assume it as the element within which to recast our thinking of politics and communism, and to show that thinking through tragedy as an experiential, narrative and political form can allow us to break with a defeatist and deflationary reading of our baleful present, as well as to avert the curse of shallow optimism.

In the present conjuncture of theory, tragedy is either dismissed (along with all structures of feeling anchored in the negative) for its denial of an insurgent social creativity, or, obversely, affirmed as an antidote to utopian aspirations. Leftist thought for the most part treats the tragic – the discord between will and capacity, subject and system – as extrinsic, accidental, or it slips into a narrative about finitude and limitation,

which is anti-political to the extent that it reifies and renders transcendent the moment of the ethical. Despite its protestations to the contrary, it is to this second strand that belongs T.J. Clark's recent screed, published in *New Left Review* as 'For a Left with No Future'. There Clark turns to the archive of conservative and reactionary thought for the resources to think what *form* politics could acquire once we take leave of all modernisms of progress, redemption, utopia and emancipated futures. In particular, he carries with A.C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy*, and its proposition that what pervades the tragic form is the sense of great actions careening, through implacable patterns of counter-finality, towards 'the impression of waste'.²

Anti-communist adolescence, postcolonial melancholy

Clark's question is the same one that governs these reflections: 'could left politics be transposed into a tragic key'?³ However, his answer is vitiated, not just by a confused and misdirected polemic – which encompasses Stalinist nostalgia and ultra-left infantilism, all the while harmonizing with the perduring chorus of anti-communist condemnations of the 'god that failed' – but also by a narrow and static conception of tragedy, which ignores its persistence within the very futural leftism he is so pressed to terminate. Much hinges on whether we accept the seemingly unimpeachable connection between tragedy and pessimism. Clark writes:

Tragedy, we know, is pessimistic about the human condition. Its subject is suffering and calamity, the constant presence of violence in human affairs, the extraordinary difficulty of reconciling that violence with a rule of law or a pattern of social sanction. It turns on failure and self-misunderstanding, and above all on a fall from a great height – a fall that frightens and awes those who witness it because it seems to speak to a powerlessness in man, and a general subjection to a Force or Totality derived from the very character of things.⁴

But this powerlessness that derives from the exercise of great power, this violence that exceeds containment, is for Clark to be traced back not to a specific historical figure of human action, but to human nature and its cruel, belligerent propensities (for which he relies on shaky samplings from the anthropological record).⁵

It is here that I think Clark's failure to attend to a thinking of revolution and transition *as* tragedy rather than tragedy as a warning *against* revolution – a thinking that can be threaded through Hegel, Marx, Lukács, C.L.R. James, Raymond Williams, Sebastiano Timpanaro and others – vitiates the very core of his argument. We *should* think politics in a tragic key, refusing the immunity of political ideas from the contradictory vicissitudes of their actualization,⁶ but we cannot do so unless the tragic is considered with respect to the historical form of collective action, not the invariance of human nature. This demands resisting the temptation to treat the tragic as a warrant to abdicate any attempt to think structural causalities and political strategies – as, for instance, when Clark 'adolescently' (to use one of his terms of reprobation against the contemporary Left) states that a tragic view on the age of extremes 'allows us *not to see* a shape or logic' in it; no direction but a 'catastrophe in the strict sense – unfolding pell-mell', 'a chaos formed from an unstoppable, unmappable criss-cross of forces'.⁷ Tragedy need not be associated with this kind of strategic and epistemological nihilism, which banishes the idea in the face of the entangled actuality of social and political disaster.

Most importantly, Clark's advocacy of a tragic reformist politics of containment fails to confront the tragic problem of action itself, the problem of counter-finality and the heterogenesis of ends, of unintended consequences and the ruses of historical reason. As has been frequently noted, a politics of lesser evils may herald greater ones; the restraint of violence in one juncture may lay the ground for greater violence at a later stage. In making his claims for a politics in a tragic key, Clark seems to be ignoring the tragic, that is to say *contradictory* character of the very context of politics, in which there is no clear line between 'moderate' practices and moderate ends, and in which the actual conditions for a consequent reformism would appear to require revolutionary transformations.

Clark's model of tragedy, as a counterweight to the ineffectual or disastrous consequences of revolutionary hubris, finds a clear echo, in a postcolonial register, in David Scott's *Conscripts of Modernity*, which takes the tonal shift between the 1938 and 1963 editions of C.L.R. James's masterwork on the

Haitian Revolution, *The Black Jacobins*, as heralding a shift from anti-colonial insurgent Romanticism to a disabused tragic conception of our postcolonial present, after the closure or collapse of progressive emancipatory trajectories. The pivotal role is of course played by Toussaint Louverture. Between fidelity to the abolition of slavery and to French republicanism and Enlightenment, James's Toussaint is faced with '*tragic* alternatives. Each involved giving up values that were, for him, fundamental – that is, nonexchangeable and unexpungeable – commitments'.⁸

Though Scott is correct that the tragic form is a result of assuming the impossibility of any position *outside* the contradictions of modernity (or the dialectic of Enlightenment, which he rightly presents as a tragic philosophy of history, *against* the philosophy of history), I want to suggest that it is only from the standpoint of revolution, and its practice, that these contradictions become tragic. Accordingly, Scott's attempt to sever the 'tragic' present from the 'Romantic' narrative of the resistance and struggles for emancipation of the oppressed drains that same present of what would make it tragic in James's sense. This is also evident when he writes, apropos of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, about 'the cultivation of an idea of politics and ethical-political action that depends less on the heroism of the revolutionary subject and the renewal of humanity it promises to initiate, and more on a receptivity to the paradoxical reversals that can unmake and corrupt our most cherished ideals'.⁹

The notion that we do not make history in conditions of our own choosing belongs to the ABC of the kind of Marxism that always sought dialectically to temper its fidelity to the utopian drive of self-emancipation with a realism about contradictions (the realist character of tragic and dialectical figurations of politics, from Hegel to Lucien Goldmann or Mario Tronti, would deserve more sustained reflection). Finitude, the particularity of our conditions, the limits of our nature, the opacity of the consequences of our actions: none of these can be taken as anti-revolutionary arguments unless one has already accepted the present as a kind of lesser evil, and as in itself best suited to such finitude. 'For tragedy, history is not leading us anywhere in particular',¹⁰ writes Scott. This may be so in general, but for James the tragic form was not incompatible with directed emancipatory action building on the consequences, and the limitations, of past efforts at emancipation.

Scott problematically downplays the profound analogies to the Russian Revolution that underlie *The Black Jacobins*, especially to the figure of Lenin (the

analogy of the restoration of a plantation economy by Toussaint to that of a restoration of capitalism in the New Economic Policy by Lenin), together with the way in which the tragic is not only a matter of crisis, but of the shearing pressure of different temporal registers on political action, whose tragedy has to do with the unevenness of capital itself. In this regard the tragedy of Toussaint and of the liberated slaves bears affinity to that of Thomas Müntzer and the insurgent masses of the 1525 German Peasants' War, which provides the template for a Marxian conception of tragedy in Engels's *The Peasant War in Germany*.¹¹



Scott's concluding invocation of Hannah Arendt (aside from neglecting the fact that James actually referred to her work)¹² is evidence of the way in which the notion of the tragic is being drained of the political dynamic it had been accorded by James. Crucially, Scott papers over the reason why Arendt cannot be thought of as a tragic thinker in the modern mode of James or Raymond Williams: her separation of politics as the domain of beginnings, of acting in concert, of appearance, from 'the social question'. Arendt's claim in *On Revolution* that workers' Soviets were led astray by trying to take over the organization of production, when they should have remained purely political, is nothing if not a disavowal of the dialectical tragedy of transition. When he writes of the lesson shared by James with Arendt as 'the tragedy of the revolutionary tradition', of 'the surrendering of freedom to necessity, of the political to the social',¹³ Scott has effectively lost the specificity of Toussaint's historical tragedy, but also the fact that this melancholy anti-revolutionary contemplation of revolution's loss precisely drains it of any tragic tension or contradiction, making politics impossible by trying to keep it pure of 'the social'. Revolution is only tragic from the standpoint of a commitment to its drive, process and aims.

On the contrary, tragedy is in James the mutable form of a determinate historical content. It is not simply a matter of the complexity, unknowability or finitude of human action *sans phrase*, but of the way in which emancipatory collective action is unsettled and displaced, distorted and undermined by the collision between different imperatives and the rifts between non-synchronous temporalities. The actuality at stake here is that of an organic crisis, which both serves as the generative context for new ideas of politics and confronts these ideas with apparent incommensurabilities that only decisions without guarantees,

actions without a norm, can face up to. Whence, interestingly, an argument on the part of James for the qualified defence – in an unapologetic theorist of politics qua self-emancipation of masses and workers – of the role of great individuals in history. Social conflicts become tragic when 'society ha[s] slipped, it ha[s] no foundations any longer, and in that period, in the struggle for a new way, the individuals of energy, assumed a monstrous magnitude'.¹⁴ Tragic political individuals emerge in the throes of *transitions* – the critical component in any modern

conception of the tragic as a political form.

It is the gap between the embodiment of abstract ideas and their concrete realization within society that is represented in these individuals. But this apotheosis and apocalypse of the individual is also a precursor of a different form of actually revolutionary mass politics, not doomed by collision and contradiction. The tragic is both the experience of a blockage and a presentiment of being at the threshold of a revolutionary rupture. James allows in this regard for a thinking of the tragic which sets some of the parameters for thinking the anti-colonial *with* the post-colonial, the anti-capitalist *with* the post-capitalist, and for thinking these problems of transition – with their associated questions of unevenness, underdevelopment and colliding temporalities – as inextricable from one another.¹⁵ For James, tragic form is an anticipatory one, the blockage of the idea before a necessary mutation in objective possibility, in actuality:

Form is the conflict complete, the contradictions tearing away – but before the stage of actuality, of the revolution. It carries through the possibilities to the limit, but objective condition, purpose and activity have not yet all come together as in the revolution.¹⁶

Tragedy as political and historical form of modernity

Considering the rich tradition of radical and Marxian engagements with the tragic, one is struck by the relative indifference of both Scott and Clark to tragic *form* and to the historicity and politics of that form. There is a tendency in their presentations of the tragic as a leave-taking from the romantic hubris of communist and anti-colonial politics to present it as a condition: a condition of mature and disenchanted engagement, rather than a way of giving shape to the contradictions between intention and consequence, individuality and system, freedom and necessity.

As I've already intimated, I think that tragedy can be seen, in keeping with the diagnoses of Lucien Goldmann, C.L.R. James and Raymond Williams, as an art and form of crisis, a dramatization of the social and subjective experience of a time when decisions are due but have yet to be rendered,¹⁷ when the balance between emergent, residual and dominant forces is uncertain, when antagonistic times and customs overlap, when, among a welter of moving contradictions and realignments, the consequences of actions become more difficult to calculate, and neither an ethics of conviction nor an ethics of responsibility can hold us in good stead. As Bradley put it: 'That men may start a course of events but can neither calculate nor control it, is a *tragic* fact.'¹⁸ It is in the passage to tragedy as a dynamic, historical form that we can think one of the crucial features of a truly dialectical conception of politics, one for which history is made under the duress of unwilled conditions, in the *agon* between colliding projects and at times in the absence of any agreed normative frame, but for that very reason never in the simple face-off between a political idea and a historical actuality. This diremption, as Hegel warns, is the product of a deficient understanding:

But when the abstract understanding gets hold of these categories and exaggerates the distinction they imply into a hard and fast line of contrast, when it tells us that in this actual world we must knock ideas out of our heads, it is necessary energetically to protest against these doctrines, alike in the name of science and of sound reason. For on the one hand Ideas are not confined to our heads merely, nor is the Idea, upon the whole, so feeble as to leave the question of its actualisation or non-actualisation dependent on our will.¹⁹

But to grasp the significance of the tragic form, we also – and this is one of the lessons of the dialectic – take this distinction, separation and collision between the ideal and the actual as itself *real*.

It is perhaps in the early Lukács of *Soul and Form*, and specifically the essay on 'The Metaphysics of Tragedy', that we encounter the most elegant and incisive figure of the modern subject confronted with the tragic impossibility of action.²⁰ Lukács's dialectical thought finds its origin in a confrontation with the tragic, in an experience and assertion of the one-sidedness and isolation of the subject. In his late autobiographical reflections, Lukács sketches his intellectual origins in the following terms: 'Synthesis of the problematic of my childhood and youth: a meaningful life impossible under capitalism; the fight for such a life; tragedy and tragicomedy.'²¹ It is the wrenching personal experience of the abyss between being and value, ontology and morality, which haunts the young Lukács, as his diaries make laceratingly clear.²²

In a pathos-laden pendant of the sociological theories of the emptying out of modern life of his teachers Simmel and Weber, Lukács paints the tragic predicament of modern experience in terms of the fleeting formlessness of experience: 'Everything flows, everything merges into another thing, and the mixture is uncontrolled and impure; everything is destroyed, everything is smashed, nothing ever flowers into real life.' What's more, historical existence 'is the most unreal and unliving of all conceivable modes of being; one can describe it only negatively – by saying that something always comes to disturb the flow. ... Real life is always unreal, always impossible, in the midst of empirical life.'²³

But though this impossibility for principled action to find a foothold of any consequence in the world – its being countered, dissipated, wasted – is in some sense clearly 'tragic', what is properly tragic about the modern predicament is its refractoriness to tragic *form*. Form is a critical concept in Lukács's work of this period – form conceived as living something through to the end, arresting the flow, stamping a moment or an act with the singularity of a will or character. Whence Lukács's contention that 'The miracle of tragedy is a form-creating one.'²⁴ Note that it is precisely to the extent that an individual experience can have universal import, in its very contradictoriness, that tragedy is possible, as the living, agonistic relation between the ideal and the actual. It is this 'will to form' that also motivates Lukács's disdain for the anti-tragic character of modern conceptions of democracy. If form is the highest judge of life, and it shapes a hierarchy of possibilities, 'those democrats who are consistent about their demand for equal rights for all men have always disputed tragedy's right to existence.'²⁵

As Löwy notes, ‘Lukács’s mystical flight, suicidal despair, ascetic spiritual aristocratism, and tragic world view can be understood only in relation to his deep, radical, absolute, and intransigent rejection of the impurity and lack of authenticity of the bourgeois world.’²⁶ Once again, we are confronted with the paradoxical conviction that the contemporary predicament is tragic to the extent that it makes a life lived according to tragic form impossible. In the recognition of a rigid dichotomy between absolute and relative life and obsolescence of a romantic art of living, we encounter the impossibility of ‘performing a noble and authentic *gesture* in one’s actual life’.²⁷ This radical inauthenticity is also to be thought in terms of there being no *transition*, no passage between value and being, between ought and is. According to Löwy, ‘Lukács also displayed his Kantian dualism in a total, metaphysical opposition between the subjective universe of intention and the objective universe of the external consequences of one’s action.’²⁸ The wrenching paradox is thus that modernity is both a tragic condition, as the rule of abstractions sets the individual adrift into pointless interiority or ethical impotence, and the collapse of the very conditions for tragedy as an artistic, cultural and experiential form. And yet this remains the tragedy of individuality.

As I’ve suggested with reference to James’s reflections on the Haitian Revolution, it is precisely at the level of a collective historical experience of a crisis – a crisis that can throw up both the immiserating experience of arrested history or the disorienting one of the collision and stratification of different times and subjectivities – that a properly modern tragedy can be thought. This passage, from tragedy as situation for the individual to tragedy as a process for the collective (and *a fortiori* for the individual, be it as a partisan or an impossible bystander), could be schematized as a passage from the young Lukács back to Hegel and forward again to the later Lukács, C.L.R. James and Raymond Williams, but also to the Robert Linhart of *Lenin, les paysans et Taylor* or the Badiou of *Theory of the Subject*. This movement is also one from the political predicament of the modern as desolation, abstraction, evacuation to a conception of politics in terms of historical contexts of crisis and contradiction.

The later Lukács’s engagement with the young Hegel is in this respect instructive, since it highlights the historicity of Hegel’s conception of tragedy as a form that introduces us to a dialectical grasp of capitalism’s contradictions, while nonetheless remaining immanent to them. The young Hegel thus doubles as a critic of the young Lukács. According to Lukács, though

most ideologists (in the broad, and not necessarily pejorative, sense) of periods of capitalist turbulence, in Marx’s words, ‘seek the truth “amid the ‘manure’ of contradictions”, they frankly declare their findings, but contradictoriness as such does not reveal itself to them as the foundation of objective existence’.²⁹ They miss the ‘dynamic’ character of contradictions, and thus pose solutions as utopian alternatives rather than immanent mutations and revolutions. For Lukács, ‘the seminal importance of [Hegel’s] work rests precisely on his inconsistency’, but this is emphatically *not* in the manner of the Romantics, who lack the capacity to sustain an immanent realism, as well as an attention to the negativity of the present.

[T]he contradiction in Hegel’s philosophy of culture ... consists of the affirmation of the necessity and progressiveness of the forces that led to capitalism, with all their dire consequences to which, as we have seen in his description of poverty and wealth, he never closes his eyes; and at the same time, there is an impassioned struggle against the degradation and deformation of man brought about by capitalism with an equally compelling necessity.³⁰

We can think of this tragedy, in a more Marxian vein, as a tragedy of a *potential* force fettered by actual forms and relations, but also as tragedy on a scale that moves beyond the predicament of great, flawed individuals, to that of masses (a possible reading also of the dramatic arc of James’s *The Black Jacobins*). This is perhaps the crucial passage, and one that shows the shift from a Kantian to a Hegelian-Marxist conception of tragedy most clearly:

The hard core of Hegel’s conception of ‘tragedy in the realm of the ethical’ is that he is wholeheartedly in agreement with Adam Smith’s view that the development of the material forces of production is progressive and necessary, even in respect to culture since, as we have repeatedly maintained, the higher, more developed and spiritual form of individuality of the modern world goes hand in hand with the growth in the productive forces. He is as forceful as Smith and Ricardo in his strictures on the complaints of the Romantics about the modern world and he heaps scorn on their sentimentality that fixes on particulars while ignoring the overall situation. But at the same time, he also sees – and this brings him closer to the interests and preoccupations of Balzac and Fourier – that the type of man produced by this material advance in and through capitalism is the practical negation of everything great, significant and sublime that humanity had created in the course of its history up to then. The contradiction of two necessarily connected phenomena, the indissoluble bond between progress and the debasement of mankind, the purchase of progress at the cost of that

debasement – that is the heart of the ‘tragedy in the realm of the ethical’.³¹

But for Lukács, in whom the tragic operates an antidote to the romantic or utopian, when the urge for progress and emancipation is confronted with the realities of strife and the obstacles to advancement, it should be viewed from the vantage point of another, revolutionary reconciliation than the one proposed by Hegel:

For the real, dialectical analysis of human progress and its contradictions can only be undertaken from a point of view dominated by a belief in the ultimate victory of progress, despite all contradictions. Only the perspective of a classless society can provide a view of the tragedies to be encountered *en route* without succumbing to the temptations of a pessimistic romanticism.³²

Tragic times: unevenness, transition, revolution

In the wake of German philosophy’s formative encounter with what Kant euphemized in *The Conflict of the Faculties* as the ‘revolution of a gifted people’, we can say that the wholesale political and social upheaval that commenced in 1789 formed the philosophical matrix of modern tragedy. This tragic form is twofold: it inhabits the split between the universality of its meaning for the spectator and its unleashing of licentious cruelty among its militants, but it is also figured as the triggering of an implacable purifying logic, a kind of autophagic ‘passion for the real’.³³ Extracted from Kant and Hegel, respectively, these are two modes of the revolution philosophically grasped as a tragedy of universality – lines of thought that continue to have a shaping influence on political theory today. What I’d like to suggest here is that there is a less formalistic and perhaps more immanent way of conceptualizing the tragic form of revolutionary and transitional politics, as well as the way in which this tragic form is tied up with the temporalities of collective, transformative political action.

Among the most crucial sources for such an effort to rethink tragedy in a non-deflationary register as the dramatic form of political transformation, is Raymond Williams’s *Modern Tragedy*, a book that takes a periodizing interpretation of tragic literature in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as the occasion to consider ‘the structure of tragedy in our own culture’, beyond ‘the ordinary separation of social thinking and tragic thinking’.³⁴ There are two principal preconditions for such a reflection on tragedy. First, as Williams notes in an autobiographical key, the dismissal of the quotidian, plebeian use and experience of tragedy

needs to be resisted, countering Hegel’s observation that ‘True sympathy ... is not, of course, excited by ragamuffins and vagabonds.’³⁵ But if this first condition is clearly set against a bourgeois ideology of the aesthetic, the second premiss for a renewed consideration of tragedy – the inclusion of the tragic within the idea of revolution – clearly stands as a reproach to a political radicalism unwilling to fully confront the lived experience of revolution ‘as a whole action of living men’.³⁶

Williams’s argument can be seen to long prefigure but also to radically undermine recent turns to tragedy as a mode of post-revolutionary disenchantment or melancholia. Echoing, to an extent, Clark’s asseverations against the coldness of communist calculus, Williams castigates the immunizing bad faith that sees real suffering as beyond the ledgers of the revolution, as ‘a class swept away by history, an error in the working of the machine, blood that is not and can never be rose water’. But against those who lay suffering at the door of the revolution, and who would pose the tragic as its antidote, he argues that ‘the revolution is an inevitable working through of a deep and tragic disorder, to which we can respond in varying ways but which will in any case, in one way or another, work its way through our world, as a consequence of any of our actions. I see revolution, that is to say, in a tragic perspective.’³⁷ Whence the assumption of terror as a possible dimension of revolutionary upheaval, though one never to be merely ascribed to the impersonal, antagonistic logic of necessity.³⁸

This tragic perspective envisages the revolution as a long transition, immersed and entangled in the ponderous legacies and contradictions of the capitalist society it determinately negates. Tragedy lies both in the character of contemporary society and in the unfolding of any process of dismantling, refunctioning and foundation that would, by contrast with Clark’s depiction, do something else and something more than desperately offset the worst demons of our nature: ‘A society in which revolution is necessary is a society in which the incorporation of all its people, *as whole human beings*, is in practice impossible without a change in its fundamental form of relationships’ – which is why revolutionary action must impel ‘the change in the *form* of the activity of a society, in its deepest structure of relationships and feelings’.³⁹

Indeed, we could say, recalling Hegel’s conception of capitalist tragedy in the light of an impossible ethical life, as outlined by Lukács, that the tragedy of the present is only discernible from the virtual vantage point of its overcoming. But this vantage point is not

utopia, it is *transition*, which, as a determinate negation of a baleful, contradictory present, is of necessity tragic. Williams's diagnosis of revolutionary utopianism as the disavowal or foreclosure of transition as tragedy remains instructive:

And if [revolution] is thus tragic in its origins – in the existence of a disorder that cannot but move and involve – it is equally tragic in its action, in that it is not against gods or inanimate things that its impulse struggles, nor against mere institutions and social forms, but against other men. This throughout has been an area of silence in the development of the idea. What is properly called utopianism, or revolutionary romanticism, is the suppression or dilution of this quite inevitable fact.⁴⁰

But transition as tragedy is also occluded by a reformism that, engaging its energies solely against the menace of outright violence and war, ignores their origins in the basic determinants of contemporary society and experience: 'the real tragic danger, underlying war and revolution, is a disorder which we continually re-enact'.⁴¹ This is why, in a manner diametrically opposed to the leftist politics of *kat-echon* advanced in Clark's retreat from revolution, Williams affirms that the lesson of tragedy is not that of holding the dark side of human nature at bay, but rather the necessity to think revolution as an inevitably protracted and multidimensional transformation of the deep structures of our relations and experience. To really resolve, rather than ignore, suppress or neutralize tragic disorder means taking on revolution as collective experience and organized strategy, always confronted by its counter-finality, by the suffering endured and inflicted, but also by the conviction that it is only in the totalizing dimension of a revolutionary process that political justice and equality have a chance of being enacted:

The tragic action, in its deepest sense, is not the confirmation of disorder, but its experience, its comprehension, and its resolution. In our own time, this action is general, and its common name is revolution. We have to see the evil and the suffering, in the factual disorder that makes revolution necessary, and in the disordered struggle against that disorder. We have to recognize this suffering in a close and immediate experience, and not to cover it with names. But we follow the whole action: not only the evil, but the men who have fought against evil; not only the crisis, but the energy released by it, the spirit learned in it. We make the connections, because that is the action of tragedy, and what we learn in suffering is again revolution, because we acknowledge others as men and any such acknowledgment is the beginning of struggle, as the continuing

reality of our lives. Then to see revolution in this tragic perspective is the only way to maintain it.⁴²

The attention to historical tragedy in Marx himself, especially as evidenced in his letter to Ferdinand Lassalle, criticizing the latter's *Franz von Sickingen*,⁴³ is closely connected to the temporal modalities and unevenness of capitalism, the tragic revolutions and revolutionaries which surge up in moments of crisis, in which they are capable of anticipating horizons of emancipation far into the future while being out of step with the emergent constellations of class, power and capital. These revolts are not residual, they are wholly modern.

This is why Friedrich Engels's account of the necessity of the defeat of the peasants' war, which also haunts C.L.R. James's portrayal of Toussaint in tragic garb, could be regarded as the template for Marxist



tragedy – as well as an antidote to the image of Engels as the bogeyman for everything linear, Eurocentric and determinist in historical materialism. The millenarianism of Thomas Müntzer and the peasant insurgency against the princes is both a historical symptom and a revolutionary precursor, which explains, in Engels's words,

why the plebeian opposition of that time could not be satisfied with fighting feudalism and the privileged middle-class alone; why, in fantasy, at least, it reached beyond modern bourgeois society then only in its inception; why, being an absolutely property-less faction, it questioned institutions, views and conceptions common to every society based on division of classes. The chiliastic dream-visions of ancient Christianity offered in this respect a very serviceable starting-point. On the other hand, this reaching out beyond not only the present but also the future, could not help being violently fantastic. At the first practical application, it naturally fell back into narrow limits set by prevailing conditions.⁴⁴

Contravening any rigid conception of Marxian method, Engels takes the prophetic character of Müntzer seriously, seeing his preaching not just as the expression of the demands of the oppressed, or as a compilation of their grievances, but as ‘a genius’s anticipation of the conditions for the emancipation of the proletarian element that had just begun to develop among the plebeians’.⁴⁵

An unreconciled politics

Yet, if we follow Engels, the temptation would then be to think of tragedy as something that the maturation of class struggle, and the *synchronization* forced through by the proletarian subject, could dispel. What I would like to suggest, by way of conclusion, is that the process of revolution, of transition – with its material pressures, its actually contradictory but in themselves legitimate demands, its superimposition of multiple temporalities of accumulation and subjectivation – could be conceived as *ineliminably* tragic, thus dispensing with the sterile and comforting juxtaposition of tragedy and revolution proposed by the likes of Clark and Scott. The insistence of ambivalence, antinomy and paradox would here be linked to the striving for totality. Absent the horizons of totalization and emancipation, there is no tragic thought. To ‘accept’ the tragic as our condition would in effect be to deny it, since it would neutralize the tragic character of modern, collective action, so strikingly formulated by Williams when he wrote that

changing ourselves, in fundamental ways, and our unwillingness to do this, the certainty of disturbance, the probability of secondary and unforeseen disorder, put the question [of revolution], inevitably, into a tragic form. The only consciousness that seems adequate in our world is then an exposure to the actual disorder. The only action that seems adequate is, really, a participation in the disorder, as a way of ending it.⁴⁶

Following A.C. Bradley’s reading of Hegel, we could say that tragedy’s centre of gravity is action and conflict rather than suffering and misfortune. But transition as tragedy is also the absence of reconciliation. To put it another way, conciliation has to be stripped of any suggestion of a return, a reconstitution; it is a construction, a leap. What is more, inasmuch as the modern tragedy par excellence is to be found in the revolutionary process, it is a tragedy without catastrophe – if the latter is the canonical form of the resolution of tragedies, usually by way of a symbolic death. Bradley writes that

the tragic action portrays a self-division or intentional conflict of spirit, so the catastrophe displays the violent annulling of this division or conflict. ... On the hand [the catastrophe] is the act of a power immeasurably superior to that of the conflicting agents, a power which is irresistible and unescapable, and which is overbears and negates whatever is incompatible with it. ... But ... if this were all and this necessity were merely infinite, characterless, external force, the catastrophe would not only terrify (as it should), it would also horrify, depress, or at best provoke indignation or rebellion; and these are not tragic feelings. The catastrophe, then, must have a second and affirmative aspect, which is the source of our feelings of reconciliation, whatever form they may assume. And this will be taken into account if we describe the catastrophe as the violent self-restitution of the divided spiritual unity. The necessity which acts and negates in it, that is to say, is yet of one substance with both the agents. *It* is divided against itself in them, so far as they are compatible with that unity.

This is ‘the affirmative aspect of catastrophe’.⁴⁷ Transition as tragedy is instead the opposite of what Walter Benjamin famously called catastrophe in permanence. And perhaps, though he tends very problematically to downplay the unevenness, the suffering and the experience of tragedy, it is here that Alain Badiou’s reflections on tragedy in his *Theory of the Subject* can help think how tragedy could be a political form that does not harbour a melancholy disenchantment or an illusory and conservative reconciliation, but instead proposes the possibility of a traversal and recasting of the law, a new foundation. Badiou declares: ‘The possible modernity of the tragic is a political question – as a question for the theory of the subject.’⁴⁸ Whence the championing, in a critical dialogue with Hölderlin, of the *Oresteia* against *Antigone*; the break, through a new foundation of freedom, of the infinite law of blood-guilt. This tragedy is that of the dynamic division and re-foundation of the law. There are thus two forms of Greek tragedy: ‘[T]he Aeschylean one, the direction of which is the contradictory advent of justice by the courage of the new; and the Sophoclean one, the anguished sense of which is the quest, through a reversal, for the superegoic origin.’⁴⁹ What Badiou’s reading of the *Oresteia* suggests is the vision of a tragedy not of catastrophe but of ‘instituting rupture’, which would resist a return to order, instead advancing the recomposition of a new order. To think this tragedy of a new order, alongside the tragedy of capitalist contradiction and transitional action, is a necessary task for any political thought trying to navigate the fraught relation between actuality and the idea.

Notes

- This paper was originally delivered at the 'Actuality and the Idea' conference of the Princeton Theory Reading Group, in May 2012. I thank the organizers, and in particular Gavin Arnall and Nick Nesbitt, for their invitation and hospitality.
1. See Robert Meister, *After Evil: A Politics of Human Rights*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2011.
 2. T.J. Clark, 'For a Left with No Future', *New Left Review* 74, March–April 2012, pp. 53–75. Although unacknowledged in *New Left Review*, this is the text of a lecture that was commissioned for the series 'The State of Things', which made up part of the Norwegian Representation at the 54th International Art Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia, June–November 2011. It was presented there under the title 'The Experience of Defeat', the title under which it appears in the publication of that series: Marta Kuzma, Pablo Lafuente and Peter Osborne, eds, *The State of Things*, Office for Contemporary Art Norway/Koenig Books, London, 2012, pp. 247–82. The quotation from Bradley appears at *NLR* 74, p. 59/*The State of Things*, p. 257.
 3. *NLR* 74, p. 57/*The State of Things*, pp. 255–6.
 4. *NLR* 74, p. 58/*The State of Things*, pp. 256–7.
 5. Cf. Susan Watkins, 'Presentism? A Reply to T.J. Clark', in the same issue of the journal: *New Left Review* 74, March–April 2012, pp. 77–102; pp. 81–3.
 6. I have tried to explore the presence of this theme in Lukács, Sartre, and the recent debate between Žižek and Badiou over Mao's legacy in 'The Dirty Hands of the Dialectic', *Brumaria* 22, 2011, pp. 219–34.
 7. *NLR* 74, p. 61/*The State of Things*, p. 261.
 8. David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 2004, p. 133.
 9. *Ibid.*, p. 190.
 10. *Ibid.*, p. 166.
 11. See my *Fanaticism: On the Uses of an Idea*, Verso, London and New York, 2010, ch. 2.
 12. C.L.R. James, *Modern Politics*, Charles H. Kerr, Detroit MI, 1973, p. 157.
 13. Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*, p. 220.
 14. C.L.R. James to William Gorman, 18 September 1950, p. 1. I quote this letter from Aaron Love's superb doctoral dissertation *The Caribbean Novel and the Realization of History in the Era of Decolonization*, New York University, May 2011, and specifically from chapter 2: 'C.L.R. James and the Postcolonial Caribbean: The Black Jacobins and the Tragedy of Underdevelopment'. I am grateful to the author for making this unpublished material available to me.
 15. 'Hence, for James, these new masses are implicated in the tragic movement of history just as much as the bourgeois individual. That they experience the possibility of freedom and, at the same time, the limits set upon its full realization by the development of the productive forces, means, for James, that the issue of underdevelopment, the question of transition, becomes the problem of modern tragedy.' (*Long Way from Home* blog post, 10 March 2010, <http://fragments-correspondence.org/2010/03/the-origins-of-modern-tragedy-in-clr-james>).
 16. C.L.R. James, 'Rough Notes from Discussion for Melville Book', p. 3. Quoted in Love, *The Caribbean Novel and the Realization of History in the Era of Decolonization*.
 17. See Reinhart Koselleck, 'Crisis', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 67, no. 2, April 2006.
 18. A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, Harmondsworth, London, 1991, p. 9.
 19. G.W.F. Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, trans. T.F. Geraets, W.A. Suchting and H.S. Harris, Hackett, New York, 1991, p. 214.
 20. Georg Lukács, *Soul and Form*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2010. But consider also the development of this theme in *Theory of the Novel*: 'Philosophy only exists for unhappy ages, as a symptom of the rift between "inside" and "outside", a sign of the essential difference between the self and the world, the incongruence of soul and deed' (Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. A. Bostock, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1971, p. 29). It is a sign of the collapse of 'integrated civilizations'. Though he refers to them as 'great and timeless paradigmatic forms of world literature', Lukács also puts epic, tragedy and philosophy in a kind of sequence. 'The world of the epic answers the question: how can life become essential? But the answer ripened into a question only when the substance had retreated to a far horizon. Only when tragedy had supplied the creative answer to the question: how can essence come alive? did men become aware that life as it was (the notion of life as it should be cancels out life) had lost the immanence of the essence' until 'the creative act of philosophy had revealed tragic destiny as the cruel and senseless arbitrariness of the empirical' (p. 35).
 21. Georg Lukács, *Record of a Life: An Autobiographical Sketch*, trans. R. Livingstone, Verso, London, 1983, pp. 98–9.
 22. Georg Lukács, 'Diary (1910–1911)', in *The Lukács Reader*, ed. A. Kadarkay, Wiley–Blackwell, Oxford, 1995, pp. 26–41.
 23. Georg Lukács, 'The Metaphysics of Tragedy', in *Soul and Form*, p. 176. Further: 'And because nature and fate have never been so terrifyingly soulless as they are today, because men's souls have never walked in such utter loneliness upon deserted paths, because of all of this we may again hope for the coming of tragedy – once all the dancing shadows of a friendly order, which our cowardly dreams have cast upon nature to allow us a false sense of security, have entirely disappeared' (p. 177). But the young Lukács's tragedy is also detached from the train of history, from the contrast between contradictory wills, unconscious tendencies, stubborn interests: 'the time and space of tragedy have no perspective that might modify or mitigate them. ... Everything counts in tragedy, and everything has equal force and weight' (pp. 179–80).
 24. *Ibid.*, p. 183.
 25. *Ibid.*, p. 197.
 26. Michael Löwy, *Georg Lukács: From Romanticism to Bolshevism*, trans. P. Camiller, Verso, London, 1979, p. 108. But note that the tragic world-view is in a sense founded on the absence or impossibility of true tragedy in the world.
 27. *Ibid.*, p. 101.
 28. *Ibid.*, pp. 104–5.
 29. Georg Lukács, *The Young Hegel: Studies in the Relations between Dialectics and Economics*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1977, p. 399.
 30. *Ibid.*, p. 402.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 408.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 418.
33. See Stathis Kouvelakis, *Philosophy and Revolution: From Kant to Marx*, trans. G.M. Goshgarian, Verso, London and New York, 2001, and Alain Badiou, *The Century*, trans. A. Toscano, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2007.
34. Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, Verso, London, 1979, pp. 62–3.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 33. For the autobiographical connection, see p. 13.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 65.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 75.
38. Hardening and negation may be inevitable aspects of revolutionary processes, but they are not reasons for repudiation, if they are considered truly ‘tragic’ rather than noxious aspects. ‘We have still to attend to the whole action, and to see actual liberation as part of the same process as the terror which appals us. I do not mean that liberation cancels terror; I mean only that they are connected, and that this connection is tragic. The final truth in this matter seems to be that revolution – the long revolution against human alienation – produces, in real historical circumstances, its own new kinds of alienation, which it must struggle to understand and which it must overcome, if it is to remain revolutionary’ (*ibid.*, p. 82). To a question about the ambivalence between the presence of pity and (Aristotelian) terror in political action and possible apologies for Terror of the Stalinist kind, presented by the editors of *New Left Review*, Williams responds as follows: ‘There is the level of suffering which is involved in any sudden overthrow of an old society and the initial struggle to create a new one. There is another level of terror, brought about by the enforcement of revolutionary discipline not just against the enemies of the revolution, but over people who are involved or were involved in it or who represent a different tendency inside it. Under extreme exposure, a terror can occur which is inextricable from the liberating process: something quite different from the familiar repression of an armed gang exercising a dictatorship to preserve the old order. Through all the complications, I would say that this was basically the case in the Soviet Union during the early twenties. It is a very hard thing to accept, but I think you have got to accept it and see it as tragic. If you do not see it as tragic, you are not taking its full weight; if you regard it as a logical consequence, you reject the revolution. But that does not mean that there is bound to be systematic terror’ (Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters: Interview with New Left Review*, Verso, London, 1981, p. 396).
39. Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, p. 76.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 77.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 84.
43. Marx to Ferdinand Lassalle, 19 April 1859, in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 40, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1983, p. 418. As Giancarlo Buonfino shows, Lassalle’s play was intended as a presentation of the *formal idea of revolution*, and Marx countered it, in the context of his ongoing polemics with the social-democratic leader, by relying on the conception of tragedy drawn from Hegel’s *Aesthetics* (Giancarlo Buonfino, *La politica culturale operaia. Da Marx e Lassalle alla rivoluzione di Novembre 1859–1919*, Feltrinelli, Milan, 1975).
44. Friedrich Engels, *The Peasant War in Germany*, trans. M.J. Olgin, George Allen & Unwin, London, 1927, p. 66.
45. *Ibid.*
46. Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, p. 81.
47. A.C. Bradley, ‘Hegel’s Theory of Tragedy’, in *Oxford Lectures on Poetry*, Macmillan, London, 1909, p. 91.
48. Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject* (1982), trans. Bruno Bosteels, Continuum, London and New York, 2009, p. 163.
49. *Ibid.*, p. 165.

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