

False Totalities Don't Have Exits: Introduction to Error

By Endnotes

This text was initially part of a presentation of the Endnotes text 'Error' at the 'What is to Be Done under Real Subsumption' workshop at Bulegoa, Bilbao, 28–29 November 2014. An early draft of the text was published in the Arts Against Cuts' book Bad Feelings (2015). This version is a composite of the introduction to that presentation and the text published in Bad Feelings.

The following is a fragment from a work in progress that was intended to appear in *Endnotes* No.4.¹ It's a strange and perhaps difficult text, and one that we fear will be prone to misinterpretation. The core intention here is to identify and critique fundamental conceptual structures that are latent in revolutionary thinking – structures that set the terms of certain recurrent disputes around such thinking. These structures are most explicit in formalised theory, but are also, we think, implicit in the everyday 'common sense' of struggles. The point of such critique is not simply to transcend such structures, since this may not actually be possible: despite their limits, these structures have a certain necessity. As such, one might view this as a somewhat 'Kantian' project, though the theoretical sensibility at play here generally owes more to Hegel.

The project can be framed narrowly as responding to a standard genre of critique of *Endnotes* that we find exemplified in articles by Alberto Toscano, in a muddled piece from Matthijs Krul, and in the subtlest example so far, Ray Brassier's 'Wandering Abstraction'. Recently this genre has been entangled with debates around a supposed competing brand of radical intellectual chic, a rival fad-word to set against 'communisation theory': 'accelerationism'. Plainly put, at the core of this genre is the 'what do we do with all the stuff?' question; a question to which there are apparently four possible answers: (a) smash it up, (b) keep it, (c) change it, and (d) some mixture of answers a-c. In the rhetorical game which ensues around this question, 'communisation theory' will inevitably be placed at (a), its most naïve leftist critics at (b), while those who want to appear right-thinking and pragmatic will place themselves at (c), or perhaps (d). Narrowly, this text can be viewed as a critique of this game, which naturally involves a refusal to accept any placing of *Endnotes* at (a), but is also intended to problematise the idea that any alternative allocation on this game's board is an adequate response.

But, beyond the terms of that debate, the text is also meant to address broader fundamental problems in thinking about the notion of revolutionary rupture. The key determinant here is the concept of totality employed in identifying that which is to be abolished. Some notion of totality is unavoidable, but any such notion seems necessarily to raise a set of irresolvable metaphysical problems. With adequate critical self-reflection, these problems can at least be negotiated as long as the concept of totality with which we are operating is a determinate one, in which not only the unity of all moments, but also their systematic differentiation from each other, can be clearly articulated. The Marxist notion of a capitalist mode of production is an example of such a determinate totality.

¹ Though the full version was scheduled for *Endnotes* No.4, the mass of other content meant it was held over for *Endnotes* No.5, which was supposed to follow shortly after. In the event, that volume did not reach the printers until 2019, making for a peculiarly long gestation. The core idea of the text remained essentially unchanged throughout, though we shifted emphasis from 'false' to 'indeterminate' totalities, on the basis that the true/false dichotomy was confusing: totalities that are indeterminate might be still be 'true' in some sense. For example, 'society' is an indeterminate totality, since we cannot systematically and exhaustively enumerate its constituent mediations, but it is no less real, and indeed thinking of it as an indeterminate whole may actually be somewhat appropriate. As such, the indeterminate totality need not represent a mere *mistake*. What does stand to be critically interrogated is the way thought slides between determinate and indeterminate totalities, often blurring the two, and the impact that this has on revolutionary speculation. Try imagining revolution as an exit from *society*: while some ultra-radical contrarians will of course try to do just that, the challenge for them will be to imbue such thinking with definite content.

But there is often a slide from this determinate notion to another one, where the whole that is to be superseded is posited as a sort of indeterminate ‘absolute’, underlying and saturating every particular of our problematic. When this occurs, those metaphysical problems become monstrous, condemning us to the infinite working-through of variants of traditional theological problematics, searching for an ‘exit’ where there can be none. We call the projection of such totalities ‘false totalisation’, since the projected totality is contentless, an indeterminate ‘all’ involving no real articulation of its moments.

Thinking which confuses capital’s domination of the world at large, and its possession of the apparatuses of human reproduction, with a generalised logico-ontological ‘subsumption’ of all particulars, tends to be entwined with a false totalisation, and for this reason in particular is to be criticised. The determinate totality which is the capitalist mode of production does not, and will never, saturate the entire human world, let alone the natural one. But it does possess human reproductive apparatuses in general, at a planetary level. And it follows from this that our very being will be at stake in any supersession of the capitalist mode of production.

As to the concept of ‘error’ that titles this text, we have yet to work this through with enough precision for it to be worthy of debate, but it can be said provisionally at least that it is derived from the technical notions of error at play in the strange ontology of statistics, and in engineering, where it represents not a mere mistake, but an *objective disparity*. It is intended on the one hand as a sort of negative identification of the gulf between particular practices that are materialised within the stuff of capitalist societies, and a communist refiguring of human practice in general, and on the other hand as an identification of the objective disparity between real processes of revolutionary change and our capacity to conceptualise them. These two disparities are closely related.

We will end this introduction with a few rough propositions that have not yet been adequately developed in the fragment below, but which might prove fodder for debate this weekend:

Proposition 1:

Projective imaginings of both a general managed transition beyond capitalism – in which a singular thread of decision applies globally – and a singular, spontaneous, insurrectionary break with it, are effects of the conceptual artefacts necessarily produced by the impossibility of consistently or adequately thinking through the end of a totality. Both are equally the offspring of unavoidable but inadequate abstractions. There’s thus little point in arguing over which one is the better.

Proposition 2:

If both above projections are structurally constrained to being mere fantasies, this basic conceptual problem is only compounded by historical conditions in which there exists no significant ready-constituted social subject with the overcoming of the mode of production as its notional goal. The absence of such a subject underlines the fact that seemingly common sense, pragmatic ideas about a globally planned transition are just as fantastical as their ostensible alternatives.

Proposition 3:

This, of course, doesn’t mean we should think that a revolution will have to happen ‘by accident’.

Proposition 4:

If neither process nor event can adequately capture what the end of a totality would look like, nor will forging some mere conceptual admixture of the two ultimately solve the problem, since concepts are immiscible.² This is equally true of origin.

² That is to say: concepts can only meaningfully be brought together by further mediating terms which identify their relations while allowing them to retain their distinctness.

Proposition 5:

The impossibility of adequately thinking this problem through on the basis of mere concepts should not be mistaken for a concrete impossibility. The origin of the capitalist mode of production was impossible in a similar way, yet it still happened. In current global conditions, with ecological crisis, sputtering economies and mounting surplus population.

Error

In a world whose social forms are shaped by capital, it is perhaps to capital that we should look for explanation of the material imprints and patterns left by those forms – not just in the production process itself, but also in all the implications of this process as it unfolds across the globe. If capital moulds social relations to its ends and means, those relations in turn mould the stuff of the world. And if the affordances of that stuff enable and limit our activity, our own capacities must thus be seen as in part defined by capital. From this there follows a conundrum in the communist imaginary: absent the constitutive social forms of capitalist society, what will people do about all the stuff of the capitalist world and the parameters it gives to their action and behaviour? How will they be able to work with these things to reproduce themselves, without being compelled to reverse engineer the social relations that have inscribed themselves in them?

This intractable question invites two troublesome answers. Either:

1. Given the depth of penetration of the effects of capital into the very material structure of the world, it will be necessary to break directly with the entire structure of things as given, since anything less than this will amount to a perpetuation or return of capitalist social relations. Or,
2. Given the general human dependence on capitalist infrastructure, it will be necessary to take a pragmatic approach, keeping this infrastructure running while we grapple with the Herculean political problem of managing and coordinating some global transitional phase.

From the standpoint of the first answer it will be said in response to the second: keeping such infrastructure running would be tantamount to keeping capitalism in general running, since such things cannot be extricated from the global capitalist system. And from the standpoint of the second it will be said in response to the first: to advocate some immediate break with the material structure of the capitalist world in general is to advocate a gigantic global humanitarian disaster, since there is no other ready means for dealing with the needs of seven billion people.

These contrary standpoints, for all the difference between a homely common sense and a rigorous principle, have at least one common implication: insofar as the future is foreseeable on the basis of things as currently given, it is capitalism or else. If the affordances of the world are shaped by the imprint of capital, this currently gives and forecloses the horizon. Thus, at the limit of Hercules' labours there's still an inscription that says *nec plus ultra*: nothing else beyond but an ineffable negativity. And whether they liked it or not, our intransigents, for their part, would quickly be confronted with all the pragmatic problems of carving some path through all this crud. If the capital-constrained vectors written into the stuff of the world lead indefinitely towards the horizon, communism must be projected as an indeterminate, far-off break in these vectors. And as to the exact placement or character of that break: infinitesimals of sectarian fun await those who try to take up a strict position – or consign some opponent to one – on such matters.

Antinomies of Communist Thought

If we squint our eyes this problematic resembles another – the one with which Marx grapples in the section of *Capital* on 'so-called primitive accumulation.' Given that capital is a systematic interrelation of moments which posits its preconditions as a primary result, this confronts us with a

question: how could such a thing originate in the first place? This is an instance of the problem of bridging the gulf between any synchronic theory and a diachronic account of the same totality – or, more broadly, of the ancient and intractable philosophical problem of how to think becoming. Considered synchronically, given that all moments of the totality are simultaneously necessary, in all their systematic relations, the problem of origin appears absolute: capital must have sprung fully formed into the world, and it can't have existed at all a mere instant prior to this. But considered in diachronic terms this claim appears irrational: though little moments of genesis are part of the overall continuity of things, historical development doesn't produce miracles. Marx avoids this problem by reducing the question to that of the historical separation of producers from the means of production – something for which a history can be narrated, and which the synchronic analysis has demonstrated to be a fundamental prerequisite for generalised capitalist production.

In strict theoretical terms, however, this move is inadequate, since it only sidesteps the question of the origin of the system of forms of value that mediate the separated relation of producers and means of production. This separation is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for the capitalist mode of production. Thus we can ask whether a different – non-capitalist – mode of production might have been possible on the basis of this simple separation if, for example, capital's self-valorisation had been absent as motive force. However, rather than getting caught up in such speculation, we might provisionally bracket this problem as merely an unavoidable theoretical artefact of a nonetheless necessary distinction. We know, after all, that capitalism did come to be, and Marx's account of this history is a plausible one. To push further on the problem might look like philosophical onanism – and, of course, it's better to attend to the actual world.

But if, on the basis of a synchronic grasp of capital as totality, the origin presents itself as a problem, or historically as a sort of 'miracle', something similar is true of capital's demise. On the strict basis of capital's systemic integrity, its demise is unthinkable, and thus, when postulated, tends to take the abstract form of a pure rupture. And there results a strong temptation to recoil from this thought into assuming instead the concrete impossibility of anything so absolute, anything so mystical: of course, some intermediate phase must be postulated and the purity of such a rupture diminished; more pragmatic steps must be taken... Yet no amount of common-sense transitioning can bridge from what is to what is not without still implicitly posing the problem of when specifically the break takes place – the problem, if framed in this way, does not go away. The theoretical effects of the synchronic/diachronic distinction appear again, now resembling one of Zeno's paradoxes.

So, again, we might bracket such matters as theoretical artefacts, and as not necessarily referring to any literal historical truth, much as the axiomatic projection of a single infinite flat plane can occur as an artefact of Euclidean geometry without rendering that geometry useless in the face of the non-flatness of the world. And let's try to resist pictorialising this necessarily abstract concept of a pure final rupture in the concrete world of our revolutionary imaginary, for the resulting visions are guaranteed to be facile, simply depicting this abstractness. Against such imaginings, the common-sense recoil to faith in 'transition' is understandable. Yet it will always be susceptible to the impertinent prodding of a theoretical absolutism which correctly perceives that, in itself, no amount of transition can amount to a rupture.

A Rube Goldberg Contraption

Now, let's recall that capital itself was the only totality at stake in all that questioning; not yet even capitalist society, let alone the things that bear the imprint of that society. If the simple question of thinking capital's demise on the basis of its systemic integrity leads us into metaphysical conundrums (a problem that no amount of crisis theory can solve of its own accord), it would seem reasonable to reframe the question on other bases, such that we no longer assume the very thing we

want to negate. If capital's totality is restrictable to the various phases in its circuit, there's surely plenty else out there that we depend upon: can't we plant our feet in 'nature' or 'the commons' or 'the autonomy of the working class' or 'humanity,' from whence we can swivel our analytical instruments and look at capital from the outside as something subject to forces other than itself? From here it looks all artifice. How could we have been so foolish as to start from a position whose assumption was the eternalisation of the very thing whose demise we wanted to think?

So we marshal all our forces – nature, the commons, the autonomy of the working class, humanity, etc. A mere mode of production can never be a match for such a formidable army. But it's impossible to form battle lines when both antagonists are spread all over the place. What's more, the capitalist side is running the other's logistics... . Particularistic and contingent as this totality may look – when measured up against the empty universality of such bald abstractions – if we are to take a realist survey of the forces at play, we're compelled to note that this mode of production is necessary for the reproduction of such antagonists as it meets. And thus it is easily master of the entire strategic terrain. This mere mode of production has miraculously made itself once more into the Absolute of this problematic: from the perspective of action it fills the whole horizon, and communism has been reduced again to an abstract messianism.

Thus our world appears capitalist through-and-through. We can now apply a philosophical lacquer to our new-found realism; a viscous solution of such things as 'reification' and 'subsumption', as is the wont of a particular kind of philosophically oriented Marxism which can be traced back at least to Lukács's reification essay. This type of Marxism revels intellectually in projecting some subsumption of the world, without remainder, into a monolithic totality, of which the essence is capital or one of its avatars. Since all is tendentially subsumed in this totality, our elementary philosophical problem of thinking becoming now takes on grander proportions – for no particularisation of a totality is conceivable when it is absolute, projected across the breadth of social being and into the depths of its material imprints. Thus revolutionary thinking is faced with a version of a theological problematic: immanence vs. transcendence. If communism is immanently produced within a capitalist world, how is it not to be just a perpetuation of capitalism? If communism transcends this world, how are we to get there, given the depth of our subsumption within capitalism? It is necessary to think the impossible passing-over of a limit, the working-through of a contradiction: immanent transcendence. It's a seductive problem that lends itself to no end of forlorn and playful manipulation. But even play gets boring eventually, and boredom is a mode of critique.

So let's retrace our steps to the beginning, and throw our thoughts again speculatively at the crud of the world. The application in which I write this is developed by volunteers. Within sight, there's a garden on wasteland reclaimed by local residents. The route that leads north-south from here has connected not just capitalist conurbations, but also medieval towns and hamlets. The kinds of vessels whose shards litter deep layers of the earth are still currently in use, with the same affordances. The spaces between these words were invented by feudal scribes. To the north, the woodless hills that roll either side were cleared not by capital, but by neolithic people. If capital is the motive factor in shaping social forms which in turn leave their imprint on all the stuff of the world, we would of course be distinctly overestimating its spread and power if we really thought that there was nothing here that was not referable to – and explicable in terms of – capital. To theoretically project capital's totalisation beyond what capital can legitimately explain is to make a false – merely imaginary – totalisation. The crud of the world, with its limits and affordances, extends far beyond capital's horizon.

Poor Miserable Heath Robinson

Yet there's a truth pictorialised in such false totalisations. While it doesn't encompass all the

world's stuff, capital's self-totalisation involves an inner tendency towards expansion, and the value form it autonomises projects itself as the potential universal to all the world's particulars. Capital thus makes a claim – however spuriously – to logical universality, while it subordinates one aspect of social reproduction after another to its prerogatives. Most importantly, in this process it posits a tendentially general proletarian 'we,' with everything at stake in this reproduction. This we, whose being is immanent to the capitalist mode of production, is only insofar as capital mediates its reproduction, putting it logically at stake in any overcoming of capital itself. It is never in a state of absolute identity with the creatures it subsumes – they'll always dwell in the crud of the world prior to inhabiting capitalist society – but insofar as capital mediates their reproduction, these creatures are posited as proletarians. This seizing-hold of social reproduction by capital, and this positing of a class for whom everything is at stake in this reproduction, is the real generalisation of the proletariat. Through this process, capital takes the lives of an expanding mass of humanity under its uncertain stewardship, generalising the stakes held in a capital-mediated social reproduction. At the same time, it has a tendency to corrode such reciprocity as there is in these bonds, throwing workers into ever more dependent conditions and insecurity. And as it does so, while the stakes are raised, the odds simultaneously lengthen. Thus a whole shape of life comes to be put precariously in question.

Meanwhile, integrative processes inherent to political-economic and technical levels tie this reproduction increasingly into a unified and globally articulated system. Practical-technical vectors written into the stuff of the world gradually lose much of the 'ready-to-hand'-ness appropriate to the Robinson-like practical individual, as their globality lends them an ineffable quality, always receding over the horizon of that individual's perception. 'My' actions are decreasingly encapsulable as complete or self-subsistent, meaningful in themselves, deferring vanishingly instead down a chain of other actions.

Now the 'state of nature' of the communist imaginary looks ever more remote from that of the Lockean practical type, while Rousseauian and Hobbesian terms lose sense: abstracted from this vast reproductive apparatus the human could be reduced neither to an ignoble, primordial state of violence nor to some precorrupted condition, but only to inanimate matter. A breakdown of capitalist reproduction becomes imaginable only as a breakdown of human reproduction per se, and the communist imaginary increasingly a mere blank negativity, its most concrete forms mirroring the emptiest, merely logical derivation from the theoretical artefacts we examined above. Now the most abstract anarchisms become the common sense of struggles, while social democracy whiffs of utopia.

It would be a strange thing to advocate wilfully either for that blank negativity, or for its simple, pragmatic management as we cling on to this apparatus for dear life; and there is no obvious mediating path. Besides, at this large scale, though we are never passive, there's little straightforward choice that comes into such matters. Yet the odds continue to lengthen while the stakes are raised. And thus at some point, we can reasonably speculate, the bulk of humanity will have to find another way of reproducing itself. It is inconceivable that it could do this instantaneously, or acting merely under the most abstract kind of spontaneity. It is also inconceivable that it could simply cut the cable on its capitalist life support and head back into some rustivating bliss. However abstractly this negation presents itself on the horizon, the course of any real revolutionary struggle to escape this bind will of course be entirely concrete; rich in articulations, coordinations, mediations. And while it would be vain to think we could draw up detailed blueprints in advance, it would also be absurd to advocate for mere passivity. So in the meantime we struggle as well as we can, and in the process we strain to trace the strategic logic of things, to map the crud of the world from where we stand, and to reflect that back into the struggles themselves.

Tangent Space

So what will we do with all the crud of the world? The question does not stop asking itself. But it would be quixotic to think that we could answer it right away from some merely contemplative position, sorting all this shit into the columns of a communist's inventory: keeps, junks, repurposes. There is stuff with regards to which it would be pointless to speculate as to the capitalist-ness or otherwise of its affordances, and there's stuff that would be of strategic significance in any revolutionary struggle. Yet the latter is precisely the kind that is most inextricably entwined with the global reproductive apparatus; it can't be disaggregated and evaluated in abstraction from that apparatus, and the problem it poses can't be resolved into a keeping or a junking. 'Repurposing' is probably closest to what people would find a need to do, but it's also the vaguest of these terms, and hardly an answer at all to a question which can only be posed properly in practice.

It would be a case of false totalisation to take all this stuff to be irredeemably capitalist: social forms cannot be identified with the crud of the world. But we also can't assume that such stuff could be freed from those forms and their uses, capitalist operators swapped for communist ones. Imaginings of some universal managed resolution to 'the infrastructure question' are as much effects of our second theoretical artefact as are insurrectionist fantasies.

Historical experience will never literalistically embody such abstractions. While capital remains to be at some point brought to a revolutionary terminus, from this angle we can't judge with any precision what might be the key moment. But it is reasonable to speculate that the infrastructure question would loom large; concretely, practically, irreducible in its complexity.

For all the abstractness of communism as it presents itself, it's still there, projected onto the horizon by a class relation which can only be insofar as it is coming to an end. Against the glare of this blank abstraction, the crud that clutters the terrain stands out in silhouette. It's impossible to say precisely how we will get there, or how long it will take: as we approach it, the horizon rolls back. But it's not always the same distance away: even if our steps have always fallen short until now, sometimes a steep gradient seems to bring it right up to our noses. And we might at least capture the falling-short with a concept: error. A cognate of the verb 'to err', error refers to a straying, a mistake, a lapse.

Thus always a relation between two points at minimum: something right, and something which deviates from it. In statistics, an error term may identify the influence of an unmeasured world beyond our model. And in mathematics, when an exact value can only be ascertained at infinity, specifiable error margins can at least define our proximity to that value. In engineering, error is the gap between a norm of how things should function, and how they actually do. In instances of error, our means fall short of the ends we project, and the error we confront names this lack of possibility.

The delimitation of error is a key aspect of the everyday practical world; a negative specification of the space of affordances in which particular ends may be pursued. In a fragile, interlocked world whose affordances are increasingly defined by the humourless literality of logic gates, you don't have to stray far from the pre-given cowpaths to bump into error. Indeed, as soon as one attempts something not given by the affordances of the world, the state of error – as a measure of incapacity – appears absolute. But with reconstructive effort, error may gradually be pushed back to the limits, defining a space of possibility.

As lived activity errs from the vectors shaped by capital's worldly movement, new paths will already be being trodden, new uses found for existing things, old uses taking new tools. Communist use, we might say, is repressed by capitalist crud, hemmed in as error. Incapacity would be the

immediate condition faced by many of those erring from the affordances written into the most intricate of capitalist infrastructures. But in running up against that incapacity, lived activity will have to find ways to push the error back, carve out new affordances, such that erring becomes the path, and capitalist use becomes the error.