

Lea Kuhar\*

## Materialism of Suffering and Left-wing Melancholia<sup>1</sup>

The works of Karl Marx were often inspired by real attempts at social revolution. One of his most famous analyses was based on the French *coup d'état* of December 1851 in which Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte assumed dictatorial powers. In a series of essays that were eventually published as *The Eighteen Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852)<sup>2</sup> Marx tried to distinguish his own interpretation of the event from the interpretations given by his contemporaries, mainly Victor Hugo's *Napoléon le Petit* and Proudhon's *Coup d'Etat*. While the former understood Bonaparte's coup as a violent act of a single individual that could not be foreseen, the latter claimed it was an inevitable result of a foreseeable historical development. Marx diverged from both interpretations by focusing on the concrete circumstances created by the class struggle in France that "made it possible for a grotesque mediocrity to play a hero's part."<sup>3</sup> He claimed that Bonaparte's *coup* was the result of the struggle between the parliamentary republic constituted by the French bourgeoisie and Bonaparte's attempt to overcome the existing social relations that regressed into the sediments of the old dictatorial society. Marx ridiculed Bonaparte for being a farcical repetition of his uncle, Napoleon I,<sup>4</sup> and used this example not so much to claim that his coup was a reactionary event, but to clarify what a real revolutionary movement would look like. In one of his conclusions he argues: "the social revolution in the nineteenth century cannot

183

---

<sup>1</sup> This article is a result of the research programme P6–0014 "Conditions and Problems of Contemporary Philosophy", which is funded by the Slovenian Research Agency.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte", in: *Marx & Engels Collected Works 1851–1853, Volume 11*, Lawrence & Wishart, London 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Karl Marx, "Preface to the Second Edition of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*", in: *Marx & Engels Collected Works 1867–1870, Volume 21*, Lawrence & Wishart, London 2010, p. 57.

<sup>4</sup> This is also the reason why the eighteen Brumaire he uses in the title is not the date of Bonaparte's coup (2 December 1851) but the coup after which his uncle became the First Council of the French Republic (9 November 1799, according to the Gregorian Calendar).

\* Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Institute of Philosophy

draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped off all superstition about the past.”<sup>5</sup>

If the revolutions in Marx’s time had to overcome the social boundaries set by their bourgeois predecessors, revolutions in our time also need to overcome the experience of their own failure, i.e. the failure of the socialist projects of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It therefore seems that Marx’s insight from the *Eighteen Brumaire* is still relevant to contemporary revolutionary movements, especially those that are unable to surpass their troubled past and “are living in a long winter of melancholy.”<sup>6</sup> Walter Benjamin was one of the first philosophers to analyse such a phenomenon. He claimed that *left-wing melancholia* is caused by a certain fixation upon one’s political past that traps used-to-be progressive movements in a paradoxical state between a past they cannot get rid of and a future they cannot re-invent.<sup>7</sup> Even though Benjamin never developed a precise formulation of the given term, his idea had a significant influence on subsequent interpretations of this phenomenon. One of them was given by Wendy Brown, who on the basis of Benjamin’s insights equated left-wing melancholia with a state of self-observation and self-reification that turns emancipatory struggles into something anti-revolutionary, anti-communitarian, and even anti-political.<sup>8</sup>

Herein, I offer a new interpretation of left-wing melancholia, and claim that it designates a specific state of action that does not draw its poetry from the past, but from the future. I argue that left-wing melancholia is neither a nostalgic remembrance of past revolutionary ideals, nor a mourning of their failures. It is rather *a form of fidelity to future actions, the content of which remains unknown*. I believe that connecting Marx with a moment of melancholia – a moment that seems to be in direct contradiction with his revolutionary theory – can be beneficial for both parties. While Marx’s critical theory enables one to better un-

<sup>5</sup> Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte”, p. 106. By “poetry”, Marx does not mean a form of literature but *poiesis*, which is a word deriving from the ancient Greek verb *poiein* and means ‘to produce’ in the sense of bringing something into being.

<sup>6</sup> Srećko Horvat, *Poetry from the Future: Why a Global Liberation Movement Is Our Civilization’s Last Chance*, Penguin Books, London 2019, p. 23.

<sup>7</sup> Walter Benjamin coined the term *left-wing melancholy* in his critique of Erich Kästner, a left-wing poet from the Weimar Republic. Walter Benjamin, “Left-Wing Melancholy”, in: *Selected Writings, Vol. 2, Part. 2, 1931–1934*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2005, pp. 423–428.

<sup>8</sup> Wendy Brown, “Resisting Left Melancholy”, *Boundary 2*, 26 (3/1999), pp. 19–27.

derstand the materialist part of the object produced by left-wing melancholia, the functioning of the latter enables one to better understand the progressive moment of Marx's critical endeavour.

In the first part I form the conceptual apparatus that I believe is necessary to comprehend the paradoxical relation between left-wing melancholia and its object. I base this apparatus on the *symptomatic reading* of classical political economy constructed by Marx in his later works. I believe that this symptomatic reading introduces new conceptions of truth and knowledge that can be used to constitute a new kind of materialism, the one that Davide Tarizzo calls the *materialism of suffering*.<sup>9</sup> I argue that a materialism of suffering based on Marx's critical endeavour can show how the exploitative system of the capitalist mode of production is a specific resolution of the fact that there is no such thing as an ontologically pre-determined social relation. Focusing on social non-relation enables Marx to discover class struggle as the materialist part of the suffering produced by the capitalist mode of production.

In the second part I focus more specifically on left-wing melancholia. I argue that this peculiar phenomenon cannot be simply explained as a process of mourning, but as a process of *impossible mourning*. Proceeding from Freud's and Agamben's investigations of the topic of melancholia, I show that this impossibility comes from the fact that the object of melancholia's sorrow is not something that was lost but something that was produced as being lost, that is, as an *object-loss*. I use Marx's materialism of suffering, developed in the first part, to transfer Freud's and Agamben's insights onto the subject of left-wing melancholia. I argue that left-wing melancholia is a specific kind of social suffering constructed as recognition of the social non-relation.

In the last part I focus on the implications of the object-loss produced by left-wing melancholia for future revolutionary struggles. I claim that the paradoxical form of its existence enables one to comprehend left-wing melancholia as a progressive state. My argument is twofold. On the one hand, I claim that the object-loss of melancholia is not something individual but rather *has a social*

---

<sup>9</sup> Davide Tarizzo, "True Fictions: Biopolitics, Critical Theory and Clinical Materialism", *Paragraph*, 39 (1/2016), p. 11.

*character*. On the other hand, I argue it does not exist merely as recognition of the social non-relation, but *as a form of fidelity* to this fact.

## Materialism of suffering

In the *Eighteen Brumaire* Marx distinguishes the revolutions of the previous centuries from the yet-to-come revolutions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. According to his analysis, earlier revolutions needed to recall past historical events in order to form a description of their future acts. They needed to “resurrect the dead,” which served the purpose of “glorifying the new struggles.”<sup>10</sup> In order to invent new content, the revolutions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century had to, on the contrary, let the dead bury their dead. This means that they should not use past events as the models for their future acts since neither the content nor the form of past actions are sufficient for achieving true revolutionary change in the capitalist mode of production. Marx describes the distinction between past revolutions and the revolutions of his own time as follows: “there the words went beyond the content; here the content goes beyond the words.”<sup>11</sup>

The distinction between the “words beyond the content” and the “content beyond the words” reflects the distinction between the *operational* and *clinical approach* to studying social phenomena posed by Davide Tarizzo.<sup>12</sup> Both approaches belong to critical theory and both attempt to explain the functioning of society. They differ in the way they approach their task. In considering social phenomena, the operational approach uses descriptive and normative analyses, which means that it tries to explain how society works or how society should work. For a clinical approach, knowledge of the supposedly proper, normal functioning of society is not needed since it suffices to acknowledge human suffering. In order to detect social illnesses, one does not need to know the secret of social health. “The need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth,”<sup>13</sup> to use Adorno’s words. However, this does not mean that when applying a clinical approach, one does not need to know anything about the given

<sup>10</sup> Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte”, p. 105.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>12</sup> Davide Tarizzo, “True Fictions: Biopolitics, Critical Theory and Clinical Materialism”, pp. 10–11.

<sup>13</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton, Seabury Press, New York 1973, p. 17.

situation. It means that knowledge of the given situation can only be produced by proceeding from its dysfunctioning. Truth can be found only in the wounds and cracks deeply embedded in the social structure and visible in the traces of collective and individual suffering. A different kind of materialism can emerge from the suppositions of the clinical approach, “the materialism of suffering, or the materialism of social, political and historical disorders.”<sup>14</sup>

Tarizzo believes that the future of critical theory depends on using the materialism of suffering. However, there are not many theories that can meet the criteria established for this task. According to Tarizzo, Marx’s critical theory presents an almost sufficient conceptual framework, but it still operates in a way that is somewhat in between the operational and clinical approaches. On the one hand, it proceeds by investigating individual and social suffering as it focuses on the systematic exploitation of the workers in the capitalist mode of production. On the other hand, its critique of the capitalist form of exploitation is rooted in communism as a conception of a true and therefore necessary form of society that will sooner or later be realised. Tarizzo therefore argues that the conceptual apparatus produced by Marx’s critical theory does not allow one to reach the “content beyond the words” and is therefore not able to develop a true materialism of suffering.

Contrary to Tarizzo’s theses, some studies of Marx’s critical theory can be seen as establishing the fact that Marx did develop a sort of clinical approach in his critique of the capitalist mode of production. I believe Louis Althusser was one of the first philosophers to show this. In *Reading Capital*, he claims that the aforementioned criticism does indeed apply to Marx’s early works, which are non-scientific for this same reason, while it is not valid for his later, scientific works, such as *Grundrisse* and *Capital*. In these works, Marx establishes a new form of critical theory based on a *symptomatic reading*, which represents a completely new method of critical investigation. A symptomatic reading shares many similarities with Tarizzo’s quest for a clinical approach. It enables Marx to take the concepts produced by the conceptual apparatus of classical political economy and understand them as a cluster of symptoms that need to be decoded. These symptoms (labour, money, capital, etc.) do not indicate a more general truth of society, but a certain *lack* in the existing knowledge thereof produced by classical political economy.

<sup>14</sup> Davide Tarizzo, “True Fictions: Biopolitics, Critical Theory and Clinical Materialism”, p. 11.

Samo Tomšič makes a similar point in his Lacanian reading of Marx's critical theory. He underlines the fact that for Marx truth "has no other form than that of the symptom," which was later emphasised by Lacan as the *Marxian turn in the history of truth*.<sup>15</sup> According to Tomšič, Marx's notion of the symptom combines two dimensions. The first one is *epistemological*, the other is *political*. In its epistemological dimension, the symptom subverts a certain regime of knowledge. In his theory Marx does not claim that he speaks the truth. His conception of truth rather manifests the conflictual nature and incompatibility of truth and knowledge. For him, speaking the truth means to disrupt a regime of knowledge by pointing out not only something that cannot be expressed therein, but also something that goes beyond its comprehension. In its political dimension, the symptom unveils the truth as class struggle.<sup>16</sup> Marx's analyses of the capitalist mode of production indeed presuppose a certain truth. This truth, however, does not designate a hidden reality beneath the surface of the capitalist mode of production, but rather *the form of its existence*. Truth returns as *a form of the very dysfunctioning* of the capitalist system. Marx's primary consideration was to build a conceptual apparatus that would be able to comprehend this form in a sufficient way. His value-form analysis is a product of this task, since it enables Marx to see how the various contradictions existing in the capitalist mode of production are merely different forms of one fundamental contradiction, i.e. *class struggle*.

Class struggle determines the social structure *in the last instance*, to use Althusser's expression. This means that it can be grasped only in the effects of its workings and cannot be comprehended as such. It does not designate a lack, but a void. Tomšič explains the distinction between the two terms as following: "[l]ack still implies an empty place, which can be occupied by an object, which veils, or mystifies, as Marx would put it, the radical implication of the lack, namely the void, which stands for the abolition of the logic of places altogether."<sup>17</sup> Class struggle does not offer a neutral position that would enable one to objectively grasp the whole of society, but designates the impossibility of such a posi-

<sup>15</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre XIV, La logique du fantasme*, unpublished, 10 May 1967; quoted in Samo Tomšič, *The Capitalist Unconscious: Marx and Lacan*, Verso, London 2013, p. 185.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

<sup>17</sup> Samo Tomšič, "Toward a Materialist Ontology", *Continental Thought & Theory*, 2 (2/2018), p. 112.

tion. It designates the fact that “being is neither One nor Multiple, but non-all.”<sup>18</sup> Arguing that history is the history of class struggles or saying that communism is the real movement that abolishes the present state of things designates the antagonistic moment of every social formation and has nothing to do with “the humdrum music of the dominant positivism and reassuring odes to progress.”<sup>19</sup>

Class struggle represents the void, i.e. the “non-all” part of every society. The non-all is a point of impossibility, since it designates the fact that society as such is fundamentally split and that this split is inherent in every concrete social formation. Class struggle therefore designates that “there is no such thing as a social relation,”<sup>20</sup> or that “the foundation of social links is a structural non-relation.”<sup>21</sup> Its function was best described by Alenka Zupančič, who argued that it functions as a *concrete constitutive negativity*.

To put it differently: it is not that there is (and remains) a fundamental non-relation which will never be (re)solved by any concrete relation. Rather: every concrete relation de facto resolves the non-relation, but it can resolve it only by positing (“inventing”), together with itself, its own negative condition/impossibility. The non-relation is not something that “insists” and “remains,” but something that is repeated—something that “does not stop not being written” (to use Lacan’s expression).<sup>22</sup>

For Marx, the capitalist mode of production resolves the problem of the structural non-relation of every society by excluding social relations from the production process.<sup>23</sup> Since the fundamental non-relation never stops being written, the primary exclusion repeats itself throughout the whole structure, thus riddling the whole of society with antagonisms. The value-form is the symptom of the return of the truth, which is class struggle. As a concrete constitutive negativity, class struggle is the point of impossibility of every critical theory and

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.

<sup>19</sup> Daniel Bensaïd, *A Marx for Our Times: Adventures and Misadventures of a Critique*, trans. G. Elliott, Verso, London/New York, 2002, p. 4.

<sup>20</sup> Samo Tomšič, *The Capitalist Unconscious*, p. 9.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 186.

<sup>22</sup> Alenka Zupančič, *What is Sex?*, The MIT Press, Massachusetts 2017, p. 146.

<sup>23</sup> I develop this point in more detail in my forthcoming article, “Object-Oriented Critique of Political Economy”, *Filozofski vestnik* 40 (3/2019).

could be read as the material part of Marx's materialism of suffering. By developing a conceptual apparatus that allows one to see social symptoms as the effects of class struggle, Marx's critical theory enables one to grasp a point in the all-encompassing capitalist reality where one is able to meet something more than what currently exists therein, without positioning this "something more" as the ontological truth of communism. By understanding class struggle as social non-relation, as the most material part of social suffering in existence, he can determine the absolute necessity of the capitalist mode of production without positing anything as absolutely necessary. Even though in his value-form theory Marx analyses how the social non-relation (class struggle) is resolved in the capitalist mode of production through economic antagonisms, he does not posit them as its necessary form.

Marx develops his critical theory from the position of a symptom that enables him to conceptualise social reality through the paradigm of a social non-relation. As such, Marx's critical theory can meet all of Tarizzo's criteria for a clinical approach and can be identified as a *materialism of suffering*. Its conceptual apparatus can also help one better understand his thesis from *The Eighteen Brumaire* and shed new light on the topic of contemporary social movements. For Marx, the content of the truly revolutionary social movements "goes beyond words" since it is not built upon a pre-existing vision of how society should function. On the contrary, it would be more accurate to say that it is built on its *concrete constitutive negativity*, entailing that every concrete social relation is a specific way of comprehending the social non-relation.

### Left-wing melancholia

190

The revolutions of the 21<sup>st</sup> century face a certain challenge that the revolutions from Marx's time did not need to face. When the revolutions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century faced the challenge of overthrowing the all-encompassing relations of the capitalist mode of production, they did not – as contemporary revolutionary movements do – also need to overcome the failure of the really existing socialist projects of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This double task traps many of them in a difficult situation. Following Enzo Traverso,<sup>24</sup> one could argue that many of the contemporary

---

<sup>24</sup> Enzo Traverso, *Left-wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory*, Columbia University Press, New York 2016.



left-wing movements<sup>25</sup> are stuck between a past that they cannot get rid of and a future that they cannot reinvent. They are victims of a *left-wing melancholia*, meaning that they are incapable of forming a new strategy for their actions. As already mentioned in the introduction, such a state of affairs was often understood as unsurpassable. Authors such as Walter Benjamin and Wendy Brown claimed that left-wing melancholia is essentially the product of a narcissistic tendency towards one's past political engagements and inability to let go of political analyses and ideas that turned out to be a failure. In this sense, it was comprehended as an anti-revolutionary and even anti-political stance.

Even though this may be the most popular explanation, the interpretations of left-wing melancholia are far from unambiguous. I believe this is due to the fact that the quest for understanding left-wing melancholia reflects many of the problems that have emerged in the attempts to comprehend melancholia as such. These problems have usually been a consequence of the challenge to recognise its symptoms and determine its object. This is emphasised in Ilit Ferber's extensive analysis.<sup>26</sup> Ferber shows how, on the one hand, throughout history melancholia has been recognised via a cluster of its mostly positive effects, such as enabling deeply creative processes and the occasional bursts of genius. On the other hand, these positive effects have essentially been tied to their negative counterparts, e.g. disabling sadness, feelings of hopelessness, despair, and isolation. One of the biggest transformations in comprehending melancholy was made by Freud, who no longer saw it as a mood or normal inclination, but rather as something of an entirely pathological nature. He understood melancholy as *melancholia*, as a pathology disabling the individual from making decisions or acting upon them.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> Traverso defines the left in the following way: "The left I will deal with is not defined in merely *topological* terms (the parties on the left of the political and institutional space), according to the conventional viewpoint of political science, but rather in *ontological* terms: as movements that struggled to change the world by putting the principle of equality at the center of their agenda." (*Ibid.*, p. xiii.)

<sup>26</sup> Ilit Ferber, *Philosophy and Melancholy: Benjamin's Early Reflections on Theater and Language*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2013.

<sup>27</sup> Ilit Ferber describes the long history of melancholy in the following way "in the fluctuating movement of its internal history melancholy has been described as a somatic condition (a humeral imbalance resulting in the excess of black bile) brought on by the melancholic's sins (sloth or *acedia*, in the religious context of the Middle Ages); an inclination or mood (in the Renaissance); the consequence of demonic undertakings or witchcraft (in the se-

For Freud, melancholia is the result of a mourning process that cannot be completed. The mourning process becomes impossible when, unlike the object-loss of mourning, the object-loss of melancholia is not conscious. In his text “Mourning and Melancholia”, Freud argues that the melancholic “knows *whom* he has lost but not *what* he has lost” with that person, etc.<sup>28</sup> The work of mourning is completed after the ego invests its libido in a new object, meaning it becomes free and uninhibited again. This is not, however, how things turn out for the melancholic. The free libido cannot be displaced onto a new object since the melancholic does not know what it is that needs to be replaced. That is why the process of mourning turns into a process of impossible mourning. When love (libidinal investment) for the object cannot be given up, even though the object itself has been given up, it takes refuge in a narcissistic identification. In other terms, since the melancholic does not know what it is that has been lost, he takes the loss itself as an object and identifies with it. Hence, the *object-loss* is transformed into *ego-loss*.

Following Freud, the identification of the object-loss and ego-loss is the reason why the melancholic patient represents himself as “worthless, incapable of any achievements and morally despicable; he reproaches himself, vilifies himself and expects to be cast out and punished.”<sup>29</sup> These symptoms cannot be simply dismissed as a delusion. When the melancholic describes himself as petty, egoistic, dishonest, lacking in independence, etc., he is not engaging in self-pity. According to Freud, he has “a keener eye for the truth,” which means that he correctly reflects, although not consciously, what is happening to him.<sup>30</sup> After equating his ego with the object-loss, the super-ego starts producing hate, resulting in the abuse of the ego, debasing it and making it suffer.<sup>31</sup> Hate is the final attempt to break all ties with the object-loss, which is also the reason why melancholia can culminate in deep depression and suicidal tendencies.

---

venteenth century); a desirable state inducing productivity and genius; and, finally, a pathology (in the nineteenth century)”. (*Ibid.*, p. 2.)

<sup>28</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia”, in: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV*, trans. J. Strachey, The Hogarth Press, London 1957, p. 245.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 246.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 251.

Agamben offers a different interpretation of the paradoxical status of melancholia's object. In *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture* he claims that "melancholia is not so much a regressive reaction to the loss of the loved object as the imaginative capacity to make an unobtainable object appear as if lost."<sup>32</sup> Agamben therefore goes one step further than Freud. According to his analyses, melancholia does not produce merely an identification between the ego and the object-loss, but the object-loss itself. What happens is that the libido behaves *as if* a loss had occurred although nothing has in fact been lost. The libido stages a simulation where what cannot be lost, because it has never been possessed (and has never even existed), appears as if lost. For Freud, the work of melancholia cannot be executed, since the melancholic cannot comprehend the object that was lost, while for Agamben the work of melancholia consists precisely in *producing the object-loss*. For Freud, melancholia is a pathology that acquires some traits from mourning and others from narcissism, while for Agamben it is a mixture of mourning and fetishism. For Agamben, the object produced by the melancholic exists merely as a fetishisation of a present absence, which is also the reason why it has a paradoxical status.

It is neither appropriated nor lost, but both possessed and lost at the same time. And as the fetish is at once the sign of something and its absence, and owes to this contradiction its own phantasmatic status, so the object of the melancholic project is at once real and unreal, incorporated and lost, affirmed and denied.<sup>33</sup> The melancholic therefore produces a certain lack and turns this lack into a surplus object that gains an existence that seems to be more important to the melancholic than the existence of all other objects. The object-loss is a special kind of object. As a pure presence of something that is missing, its existence is indeterminate, fragmentary, and alien to the world. It does not fully belong to this world. According to Agamben, it is located in a "no-man's land"<sup>34</sup> that is neither purely a phantasm nor the indifferent world of natural objects.

I believe it is possible to apply Freud's and Agamben's insights regarding the paradoxical status of the melancholic's object-loss to the phenomenon of left-

<sup>32</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, University of Minnesota Press, trans. R. L. Martinez, Minneapolis/London 1993, p. 20.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

wing melancholia. While Freud's theory can help one better understand the identification between the object-loss and the ego-loss, Agamben's theory can help one understand how the object-loss occurs in the first place. Following this reading, one could argue that left-wing melancholia is neither a nostalgic remembrance of the old struggles nor a mourning of their failure. It does not designate a loss, but the state of a present absence. For this reason it should be comprehended not as mourning, but as *impossible mourning*.<sup>35</sup>

Marx's materialism of suffering offers a crucial insight into left-wing melancholia comprehended as a state of impossible mourning. The "no-man's land," from which the object-loss emerges, can only be detected by means of Marx's critical theory. The no-man's land is not simply *a lack*, something that is missing from the currently existing social structure, but *the void* as the social non-relation. To put it differently, the object-loss produced by left-wing melancholia does not come from a lack of any specific thing, but is deeply intertwined with the void of the social structure. By producing the object-loss, left-wing melancholia insist that there is something more deeply traumatic than the punishment of the super ego. It affirms the fact that there is no relation, no possible symmetry between the subject and the Other that could be predisposed. In this way, it fetishises the social non-relation. The object-loss produced as an effect of such a fetishisation exists purely as *recognition of the social non-relation*.

By emphasising the fundamental non-relation as what determines every social relation, left-wing melancholia ratifies the basic principle of Marx's critique. It ratifies the fact that society is neither One nor multiple, but non-all, and it functions as a confirmation of the fact that every relation comes with non-relation. By constantly producing the object-loss as a fetishisation of the social non-relation, left-wing melancholia completely dissolves the way in which the social non-relation is resolved in the capitalist mode of production.

194

### Poetry from the future

In the previous chapters I argued that left-wing melancholia designates a process of impossible mourning. Its mourning is impossible due to the paradoxical status of its object. Left-wing melancholia does not mourn an object that was

<sup>35</sup> Enzo Traverso, *Left-wing Melancholia*, p. 45.

lost but creates the very object it is not able to surpass. Its object is unsurpassable since it functions as recognition of the fact that every social relation is a specific way of resolving the social non-relation. In the previous part I focused on the way in which the object-loss is produced. In this part I want to analyse more closely the form of its existence. By taking a closer look at the object-loss of left-wing melancholia, I want to defend a thesis that may seem to be paradoxical at first glance. What I have in mind is the thesis, already put forward in the introduction, that left-wing melancholia is not necessarily a conservative force, but can also be understood as a progressive state. My argument is twofold. On the one hand, I claim that the object-loss of melancholia is not something that belongs to the individual but rather *has a social character*. On the other hand, I argue that it does not exist merely as recognition of the social non-relation, but it exists *as a form of fidelity* to this fact.

The claim regarding the social character of the object-loss produced by left-wing melancholia was already implied in the previous two chapters. Left-wing melancholia does not *suffer* a loss but *produces* its object-loss. The way in which the melancholic produces the object-loss imbues the whole act of production with a social character. Why? Because recognition of the social non-relation is able to grasp (in an indeterminate manner) the *concrete constitutive negativity* of every society, it is more universally transmittable than any other individual act. This argument is very well summarised by Klaus Mladek and George Edmondson in their text “A Politics of Melancholia”:

The melancholic, without necessarily meaning to in any active way, shows that nonrelation is the one thing that the social cannot do without, that it is the one Thing that concerns the social above all. The melancholic is thoroughly social in that, like the social, he cannot get past antagonism.<sup>36</sup>

195

Left-wing melancholia may be seen as an individual act or an act of a small group and therefore as isolated from the rest of the society. However, this is not the case. From the perspective of Marx’s materialism of suffering, the produc-

---

<sup>36</sup> Klaus Mladek and George Edmondson, “A Politics of Melancholia”, in: C. Strathausen (ed.), *A Leftist Ontology: Beyond Relativism and Identity Politics*, The University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2009, p. 214.

tion of the object-loss is the most social act possible since it is formed in relation to the “thing” that is indispensable for the constitution of every society.

The argument regarding left-wing melancholia as a form of fidelity is a little more complicated. Since the object-loss is something that was produced, there is a subjective desire inscribed into its form of existence. To put it differently, the object-loss exists merely as a subjective desire to grant existence to something that cannot exist in the world of other objects. Due to this fact, the object-loss can be described as *fictitious* (Benčin)<sup>37</sup> or *phantasmatic* (Agamben). However, it is important to emphasise that due to the way in which the object-loss is produced, it is not merely a work of fiction, but a fiction that touches upon something real. Since it is connected to the social non-relation, it opens up a certain *infinity* of possibilities of other words. In the words of Benčin, “the properly melancholic loss of the world entails a desire for other worlds, which, however, remain unrealised. The fictional object generated in the loss is the object of this melancholic desire.”<sup>38</sup> To put it differently, as a fictional object, the object-loss induces neither activity nor passivity, but a rupture. As a rupture, it marks the point in social reality where the loss of reality is staged as a refusal of the currently existing world and at the same time as an opening of the possibilities for other worlds, which is produced as a direct consequence of the melancholic’s dissolving of the currently existing world.

Since there is an infinity of other possible worlds inscribed into the paradoxical existence of its object-loss, left-wing melancholia cannot simply be dismissed as a conservative craving for a lost utopian dream; neither does it imply the cynical claim that “nothing can be done,” which disables one’s capacity for emancipatory action. Mladek and Edmondson argue that the rupture opened up by the impossible mourning of left-wing melancholia implies something that *cannot be counted as one*, to use Badiou’s expression.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Rok Benčin, “Melancholy, or the Metaphysics of Fictional Sadness”, *Filozofski vestnik*, 37 (1/2016), p. 112.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>39</sup> Badiou is not a philosopher that would support a melancholic stance in any way. In his already mentioned article, however, Rok Benčin argues that Badiou’s *metaphysics of real happiness* could be supplemented by melancholy as the *metaphysics of fictional sadness*. (*Ibid.*, p. 110.)

The melancholic assumes the burden of what we carry on our back; he counts with what is not counted, what remains unnamed and drops out of symbolic representation. The scandal that the melancholic presents to a political activism rooted in modes of the not-yet is that one cannot count on him. Melancholia disrupts the tally-taking done in the accounting books of history and politics.<sup>40</sup>

Following Mladek and Edmondson, there is a moment of fidelity inscribed in the melancholic's quest to count with what is not counted. This moment of fidelity can be also understood through Badiou's *ethics of truths*.<sup>41</sup> For Badiou, the ethics of truth is a principle that enables the continuation of a truth-process. It designates a certain moment of persistence that operates according to only one law, which is "[D]o all that you can to persevere in that which exceeds your perseverance. Persevere in the interruption. Seize in your being that which has seized and broken you."<sup>42</sup> In order to submit to this law, one needs to constantly pose to oneself this practical question: "how will I, as some-one, continue to exceed my own being? How will I link the things I know, in a consistent fashion, via the effects of being seized by the not-known?"<sup>43</sup>

The moment of fidelity is a moment that gives seemingly non-political events or objects an immanently political charge. It is the moment that can transform the apparently passive stance of left-wing melancholia into an active stance. As a form of fidelity, left-wing melancholia can be understood as an ethical stance. Melancholia, in the manner of fidelity, refuses to give up on the political Thing. It will not move forward just because. This is not the same as wallowing in the past. It is, rather, to anticipate the yet-to-come as radically different from the not-yet. Melancholia, like fidelity, declares that our past is not done, that it can never be done, that the dead cannot be killed.<sup>44</sup>

When the melancholic produces the object-loss, he at the same time *i.* recognises the social non-relation; *ii.* produces a fictional object that functions as an opening of the possibility for other worlds; *iii.* claims allegiance to the fact that these possible worlds cannot be realised in the currently existing one. Following

<sup>40</sup> Klaus Mladek and George Edmondson, "A Politics of Melancholia", p. 215.

<sup>41</sup> Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, Verso, London 2013, p. 45.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>44</sup> Klaus Mladek and George Edmondson, "A Politics of Melancholia", p. 227.

this line of argument, left-wing melancholia is not merely recognition of the social non-relation. It is rather *a form of fidelity to future action, the content of which remains unknown*. In this way, it does not draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future, even though, for the time being, it can produce merely “content beyond the words.”