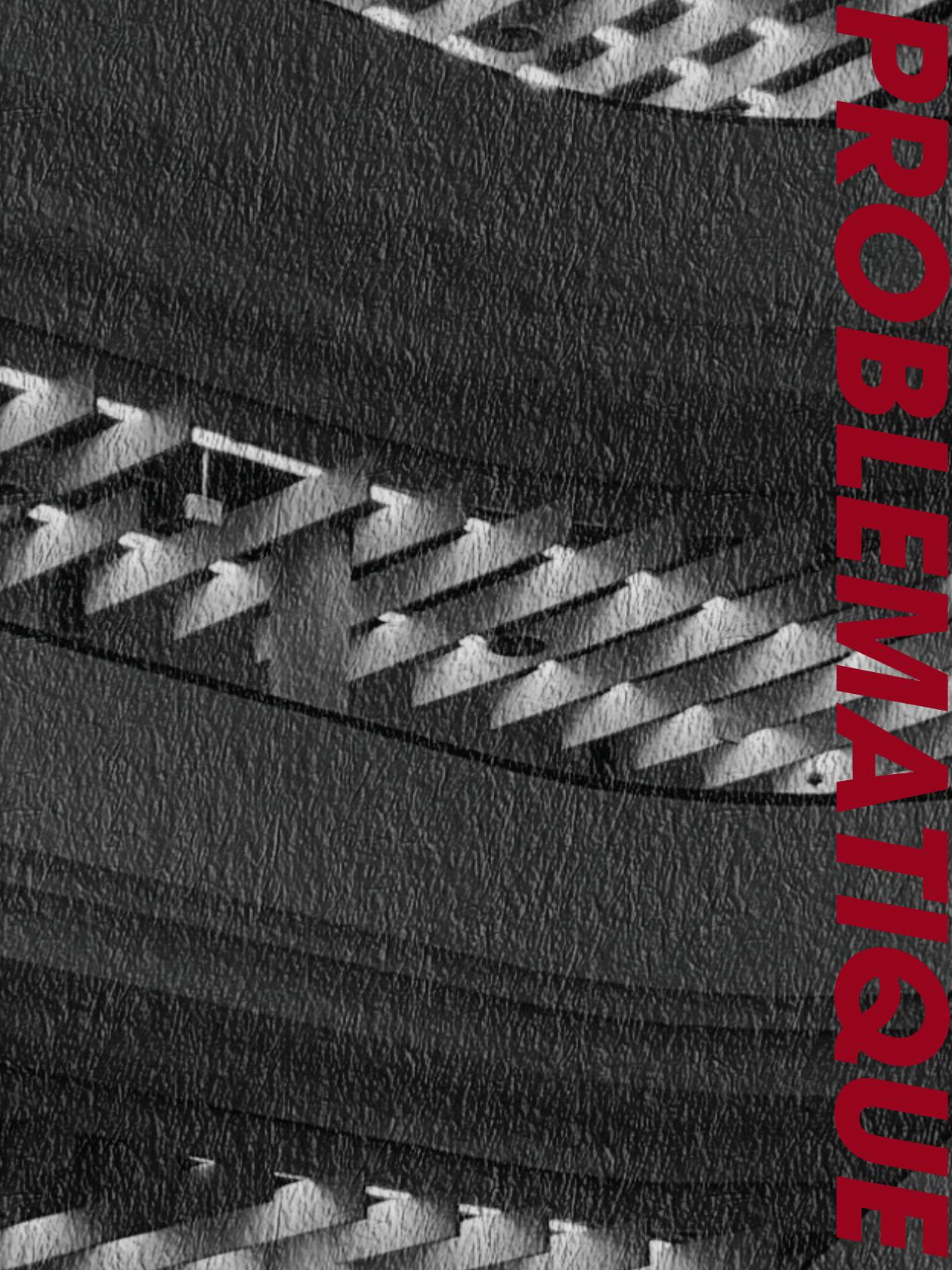


PROBLEMATIQUE



**AESTHETIC CRITIQUE OF FASCISM
AND HUMANIST EXPRESSION**

PROBLÉMATIQUE - 2025, ISSUE 16

<https://problematiquejournal.ca/>

Problématique

Journal of Political Studies

Revue d'études politiques

A publication of York Political Science Graduate Students

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AESTHETIC CRITIQUE OF FASCISM AND HUMANIST EXPRESSION

Introduction to Issue 16

“If Fascism promises beginnings of the day, representation exposes the interests of the middle of the day; then the owl of Minerva, flying at dusk, may reflect on the remains of the day—the ruins of the morning’s hope, the actuality of the broken middles.”

Gillian Rose, *The Broken Middle*

“For 20 years you adored me and feared me, as a god. Then you madly hated me, you desecrated my corpse. Now, tell me, what was the point? Look around you... We’re still here.”

Mussolini: Son of the Century

The present issue of *Problématique* marks the relaunch of the graduate outlet of York’s Department of Politics. This sixteenth issue appears after a significant break in the publication’s life, which has been on pause since 2013. This revival, first conceived during the COVID pandemic, interrupted in solidarity amid the CUPE strike, and carried out despite institutional limitations imposed by the austerity of neoliberal academia, is meant to keep alive the scholarly platform for the distinct tradition of critical thinking that this department has been known for. The department is globally renowned for its politically engaged and rigorous scholarship, as well as for introducing wholly new ways of thinking within the Marxian tradition. It cannot afford not to have a graduate outlet.

The choice of Fascism as the theme of this journal’s revival testifies to a growing concern about the possible resurgence of politics best described by that epithet. This concern is exemplified by recent academic publications and debates on the topic (Paxton 2021; Traverso 2017; Griffin 2022, 2024; Gordon and Webber 2024). Fascism is most commonly defined as anti-communist and anti-liberal, and as involving mass mobilisation and paramilitary violence. It is organised around a coherent ultra-nationalist ideology and a charismatic leader (Griffin & Feldman 2004; Griffin 2018; Paxton 2004; Eatwell 1995, 2006). Classical Marxist accounts of Fascism, developed during the interwar period, viewed the phenomenon as a counter-reaction of the middle classes during an extended

period of imperialist economic crisis (Zetkin 1923; Trotsky [1931–1932] 2011; Gramsci 1921). This tradition acknowledges that as long as there is a struggle between labour and capital, punctuated by crises of capitalist accumulation, there remains a looming threat that capital will resort to forms of direct domination beyond purely economic measures. The Fascist tendency to suspend the rule of law, on which capitalist stability itself depends, is one reason why Fascism has historically prevailed in its struggle against labour. Thus, even prior to Walter Benjamin's famous formulation that "behind every Fascism lies a failed revolution," Marx himself discerned a proto-Fascist tendency in the politics of Bonapartism. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx describes how, following the failure of the French Revolution of 1848 and the ensuing crisis of political power, a grotesque farce entered history: a militaristic buffoon emerged on the political scene and staged a mythical spectacle to "unify" the nation and its warring classes.

The catastrophic state of emergency that Fascism turns into the rule itself, as Benjamin famously proclaimed, could be countered by a messianic "revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past" (1989, 262). The emancipatory Jewish commandment to remember the oppressed past evoked by Benjamin, *Zakhor*, has been mutilated in the catastrophic farce of the present. For the orchestrated genocide in Gaza represents an instrumentalisation of

the memory of the Holocaust to perpetrate the annihilation of Palestinians, ideologically sustained by Hebrew Fascism. Emerging in the interwar period, Hebrew Fascism was not an accidental fringe phenomenon but a conscious engagement with European Fascism. As Dan Tamir (2018) demonstrates, sections of the Zionist movement actively studied and adopted fascist political styles. In the 1930s, Revisionist Zionism under Ze'ev Jabotinsky drew strategic and ideological inspiration from Mussolini, embracing what Roger Griffin (2018) calls an "organic nation," characterised by militarised unity, charismatic authority, and a mythic national destiny. Revisionist Maximalists and the Brit HaBirionim faction went further still, openly advocating for a Jewish Fascist state and borrowing heavily from the authoritarian models of Italy and Piłsudski's Poland. Irgun and Lehi operationalised these principles through fascist paramilitary organisation and political violence, enacting the action-oriented, leader-centred style that Roger Eatwell (2006) identifies with Fascist movements. Lehi's overtures not only to Fascist Italy but even to Nazi Germany exemplify what Robert Paxton (2004) describes as Fascism's "mobilising emotions": the veneration of "natural chiefs," the sanctification of violence, and the belief that national rebirth requires brute force.

These fascist threads only intensified with the founding of the Israeli state. After 1948, and especially following the territorial expansion of

1967, Hebrew Fascism entrenched a political tradition committed to domination, racial hierarchy, and maximal territorial claims. Kahanism, extremist settler movements, price-tag attacks, and the sacralisation of land all reflect the authoritarian impulses identified by Paxton (2004): reverence for strong leaders, contempt for minorities, and the normalisation of violence as a national duty. The assassination of Yitzhak Rabin in 1995 was not an aberration but the crystallisation of these tendencies. By the 1980s, Hebrew Fascist parties such as Kach, HaTchiya, Morasha, and Moledet had steadily expanded their base, transforming racist doctrines into viable electoral platforms. Hebrew Fascism is visible today in the remarks of Knesset ministers during the genocide in Gaza: calls for a Gaza Nakba, musings about nuclear options, proposals to bar Palestinians from harvesting their own olives, and open celebration of Gaza's destruction. This is not simply extremist rhetoric; rather, it is a Fascist political style embedded within state institutions.

By contrast, the very act of raising the problem of Fascism in the North American context, from which this call originated, inevitably produces a certain alarmism. In societies with no historical experience of Fascism comparable to that which plagued Europe in the first half of the twentieth century, common sense suggests that Fascist tendencies may exist but remain marginal. The problem is further compounded by the absence of a comparable history of

socialist mobilisation, the kind of force that historically provoked European Fascism. And yet, North America is no stranger to phenomena at the “core of Fascism” (Toscano 2023, xi). The political violence of the Ku Klux Klan and the former slave-owning class, in reaction to the unprecedented advances made by the Black proletariat in the wake of Reconstruction, belongs to such a core (*ibid.*), which W. E. B. Du Bois described as the “counter-revolution of property,” a movement “to subject Black labour to strict domination by capital” (Du Bois 1935, 626). Writings by members of the Black Panther Party likewise employ the expression “Amerikan fascism” (Jackson 1970) to characterise U.S. politics, notably in the context of the extrajudicial killing of Black revolutionaries. These interventions reinvigorated anti-Fascist thought and challenged classical definitions of Fascism as a phenomenon confined to European history.

Despite the racial and colonial conditions that also shaped Canadian capitalist development, organised Fascist movements—the Canadian chapters of the Ku Klux Klan, Arcand's National Social Christian Movement, Whittaker's Canadian Nationalist Party, and various neo-Nazi organisations, for example—remained relatively minor. Today, as even mainstream academics claim to seek refuge in Canada from a creeping Fascism in the United States, many Canadian academics and intellectuals may be tempted to regard Canadian liberal democracy

as immune to Fascism. Yet this belief sidesteps the more difficult, but essential, task of identifying the past and present violence of capital, as well as the conditions that make Fascism possible. Neoliberalism, capital's reaction to the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s and the dominant regime of capital accumulation in Canada over the last several decades, as in much of the world, carries within it an ideological canon of ethno-economists, racial hierarchies, and proponents of racial "science" (Slobodian 2025). Events such as the recent meeting of the so-called "Fascist International" further underscore the need for Canadian anti-Fascists to reckon with Fascist movements' longstanding ambition to divide the "nomos of the world" into distinct ethnic entities, all the while extracting private profit through the imperial structures of monopoly finance capitalism and its evolving forms of workplace domination. Canadian diasporic multiculturalism, reliant on fantasies of the sovereign yet alienated individual and an intensified longing for a lost primordial community, becomes particularly vulnerable to internalising these mythologised global lines of division. The stupefying applause for a Ukrainian Waffen-SS veteran in the Canadian Parliament stands as a testament to this.

The current issue comprises responses to the editorial collective's call to critically reflect on the aestheticisation of politics by Fascist movements and on the potential of humanist aesthetics

to offer a political counter-response. By situating the analytical framework within the tradition of Frankfurt School critical theory and its fellow travellers, we encouraged contributors to combine literary and aesthetic critique with a social and political analysis of the conditions that catalyse Fascist politics. Let us admit it at the outset: critical theory is no innocent notion. The latest generation of the Frankfurt School has severed its ties with its erstwhile label, "Western Marxism," and has turned instead to a form of academised and moralising thought against which its German founders originally positioned themselves. The detachment from the working-class movement and the abandonment of the critique of political economy have proven particularly damaging to critical theory's capacity to confront the rise of contemporary Fascism. The contradiction between legal equality and class inequality in liberal societies can lead not only to class solidarity, as the classics teach us, but also to the anarchic antagonism of disenfranchised masses, thereby reducing the very possibility of revolutionary politics. Contemporary critical theory, which has taken root within the intellectual circles of North America, finds itself ill-equipped to reckon with the ways this dynamic manifests in a globalised world torn by the dominance of corporate monopolies and the reactionary appropriations of legitimate social cleavages generated by neoliberal capitalism. The prevailing responses offered by many of critical theory's latest

representatives rely either on postmodern critique, rooted notoriously in the philosophy of a certain infamous Nazi, on the valorisation of the excluded Other, or on forms of normative theorising that construe Fascism as an error of rational normative judgement. Critical theory, with its impoverished resources, appears deserted, occupied with deciphering Fascism as an opaque “signifier,” violently dominating its other and longing for a glorious past, while refusing to attend to the “signified” material conditions. What if the reason for Fascism’s allure among the masses is perceived as too “common” and too “lowly” an experience to be recognised by highbrow academia? This may be a properly aesthetic problem. The “glorious past” of the post-war affluent West may not have been beautiful, but rather a class compromise, the loss of which is disavowed precisely as the postmodern baroque of Fascism advances.

The focus on aesthetic critique is in no way a diversion from the critique of political economy for which the department is renowned, but rather a recognition that the critique of aesthetic representation is a necessary step in connecting rigorous social critique with practice. Unlike subsequent generations of critical theory, the first generation of the Frankfurt School was more perceptive in disentangling the problem of aesthetics in modern societies and can still teach us much about the problems of representation in our age. Aesthetics, after all, as Herbert

Marcuse (1978) reminds us, pertains to the senses. To offer a sustained aesthetic critique is not to withdraw from reality into the realm of the judgement of the beautiful, where only artistic activity takes place, but rather to connect sensuous human activity, praxis, with the representational forms that reflect, obscure, or deform that very practice. The production, distribution, and reception of artistic works are always bound up with the overall structure of labour relations in society and with the political forms in which those relations unfold. From its inception, Marxian aesthetic critique has been attentive to the homology between artistic form and the social reality that determines it. As Georg Lukács (1994) famously argued, the novel does not merely present a discourse open to critique from a plurality of perspectives; its very form reflects the principle of subjective freedom upon which modern social, political, and economic relations fundamentally depend. Fascist movements, of course, claimed to do away with the abstraction of subjective freedom through various returns to “tradition,” “realism,” and the “Return to Order.” Yet, just as in the political and economic sphere, Fascism operates by usurping an inward and alienated subjectivity, one oriented toward particular interests in the marketplace and rendered incapable of political participation. Fascist myths of primordial community deliver this politically atrophied subjectivity into the hands of arbitrary authority. The “great man,” the leader, or whoever becomes

the bearer of a conjured metaphysical authority capable of arresting the anarchy of the market, can only accelerate the ontological violence of that very anarchy. Martin Heidegger understood this well when he attempted to elevate the supposed “greatness” of National Socialism above the “troubled waters of ‘values’ and totalities” (2014, 222).

The indispensable analysis of the “value form,” it is true, cannot guide us towards a better political worldview or an “imputed totality,” and one is left with the sense that aesthetic representation is irreducible. The scandal at the heart of politics, since the time of Plato, is that politics requires guiding myths. Modern humanism, so viciously attacked by those who sought in vain to replace it with a scientific study of political economy, may not have exhausted itself as our modern myth. It is with this reflection in mind that we issued this call, invoking Thomas Mann’s aesthetic ambition to wrest myth “out of Fascist hands.” Responding to the rise of Fascism in Germany, Mann did not oppose the imperial West to its excluded others; rather, he drew on the richness of world literature, Egyptian mythology, and Jewish and Christian theology to reclaim mythological thinking from its appropriation by reactionary political forces. Gillian Rose (1992), whose contribution to Marxian literary criticism may itself be seen as a distinct and subterranean generation of the Frankfurt School, showed that Mann’s dangerous journey into the origins, a backward movement

that paradoxically propels the reader towards a “new humanism,” illuminates the fraught nature of constructing a myth of cosmopolitan humanity. By integrating diverse literary forms into what remains a novel, Mann poses the problem of modern politics in aesthetic terms: how to reconcile the totality of real social relations with what Lukács called “imputed totality,” namely the consciousness of the dominated particular class with its universal, classless potential. In arrogating authority as the author of a “new humanism,” Mann, to be sure, risks deploying the very means that enabled Fascism to capture the political imagination of his contemporary readers. Mann’s strength lies in the fact that, as a “poet,” he refused the role of spiritual leader. He understood how to make use of authorial facetiousness without succumbing to the earnestness of imposing his authority upon readers, instead educating them in the paradoxes of authority itself. Mann’s humanist expression countered Fascism without reducing art to a mere “superstructure,” and without grounding a violent mythical origin in everything, an inclination shared by both Fascism and some of its purportedly radical critics. This issue is driven by the conviction, shared by the radical current of Frankfurt School critical theory and by Mann, that art can remain politically formative.

Our contributors offer a combination of diagnosis and expression in their aesthetic critique of Fascism and their exploration of aesthetic strategies

to counter reactionary political forces. These diagnostic approaches build upon diverse traditions compatible with the impulse of Frankfurt School critical theory, fusing literary and aesthetic criticism with a social and political critique of the conditions that give rise to Fascist politics. The contradictions inherent in the modern state and capitalist economic society are discerned in the aestheticised modes of Fascist political authority, in traditionalist national mythologies of primordial origins, and in mass media and culture. In countering these myths, contributors interpret aesthetic expressions and political strategies that resist such pernicious forces, with a view towards emancipatory politics. In one way or another, all contributors politicise aesthetics within the horizon of modern society—our perennial predicament.

Roy-Rojas' *The Gramsci–Bordiga Debate, 100 Years On* situates the Gramsci–Bordiga debate amid the rise of Fascism in interwar Italy, highlighting how their confrontation unfolded within a political environment increasingly shaped by Fascism's aestheticised modes of authority. Emerging alongside revolutionary upheaval, the debate reveals how questions of invariance, strategy, and organisation were conditioned not only by material forces but also by the stylised forms through which Fascism projected power and mobilised consent. By tracing how these dynamics entered into the strategic and theoretical tensions between Bordiga and Gramsci,

the paper shows that the aesthetic dimensions of Fascism formed part of the terrain on which their conceptual developments arose, offering insights that remain relevant for understanding contemporary entanglements of aesthetics, politics, and authoritarian resurgence.

Salinas' *Being Old and Being Modern: Amedeo Modigliani at the 17th Venice Biennale* offers a fascinating analysis of the reception of the Italian artist Amedeo Modigliani's work amid the Fascist regime's curation of the XVII Biennale di Venezia in 1930. Against the backdrop of the "Return to Order" movement's rivalry with the cosmopolitan "French taste," Salinas reconstructs a disagreement between Antonio Maraini, the organiser of the Biennale and an advocate of Mussolini's project of national reconstruction, and Lionello Venturi, art historian, critic, and the exhibition's curator, over the form and meaning of Modigliani's oeuvre. The article shows how, through his curatorial work, Venturi was able to develop an anti-Fascist interpretative approach that undermined the ideological imperative to resuscitate modern Italian art in terms of reductive visions of tradition and realism. Through a careful analysis of this curatorial dissent, accompanied by a reconstruction of Modigliani's artistic deployment of the French cosmopolitan avant-garde in his valorisation of Italian art, Salinas's contribution raises crucial questions about the facile attempts to oppose modernity and tradition.

Gauvin's *La résistance esthétique au fascisme chez Benjamin et Adorno : entre politisation de l'art et autonomie formelle* examines Adorno's account of art and politics through his debate with Benjamin. The author reconstructs the concepts of aura and autonomous art, beginning with Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, in which the historical depletion of art's relationship to ritual is identified as a central feature of mass society. Benjamin, influenced by Brecht, outlines the political possibilities opened up by this conjuncture; these are contrasted by the author with Adorno's critique of Benjamin and his own understanding of artistic autonomy and aura. Drawing mainly on Adorno's letters to Benjamin and his essays on music and the culture industry, the author expounds Adorno's account of the contradictions of modernist aesthetic autonomy. Gauvin's contribution thus sheds light on the limits of the politisation of art, the culture industry's relation to Fascist ideology, and the possibilities that formal autonomy may offer for anti-Fascist praxis.

Pellerin's *Esthétique de la peur et partage du sensible dans les discours politiques sur les immigrants* builds on Rancière's notion of the *esthétique de la politique* and on critical discourse analysis to highlight fear's constitutive role in political discourse on immigration. Pellerin situates the mobilisation of fear within rising nationalist sentiment and tightening border controls, showing how the aesthetic of politics

structures the world of experience and governs the unequal distribution of legitimacy and political power. Media framings of migrants, especially after 9/11, mobilise fear and anxiety to conflate migration with security threats and pressures on social services. The prevalence of securitisation discourses accompanies anti-migration policies, while obscuring the fact that the security of migrants themselves is under threat. Drawing on media analysis and critical theory, the paper outlines the relationship between securitisation dynamics and the "distribution of the sensible," thereby offering an original account of the relationship between politics and aesthetics.

Deslauriers' review of Lukács' *La lutte entre libéralisme et démocratie au miroir du roman historique des antifascistes allemands*, recently translated into French, offers a striking account of German anti-Fascist literature. For Lukács, the historical novel is the literary form *par excellence* of the democratic camp, capable of providing his contemporaries with goals and ideals, thus overcoming literature's "negativity." Yet the strength, or weakness, of such literature is closely tied to the state of its struggle with bourgeois liberalism. The political possibilities of the historical novel are also inseparable from its artistic form. Its poetic dimension enables it to evoke, within the text, a humanist struggle that transcends mundanity. Deslauriers' reading of *La lutte entre libéralisme et démocratie* shows how the historical novel, when it does justice to the

people as the driving force of history, is able to enact anti-fascist struggle in the narrative form itself.

This issue is being released in a new visual form and on a new *Problématique* website. The editorial collective welcomes its new members from the Department of Politics, who will continue to showcase the department's politically engaged scholarship, as well as that of its fellow travellers.

Problématique Editorial Collective

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The Gramsci-Bordiga Debate, 100 Years On

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Abstract This paper examines the 1924 leadership transition from Amadeo Bordiga to Antonio Gramsci in the *Partito Comunista d'Italia* (PCd'I), to reconstruct the theoretical and political determinations of their confrontation. The *Gramsci-Bordiga debate*, emerging amid revolutionary fervour and the rise of fascism in Italy, reveals enduring contradictions between invariance and counter-hegemonic strategy. Using a sociological and historical method and a corpus of writings, letters, and speeches, the paper situates the debate within the material and strategic conditions of interwar Europe. The analytical approach treats their opposition as a relative totality in which conflict generates conceptual development. The findings argue that, a century on, the structural economic, social, and political conditions that framed the debate persist – rendering its insights urgently relevant. From the debate emerges a necessary synthesis: Gramsci's strategy of expansive articulation and Bordiga's insistence on theoretical and organizational rigour form two indispensable poles of revolutionary praxis. The paper identifies three principles for contemporary emancipatory politics: grounding strategy in material and historical analysis; linking immediate struggles to systemic transformation; and combining flexible articulation with programmatic coherence. These key tensions outline a register for contemporary struggles to grasp from the debate.

In 1924, Antonio Gramsci succeeded Amadeo Bordiga as leader of the Communist Party of Italy (*Partito Comunista d'Italia*, PCd'I). The transition from the first to the second leader of the PCd'I occurred amidst profound differences within the Italian communist movement. Faced with the immediate danger posed by the rise of fascism, Gramsci denounced Bordiga's orthodoxy and resulting immobilism. Bordiga, for his part, foresaw the looming authoritarian and bureaucratic turn of the Communist International, which he saw reflected in Gramsci's programme, and rejected any divergence from the revolutionary struggle. A century after the transition in leadership of the PCd'I, we are witnessing similar symptoms of global capitalist crisis to those Gramsci and

Bordiga struggled with. Yet, cohesive, emancipatory, and revolutionary programmes like theirs seem lacking. To be sure, the questions raised by Gramsci and Bordiga seem more pressing than ever, and their debate offers a significant register for ongoing political struggles.

The paper addresses a central question: *What can be drawn from the debate between Gramsci and Bordiga, 100 years on?* The goal is twofold. First, to offer a comprehensive understanding of the debate, combining a historical account with a critical examination of the political-theoretical contributions it conveys. Although extensive literature has covered the debate from a historical perspective, most contributions have either accounted for the political history (of the PCd'I and other contemporary

organizations) or the biographical trajectory of Gramsci and Bordiga. Scarce research focuses specifically on the debate, while almost none comprehensively historicizes its political-theoretical tensions. The second goal is to suggest a register for current emancipatory projects, debates, and practices. Crucial aspects of Gramsci and Bordiga's debate now occupy a marginal position in emancipatory politics. However, to address the most serious issues we are experiencing, these aspects ought to resurface. Gramsci and Bordiga have certainly influenced valuable political currents since, but the latter have arguably led to impasses. The paper aims to grasp crucial aspects of the *Gramsci-Bordiga debate*; to foster efficient and theoretically informed praxis. The method is historical and sociological. It draws from a corpus of original interventions, including publications, newspaper articles, programmes, letters, transcripts of conferences and speeches authored by Gramsci and Bordiga, or in which they were involved, as well as related commentaries by their contemporaries. This corpus is approached contextually. To locate the political and its conceptualization contextually is to ground political theory within the specific, historically situated social formation in which it emerged. Hence, the analysis looks at social forces and material conditions. This renders a more cohesive account of the debate, including the relationship between Gramsci and Bordiga's interventions and the strategic landscape in which they struggled.

The debate is understood as a dialectical relationship; that is, as a relative totality in which the conflictual relationship between the two debaters and their perspectives, through development and negation, results in a more complete conceptualization and leads to change. As such, the account considers the debaters' reciprocal influence on each other's perspectives and their mutual influence on their historical context. This provides a comprehensive account from which conclusions can be drawn.

The discussion addresses the resilience of the conditions that shaped Gramsci and Bordiga's strategic landscape. It builds upon academic literature and political interventions inspired by Gramsci and Bordiga. The analytical approach followed throughout is correctly described as a historical-dialectical; by tracing the significance of its legacies and how the determinants that influenced the debate have unfolded throughout the centenary historical process that followed, it informs the analysis of the current landscape, and how the inherited conditions can change. Doing so results in a twofold contribution: it offers keys that help to characterize historical changes and identify the issues that remain; it signals a threshold for further discussions and new debates to engage with and converge upon politically.

What follows is divided into three main sections. The first contextualizes the account of the debate. The second covers the debate chronologically,

unpacking crucial theoretical contentions and considering tensions within the strategic landscape. The third section discusses significant developments and critically examines their contradictions relative to the current conjuncture. The conclusion answers the central question posed in the paper, suggesting a register for ongoing struggles against capitalism.

Approaching...

When approaching accounts of the debate, one faces two significant contradictions. The first can illuminate the present conjuncture, whereas the second has and continues to obscure the debate's legacy. Evocative of the rich theoretical contributions and major political changes of the early 20th century, the first contradiction is that of genuine political and theoretical divergences and disagreements between Gramsci and Bordiga. This contradiction is negotiated throughout the paper. The second is related to the narratives that framed previous accounts and have historically influenced the (unequal) reception of Gramsci and Bordiga's works. It contradicts the analysis and fruitfulness of the debate. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that said narratives attest to the protagonists' strategic landscape. To overcome this contradiction, rather than ideological bias or idealistic oppositions, it is addressed in terms of political constraints and situated praxis; national and international pressures upon the Italian Communist movement and

the material practice of people involved in publishing and/or, conversely, censoring the debaters' work.

Because the first contradiction is realized in view of the second, it can only be overcome after unpacking the ladder. In more concrete terms: The posthumous co-optation of Gramsci's work by the *Partido Comunista de Italia* (PCI)—not to be conflated with its predecessor the PCd'I—and the antagonism constructed against Bordiga reflect the strategic landscape which unpacked, clarifies the political determinants (e.g. pressures from international political organizations, tactical demands, contingent threats, opposition between forces, structural economic changes, etc.) that influenced the debate and must be understood to mitigate some limitations to the comprehensive historical examination, and to assess the debate's legacy and tensions within it.

Co-optation and Antagonism

The work of Palmiro Togliatti is emblematic of the initial limitations to studying the debate. After Gramsci's arrest in 1926, Togliatti assumed leadership of the PCd'I. Excluding a short interim from 1934 to 1938, he remained General Secretary of the party until 1968, the year of his death. Under his leadership, the party's programme was aligned with the unequivocal positions pushed by the Comintern and transformed into the PCI, a new structure and programme of his design. Togliatti's consolidation of his leadership was characterized by a

dual strategy of appropriating Antonio Gramsci's legacy while constructing an antagonism against Amadeo Bordiga. This strategy reflected the significant challenges imposed by the recently established Fascist regime upon the Italian Communist movement.

Indeed, in 1925 and 1926, Mussolini's government passed the *Leggi Fascistissime*, the series of laws which dissolved all non-fascist political organizations, abolished freedom of the press, and set up the Special Tribunal for the Defense of the State, the organ that, ran by fascist militia and the regime's military officers, pursued anti-Fascist "subversives", systematically imprisoning political opponents or sending them into exile. From the beginning, Togliatti led the PCd'I from Moscow, in exile. In 1943, he renamed the party PCI, and upon his return to Italy in 1944, he transformed the formerly revolutionary party into a reformist, nationalist mass organization. In his words, the PCI was to resolve the "problem of the emancipation of labour within the frame of our national freedom and life," with "the salvation, the resurrection of Italy" as its goals (Togliatti 1972, cited in Basso 2023, 131). For ideological and party-discipline purposes, the PCI antagonized Bordiga, whose programme the PCI was breaking from. Meanwhile, as George Hoare and Nathan Sperber put it, the PCI instrumentalized the defunct Gramsci, who became, in the post-war period, a "quasi-mythological figure for the party rank and file" (Hoare and Sperber 2016, 212). The definitive di-

chotomy constructed between the two previous leaders served to validate the party's new strategic direction.

The co-optation of Gramsci's legacy was intended to present Togliatti as his natural successor, instrumentalizing the prestige Gramsci acquired among Italian workers during the Turin strikes (1918–1919), while obscuring his past disagreements with Togliatti and his non-alignment with Stalin's dominant line in the International. The party reframed Gramsci's work as compatible with Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy and the PCI's new nationalist identity. According to Francisco Fernández Buey, this interpretation was "inseparable from the political and cultural vision of Palmiro Togliatti" (2014, 99). That effort was also detrimental to the early reception of Gramsci's political-theoretical contribution, as in the case of the *Prison Notebooks'* (1948–1951) first edition, which suffered substantive "interpretative choices" under Togliatti's supervision (Thomas 2009, 106).

These editorial choices reflect a complex political landscape where the PCI navigated both national imperatives and international pressures. As Peter Thomas argues, Togliatti's approach to Gramsci's work resulted from "complex political calculations" and "intense diplomatic *manoeuvres*" concerning the PCI's place within the International communist movement (Thomas 2009, 105–6). Domestically, the party aimed to enforce internal discipline and legitimize its own reformist, parliamentary programme by presenting it as the

natural continuation of Gramsci's leadership versus Bordiga's defeated strategy. As such, Gramsci's writings on party discipline were "appealed to when loyalty to the PCI leadership had to be enforced within the ranks" (Hoare and Sperber 2016, 212). Conversely, his writings on revolution were introduced as contingent to the incremental march towards socialism, which itself was reduced to the party's social-democratic programme and parliamentary politics (Basso 2020a, 131). For Pietro Basso, this effort involved masking the "very open-endedness" of Gramsci's political theory; for instance, in the first edition of the Prison Letters (1947), the compilers systematically "expunged" content deemed "compromising to the PCI," such as all 18 sympathetic references to Bordiga (Basso 2020b).

The antagonism towards Bordiga was also driven by political determinants, both national and international. Domestically, Togliatti sought to neutralize Bordiga's enduring influence, which challenged his own leadership and the PCI's new reformist direction. He systematically denigrated Bordiga, using his figure to embody all internal criticism and to rally the base by defining the party in opposition to Bordighism, whose proponents were excluded from its ranks. In Basso's words, Bordiga's position contradicted the PCI's programme that now revolved around national unity through collaboration with bourgeois and capitalist parties to rebuild a democratic Italy after the Fascist regime;

"Hence Togliatti's instruction: build up a physical, psychological, ideological, 'moral' chasm to divide these cadres from Bordiga and his positions" (Basso 2020b). This strategy dovetailed with the Comintern's own rejection of Bordiga, who was expelled in 1930. To further discredit him, the PCI conflated his position with Trotskyism—despite their theoretical differences—a tactic exemplified by Togliatti's 1937 depiction of Bordiga as a "Trotskyist skunk protected by the police and by fascists and hated by workers in the way that a traitor has to be hated" (Togliatti 1972, 29).

The strategic landscape of the 1930s to the 1950s fundamentally shaped the reception of Gramsci and Bordiga's work. Gramsci was systematically assimilated into Leninism and orthodox Marxist ideology, stripping it of its historical and national context, while Bordiga was marginalised and his contributions largely erased from communist discourse (Fontana 1993, 4). This politicized framing and the related ideological tensions underscore the necessity of historicizing both the texts and their interpretations; hence, the following account is analysed from a social and material perspective.

...the Debate

Gramsci and Bordiga first met clandestinely in Florence in November 1917 at a conference of PSI dissidents critical of the party's leadership. Both represented groups from the party's intransigent left: Gramsci as a delegate

from Turin, and Bordiga, already an established figure from Naples. Galvanized by the recent Bolshevik Revolution, which affirmed the viability of a worker-led revolution and the need to break with reformism, the dissidents prepared a common left-wing position for the upcoming national congress. The resulting platform condemned both Italy's participation in the imperialist war and the party's reformist wing, though internal divisions persisted over tactics, particularly the expulsion of reformists from the PSI.

The left platform largely reflected Bordiga's positions, which aligned with Lenin's April Theses (April 7th, 1917). Unlike the official PSI stance of "Neither support, nor sabotage" the state's war effort, Bordiga had opposed the conflict since 1914 and now advocated for organized armed insurrection: "It is essential to act [...] The proletariat in the factories is tired. But it is armed. We must act" (Bordiga quoted in Gramsci 1971, xxxiii). He argued the party must lead the proletariat in a decisive revolutionary struggle, presenting this as the only alternative to the twin failures of nationalist capitulation and socialist indecision.

Although Gramsci initially supported Bordiga's platform (he spoke in their favor and promoted the Florence platform), their analyses of the October Revolution fundamentally diverged. In his 1917 article *La Rivoluzione contro il Capitale*, Gramsci portrayed the Bolshevik success as a vanguard movement that fused with a popular revolution. He

emphasized the primacy of the ideological factor; the "Bolshevik revolution is based more on ideology than actual events", he wrote (Gramsci 1917). For him, the revolution was led by a vanguard movement that proved successful by merging with the broader popular Russian struggle and transforming the movement into revolutionary control over the state. Furthermore, he argued, the unforeseen character of the revolution demonstrated the inadequacy of the traditional Marxist method.

The Bolsheviks renounce Karl Marx and they assert, through their clear statement of action, through what they have achieved, that the laws of historical materialism are not as set in stone, as one may think, or one may have thought previously (Gramsci 1917).

Gramsci challenged the traditional historical materialist view that revolutionary will emerges mechanically from capitalism's internal contradictions. Instead, he argued that the Russian Revolution succeeded through a process of political articulation: diverse populations, united by shared wartime struggles and the February Revolution, came to see themselves as part of a whole, as a collective historical agent. The Bolsheviks' crucial role, in his view, was to foster the "socialist thinking" that ignited: the blooming "collective sense" into a cohesive communist revolutionary will (Gramsci 1917). This analysis was not a rejection of historical materialism but an effort to specify its operation within the unique Russian context.

Gramsci's analysis was widely criticized as a form of Marxist idealism. Reformists dismissed it as utopistic voluntarism, while Bordiga offered a more radical critique, arguing that its idealist character fundamentally contradicted historical materialism as a method and Marx himself. Bordiga contended that the Bolshevik victory aligned perfectly with the Communist Manifesto: a proletarian revolution following an incomplete bourgeois revolution. He wrote:

What did not happen in Germany, for complex reasons, has happened in Russia in 1917. It is therefore not right to say that the beginning of the socialist revolution is anti-Marxist, precisely in the country where the bourgeois revolution has not yet been accomplished (Bordiga 1998, 418–19).

Indeed, before the Revolution, neither the Russian state nor the economy underwent a bourgeois revolution, as Tsars still ruled and capitalist modes of production had not subsumed agriculture. Rather, Bordiga attributed the success to the party's "extreme force of will" and the unique weakness of the Tsarist state, whose resources it expanded in the war; conditions absent in advanced capitalist countries like Italy, where strong state mechanisms could easily suppress revolutionary vanguards. Consequently, Bordiga concluded that in Western contexts, the primary task was not insurrectionary voluntarism but the patient organization of a disciplined Communist Party.

Despite deeming the Bolsheviks' tactics specific to Russia, Bordiga nevertheless celebrated the October Revolution as a transformative international event. He argued it exposed the absurdity of the imperialist war and reaffirmed the interconnected, global nature of class struggle, as foreseen by Marx and Engels; the message sent by the Russian revolutionaries concerned the global capitalist order as a whole (Basso 2020a, 128). For Bordiga, the revolution was not the application of an internationalist idea to a national context, but a strike against nationalism itself; and this, Marxists should recall in their method, the inherent contradiction of the international capitalist system is grounded in people's material conditions: "the revolution has dealt a mighty blow to the *nationalist* conception of the war" (Bordiga 1996, 411). Rather than contradicting Marxism, it ultimately confirmed communism's inherently international character.

Il Soviet and l'Ordine nuovo

In the aftermath of World War I, Italy experienced a major financial crisis, laying the grounds to major general strikes throughout the country, especially in Turin—the *biennio rosso* (1919–1920), out in Turin. During this period, the divergence between Gramsci and Bordiga intensified. Each developed their analysis of the events through their respective newspapers. Yet, they shared a critique: condemning the PSI's passive stance toward the crucial situation of the simultaneous revolutionary worker

uprisings and the growing fascist threat.

In Naples, Bordiga founded *Il Soviet* in 1918 with other militants of the Communist Abstentionist Fraction. The journal promoted an abstentionist line — “Not one socialist at the polls!”—arguing that the PSI had reduced socialism to a mere expansion of democracy, within bourgeois institutions. The PSI equated socialism to “the *widening of democracy* within the limits of existing institutions” and regarded class struggle as a “*law-abiding peaceful* way of boosting this revolutionary process, with elections being the key” (Basso 2020a, 128). Bordiga adamantly opposed such a programme. In his view, class struggle was being diluted into lawful electoral gradualism. Indeed, *Il Soviet* paid particular attention to the Russian context, and its editorial lines championed Bolshevik intransigence toward Social democracy and Socialist reformism, contending that their success in “win[ing] the trust and allegiance of the great majority of the Russian workers’ stemmed from unwavering commitment to a “consistent adherence to the maximum programme” (Bordiga 2020, 24).

Founded in Turin by Gramsci, Togliatti, and other local militants, *L’Ordine Nuovo* first appeared on May 1st, 1919. Its aim, as outlined days earlier (April 25th) in *Avanti!* was to appeal to all Italian socialists who had faith in the future and wanted to put this faith into practice, to achieve, through passionate and coordinated research, a maximum programme that met the requirements of the national and international situa-

tion. The group believed that replacing the existing bourgeois implied appealing to the “common sense” emerging from the workers’ “spontaneous experience” during the *biennio rosso*; that “organizing” this common sense into a unified revolutionary programme would increase tenfold the “strength” of their “enthusiasm” (Descendre and Zancarini 2023, 123). Alongside reporting on local struggles, the journal published translations of revolutionary texts from Russia, France, and England, seeking to adapt international insights to the ebullient Italian conditions, to understand them, and to draw inspiration from them.

Gramsci’s direct involvement with factory councils sharpened his critique of the PSI’s lack of support for the revolutionary strikers. In *L’Ordine Nuovo*, he polemized with the “traditional intellectuals” trade unionists, rejecting the “industrial vision” concerned with “defending” the factory committees while waiting for the revolutionary culture to develop and the proletariat to become educated enough for its success (Descendre and Zancarini 2023, 126). In *L’Ordine Nuovo*, he polemized against PSI MPs who favoured negotiation with industrialists and whose position was tantamount to passivity in the face of fascist militia, police, and strike-breakers’ offensives. Instead, Gramsci called for mobilizing workers beyond the factories and building a powerful unitary movement.

Throughout the *biennio rosso*, Gramsci pragmatically supported the

two major leading organizations, the anarcho-syndicalist *Unione Sindacale Italiana* and the revolutionary syndicalist *Unione Italiana del Lavoro*, despite theoretical disagreements. These organizations—accustomed to small, militant circles—proved unable to develop a strategy suited to the mass movements they now represented (Bertrand 1982, 383–84). Meanwhile, PSI reformists and the *Confederazione Generale del Lavoro* (CGL) actively suppressed what they deemed primitive tactics and anarchist tendencies among the workers. For example, when anarcho-syndicalists sought to coordinate food riots into a broader uprising in Turin, local Socialists obstructed these efforts, prioritizing achievable reforms like the eight-hour workday over insurrectionary actions that threatened their “control over the masses” and the labour movement (Bertrand 1982, 185).

Despite his scepticism toward anarchism, Gramsci recognized the potential of Italy’s main revolutionary organizations, drawing inspiration from the Soviet model. He argued that Soviets were effective precisely because they emerged organically from the masses; the *a priori* articulation of a general movement freed from the control of elected representatives or predetermined agendas. In his view, Italian workers—through self-organization and direct action—were already developing their own methods and their own ends, “the tools better suited to forming a perfect cohesion of the working class” and “realizing, already, the self-govern-

ment of the masses” (Gramsci 1919a). In *L’Ordine Nuovo*, he championed the Soviet council as the “central model” for the whole communist organization of society (Gramsci 1919b).

Under the combined Fascist offensives and state repression and subsided by the settlements union and Socialist leaders negotiated, the Turin strikes collapsed in 1920. Gramsci considered that the “immediate task” was studying what led to both the rise and the failure of this revolutionary sequence. In his editorial *Superstizione e realtà* (May 8th), Gramsci analysed the defeat through the lens of Marx and Engels’ writing on the failed 1848 German Revolution. He rejected the official narrative—promoted by state-aligned newspapers and moderate socialists—that blamed the failure on the irresponsibility of a few instigators, including the *Ordine Nuovo* group. Against this “superstition”, he argued the understanding that the revolution failed because of the movement’s “immaturity” and absence of revolutionary cohesion, for which the PSI was prominently responsible; because they focused on beneficial settlements, reformist forces, including the PSI, worked to prevent the expansion of the mass movement in Turin, isolating it, ultimately signing its exhaustion (Descendre and Zancarini 2023, 137–38). Yet, like Marx and Engels, who argued “every attempt at forcible repression will only bring it forth stronger and stronger, until it bursts its fetters,” Gramsci believed that, despite the defeat, the *biennio ros-*

so would only strengthen working-class resolve (Marx 1851). He concluded that Turin's workers had emerged with a critical insight on two fronts: the control over factories and over their own political organizations.

In *Il Soviet*, Bordiga offered a distinct analysis of the events. While he agreed that post-war conditions sparked the revolutionary wave and that class collaborationists led to its failure, he opposed granting greater autonomy to local councils. For Bordiga, the revolutionary party necessarily preceded and superseded all other forms of organization, including unions, Soviets, or parliamentary groups. The party, he wrote, “came before unionism or parliamentary groups” (Basso 2020a, 128).

He acknowledged that factory councils were valuable for the socialization of the working class and the management of local production but rejected the view that they could unify the proletariat as a revolutionary subject. This divergence was rooted in the analysis of the Soviet model. While the Soviet embodied the immediate power of the proletariat—as it “took upon itself alone the task of directing the entire life of society”—only the party could unify its forces and express its general and historical interest as a class (Bordiga 2020, 24). Despite this disagreement with Gramsci over the *question of organization*, both concurred on the essential next step: breaking from reformists to create a new party committed to a revolutionary programme.

The Question of Fascism

During the interwar period, alongside the *biennio rosso*, Italy experienced the rise of fascism. Between the defeat of the Turin strikes and the founding of the PCd'I, Fascists gained their first political foothold in the country. Yet, before the March on Rome, most communists underestimated the threat, believing Fascism would soon collapse under the internal contradictions of its class constitution—a movement of the petty bourgeoisie, too fragmented and economically insignificant to consolidate lasting control over the state, that was showing its last performance before undergoing an inner dissolution (Adamson 1979, 53).

L'Ordine Nuovo documented the daily Fascist military offensive against workers and their devastating impact on the strikes. Nevertheless, its early analyses often reduced Fascism to a tool of the dominant economic forces, capitalist manufacturers and big landowners, devoid of political autonomy and perspective (Descendre and Zancarini 2023, 165). In a January 1921 article, Gramsci characterized Fascism as a negative phenomenon, emerging as a mere reaction to the war and the ensuing financial downturn. Because of its class structure, the movement of the unproductive (having no real economic or political significance, nor a determining class articulation either to capital or labour) petty bourgeois class could only mimic other classes in its political activity.

The petit bourgeoisie, even in this last political incarnation of “fascism,” has definitively shown itself in its true nature of servant of capitalism and of landed property, of agent of counter-revolution. But it has also shown that it is fundamentally incapable of carrying out any historical task: the ape people fills the press, it does not make history, it leaves a trace in the papers, it does not offer material to write books (Gramsci 1921)

This view, though perceptive in identifying its class composition, initially overlooked Fascism’s capacity to develop a coherent and autonomous political force.

Bordiga’s analysis similarly underestimated fascism, reducing it to a transient bourgeois counter-revolutionary tool that would dissipate once no longer needed by the ruling class. Even following the March on Rome and Mussolini’s ascent to power in 1922, Bordiga maintained that fascism was functionally equivalent to other bourgeois forces that had suppressed the revolutionary movement. Unlike Gramsci, who later revised his views (especially after the formation of the 1922 Fascist government), Bordiga never substantially developed his analysis beyond this instrumentalist reading. This remained Bordiga’s perspective: fascism and social democracy (like that of the PSI) were two different yet complementary functions of the bourgeois state—differing in form, but identical in their role in upholding class domination.

The Foundation of the Partito Comunista d’Italia

In January 1921, the left wing of the PSI split during its Livorno national Congress and formed the *Partito Comunista d’Italia* (PCd’I). The secession, representing a third of the PSI membership, united three main factions: the maximalist left, the Neapolitan group led by Bordiga, and Gramsci’s *Ordine Nuovo* group. The new party immediately voted to join the Comintern and elected Bordiga as its first general secretary (Gramsci 2000, 110).

The Comintern’s response, however, was ambivalent. At its Third World Congress in June 1921, the International criticized the PCd’I for “concentrating its activity on consolidating the scission and making permanent attacks on ‘centrism,’” its leaders were denounced as “ultra-left factionalists” who stripped the PSI of a great portion of its members (Del Roio 2015, 49). This tension defined the PCd’I’s early international relations, culminating, between 1921 and 1924, in a dispute regarding the contentious United Front policy. The PCd’I leadership—including Bordiga, Gramsci, and Togliatti—supported the policy in principle but opposed the Comintern’s version imported from above, which they saw as a step toward reunification with the reformist PSI. As such, the United Front policy was inaudible. From their standpoint, the reunification was unnecessary at best—since Communists remained convinced that the Fascists’ recent political victory would not change

fundamentally the Italian situation—while, at worst, it would mean renewed collaboration with bourgeois forces, betraying both the precise reason for their split and the party’s programme (Descendre and Zancarini 2023, 183). Instead, the PCd’I advocated for a United Front from below, built directly through production-based’ organizations. This stance, however, was tantamount to rejecting the Comintern’s tactical directive (Gramsci 1971, xvliii).

The formation by trade unions, following the fall of the Bonomi government, of the anti-fascist *Alleanza del Lavoro* in February 1922—which a priori excluded communists from its leadership—sharpened tensions over the United Front. In *L’Ordine Nuovo*, Gramsci criticized this exclusion as symptomatic of a deeper disconnect between the leadership, comprised of union bureaucrats, and the working-class rank and file. He argued that a genuinely representative system, based on elected local committees—rather than a structure regulated by professional union officials—would logically position communists at the vanguard of the struggle, reflecting their organic connection to organized workers (Descendre and Zancarini 2023, 173).

The Rome Congress

At its second congress in Rome (March 1922), the PCd’I grappled with the question of the United Front amid exclusion from the *Alleanza del Lavoro*. The party’s leadership was divided on the issue. Gramsci’s *Trade Union Theses*

clashed with the *Theses on Tactics* (or *Rome Theses*) put forward by Bordiga and Terracini, which ultimately prevailed and were adopted in bloc. The *Rome Theses* defined the party as the political party of the proletarian class, to constitute itself as a historical subject, asserting that without the party, it remained an aggregate of workers rather than a coherent revolutionary class. The *Theses* emphasized the party operated as a collective and based its praxis upon a “critical consciousness” from which it also “draws its programme” (Communist Party of Italy 1922). They identified “construct[ing] this party and enlarg[ing] its influence over the masses,” while providing members “coherence, discipline and preparation” was the party’s primary tasks in order “to draw behind it ever broader layers of the working class” (Communist Party of Italy 1922). While offering circular definitions, the *Theses* crystallized Bordiga’s vision: the Communist party does not merely represent the class—it fundamentally constitutes it.

During the Congress, the PCd’I was equally concerned with “preparing a defence against fascism” as it was with “attacking” and “exposing” the PSI. (Beetham 1984, 96) For Bordiga, fascism remained marginal. Yet, the Congress agreed the Italian situation was not on for passivity, not towards fascism nor the bourgeois state. As reflected in the *Theses* adopted, the consensus was that fascism could not be defeated in isolation but only through the destruction of capitalism itself.

To combat fascism does not mean to believe that it is possible to annul one function of bourgeois society without destroying the latter's existence; nor to delude oneself that fascism can be defeated in itself, as an episode cut off and isolated from the overall offensive activity of capitalism (Communist Party of Italy 1922)

While simply reiterating the party's Livorno positions, the Theses cemented a cohesive revolutionary programme. The Congress also mandated Gramsci and Bordiga to present this platform at the Fourth World Congress of the Communist International (scheduled June 7–11, 1922).

During the Moscow Congress, Bordiga elaborated his analysis of fascism as a functional instrument of bourgeois counter-revolution. He identified fascism as the bourgeoisie's political solution to the revolutionary crisis of the *biennio rosso* (1919–1920). As it emerged from war, Italy was indeed in a crisis. Its ruling class was faced with a dual problem, which the weakened state was unable to regulate: all the forces mobilized in the military campaign were suddenly re-entering the labour market, while the financial crisis generated the nationwide uprising of a reinvigorated proletariat (Bordiga 2020, 164). Thus, capitalists relied on two parallel strategies to reassert control: making concessions to the proletariat through collaboration with reformist socialists and unions (the bourgeois Left), while simultaneously unleashing fascism as a military force to subdue violently the

uncompromising revolutionaries and restore state authority.

In Bordiga's analysis of this situation, fascism and social democracy functioned as complementary instruments of bourgeois rule—one collaboration, the other through coercion. For instance, he argued that fascism extended its influence in the countryside (where the proletariat, numerous, represented a consequential force) not only through violence but also by creating alternative trade unions and peasant organizations: Capitalizing on the PSI's lack of a clear agrarian policy, it attracted segments of the working class disillusioned with the socialists' inaction; meanwhile, by advocating for small landownership and labour reforms, fascism attracted segments of the petty bourgeoisie that sought to adapt to the economic downturn. In industrial cities, however, it operated primarily through political/military organisations designed for brutal and savage violence against revolutionary workers; while the official party organ simultaneously engaged in the "most cynical demagogy", in critiquing the government's "cowardice against revolutionaries", hence fulfilling the role of Socialists by mimicking their "so-called criticism of liberal democracy" (Bordiga 2020, 163–68). One distinction Bordiga (2020) considered between fascism and the bourgeois Left was the former's nationalist hubris.

When it is asserted that all interests must be subordinated to the superior interest of the nation, that means that

class collaboration is upheld in principle, while, in practice, the conservative bourgeois institutions are supported against the proletariat's efforts to free itself (168–69)

In his view, fascism and social democracy function on a continuum: both ultimately served bourgeois interests, with fascism merely adopting more nationalist and violent methods to achieve similar class-collaborationist goals.

Bordiga acknowledged fascism's organizational strength and strategic ability but denied it possessed any coherent ideology or transformative political programme. He argued that fascism, despite its "powerful political and military organization" and "influential press" had "no ideas and no programme" beyond serving the dominant class (Bordiga 2020, 167). In his view, the consolidation of the Fascist regime was illusory; it could not create a truly new society, only reinforce existing capitalist structures. It would inevitably wither, Bordiga claimed, so long as communists fulfilled their historical revolutionary task.

During the Fourth World Congress, Gramsci began openly diverging from Bordiga. He now thought the PCd'I had to "re-orient its policies" and adapt "to the line of the Comintern" (Gramsci 2014, 22). This exposed latent divisions within the Italian leadership, whereas only one year previously, it had risen unanimously against reunifying with the PSI. The United Front policy splintered the leadership into three factions: Bordiga's absten-

tionist left, Tasca's compliant right, and a Gramsci-led center that pragmatically navigated between intransigent defense of the Rome programme and the right's full compliance with the Comintern. Faced with this stalemate, the Comintern formed a commission to force fusion with the PSI and appointed Gramsci to it, signaling a shift away from Bordiga's leadership.

After the World Congress, Bordiga returned to Italy while Gramsci remained in Moscow due to illness. In February, upon his return to Italy, Bordiga was arrested by the Fascist police. From prison, he wrote a manifesto reaffirming his opposition to the Comintern's authoritarian centralism and its disregard for the autonomy of national sections. He warned that the Executive Committee was poised to override the PCd'I's majority positions to enforce its own tactical line—a shift he saw as a betrayal of communist principles. The manifesto was polarizing: his critics saw it as evidence of personal stubbornness and factionalism among the PCd'I, while his supporters viewed it as a defense of the International's original commitment to democratic centralism and national party autonomy. Bordiga's position stemmed from his rigid conception of the Communist Party. He thought the Comintern's concessions reflected a misguided fetishism of the numbers to include reformists and an overreaction to temporary setbacks—the complete capitulation to the counter-revolutionary ebb. Instead, during periods

of revolutionary ebb, he argued, the party must “carry on the agitational and propaganda work possible until the next turn of the tide,” resisting any dilution of its programme (Goldner 1995, 82). For Bordiga, the priority was preserving the Party’s historical task and the Communist programme’s fundamental revolutionary principle.

While in Moscow, Gramsci gradually aligned with the Comintern but still shared some positions with Bordiga—regarding the United Front, he favored a strategy “from below.” When the Italian Executive Committee overwhelmingly endorsed Bordiga’s manifesto, Gramsci (2014) was the sole opponent, who saw it as the “beginning of a battle without quarter against the International” (224–25). Despite the left consensus in the PCd’I, some internal divisions persisted. Tasca’s right wing still advocated full compliance with the Comintern, while the center faction, including Gramsci, acknowledged the risk of liquidation and expressed solidarity with aspects of Bordiga’s critique. For Gramsci (1971), in 1932, the Comintern itself was “showing signs of degeneration” with the PCd’I as a vanguard on its left, “struggling against this degeneration” (lvii). Faced with this impasse, the Comintern’s Executive Committee took the unprecedented step of replacing the elected PCd’I leadership with a mixed provisional committee of its selection—marking the first time it directly overrode the majority of a national section.

During that time, fascist repression intensified in Italy. Many communists fled the country, while clandestinity became the norm for the remaining. Comintern tasked Gramsci with rebuilding the disarrayed PCd’I. From his exile in Vienna, where he founded the newspaper *L’Unità*, Gramsci emphasized the need for greater unity and centralization among European communist parties. He criticized the party’s previous leadership for its immobilism—an overemphasis on internal organizational dogma at the expense of dynamic agitation and propaganda. Gramsci (2014) argued that, as the recent debates concerning organizational form and principles reflected, the PCd’I had abandoned the organic engagement with the working class—the “organic activity of agitation and propaganda” (224–25). He began planning a renewed party focused on active political education and mass mobilization.

In a February 1924 letter, Gramsci elaborated to Togliatti and other comrades his rejection of Bordiga’s manifesto and outlined a new vision of the party. He criticized the prior leadership for creating, he wrote, “a veritable separation between the mass and the leaders,” fixating on rigid organizational principles while stifling the need to “create among the masses the possibility of expressing themselves in the same sense as the Communist Party.” This isolation, Gramsci (2014) argued, reduced the party to a refractory elite circle prone to individual “opportunism” and disconnection (222–26).

Gramsci's vision contrasted with Bordiga's conception of a historical vanguard. He considered that, since Livorno and Rome, the PCd'I was conceived as "something suspended in mid-air": developing *itself for itself*, waiting either for the revolutionary masses to join it or for the leadership to decide the conditions where ripe to bring itself down to the level of the masses and lead them into action. Instead, in his letter, Gramsci (2014) conceived the party as a dynamic, expansive form: "the result of a dialectical process in which there is the convergence of the spontaneous movement of the revolutionary masses and the organisational and directive will of the centre" (226). He rejected Bordiga's obsession with a fixed programme, emphasizing the dialectical process: "historically, a Party is never definite in form and never will be, since it will be defined only when it has become coterminous with the entire population, in other words at the moment of its disappearance" (Gramsci 2014, 226).

While Gramsci organized from Vienna, Bordiga led the PCd'I in Italy through the 1924 general election campaign. Despite facing a dominant Fascist bloc—having recently absorbed a large stratum of the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois classes, gained the Vatican's support, and industrialist's financial backing—the communists positioned themselves as the primary electoral opposition to Mussolini's regime (Gramsci 1971, lxiii). While other opposition parties initially advocated

a boycott, the PCd'I successfully persuaded them to participate in the elections, though they rejected communist proposals for a united anti-fascist electoral front. Other anti-fascist parties followed and rejoined the electoral process but refused the Communist Party's invitation to form a united electoral bloc (Gramsci 1971, lxiii).

In April 1924, Gramsci was elected to parliament, allowing him to return to Italy under political immunity. By November, he had replaced Bordiga as General Secretary of the PCd'I. From his parliamentary position, Gramsci witnessed firsthand the Fascists' autocratic consolidation of power. He grew increasingly frustrated with the "infighting" and the left's "effort to create factionalism" within his party (A. Gramsci, "Letter to Giulia Schucht," June 22, 1925). Speaking out against the Fascists' legislative attempts to limit freedom of assembly—his final parliamentary and public address, delivered in May 1925, offered a matured analysis of fascism's roots. Moving beyond his earlier writings, he argued that fascism emerged not only from the post-war international financial crisis but also from the specific class composition and conditions of uneven development of the Italian state (Short 2014, 106). Because the bourgeoisie had insufficiently industrialized the country, its post-war unstable economy was particularly vulnerable to the economic crisis and, as political dissent started to emerge from the a geographically and econo-

mically disarticulated working class, fascism exploited other social pressures—such as emigration and imperialist ambition—to gain mass support, especially from a middle-class who saw its socioeconomic position threatened by the uprisings and whose class articulation was to the state rather than to capital or labour.

The 3rd Congress and the Lyon Theses

Due to Fascist repression in Italy, the PCd'I held its Third Congress clandestinely in Lyon in January 1926. Drafted by Gramsci and Togliatti, the fourth thesis of the congress (also known as the *Lyon Theses*) presented a position that marked a decisive break with Bordiga's *Rome Theses*. They discussed the Italian situation and the party's reorientation. Crucially, they offered a deeper analysis of fascism—including Gramsci's analysis of the movement's class foundations—and emphasized ideological unity. In terms of praxis and programme, they revived the United Front strategy while reinscribing revolution on the agenda. However, by arguing the leading role of the Russian party and the Comintern in directing the party, while rejecting the compatibility of factions, the *Lyon Theses* exacerbated the foregoing conflict with the left (Bassi 2019, 17). Approved overwhelmingly with 90.8% support, the *Lyon Theses* realigned the PCd'I with Comintern directives, and marginalized Bordiga's left opposition while cementing Gramsci's leadership and ideological shift (Descendre and Zancarini 2023, 240).

Hence, the third congress and the positions adopted with the *Lyon Theses* marked both the culmination of the PCd'I's Bolshevization—the total alignment of its programme with Comintern directives—and the ascendancy of Gramsci's distinctive analysis (Del Roio 2015, 156–58). After Lyon, the party underwent a reorganization aimed at disciplining and unifying its ranks. While committed to disciplinary measures—expelling so-called “extremists” and “left factionalists,” for instance—to maintain unity, Gramsci (1971) insisted that the major tendencies within the party should “all be represented in its leading bodies” (lxxxii). Seeking a comprehensive leadership coalition—however fragile—, he successfully persuaded Tasca, who was also part of the Executive, and Bordiga to join the Central Committee. Gramsci programme followed the analysis developed in the *Lyon Theses*, in particular on the “Southern Question”: he emphasized the revolutionary potential of an alliance between the northern industrial proletariat and the southern peasantry, aiming to undermine fascism's social base by also appealing to segments of the Southern middle classes—an alliance capable of fighting fascism while laying a revolutionary basis (Del Roio 2015, 156–58).

Throughout the following year, the Fascist regime intensified its suppression of political opposition, effectively outlawing all rival parties in Italy. Many PCd'I members were imprisoned, including both Gramsci and Bordiga, who

were arrested in 1926. Togliatti, having escaped capture, was exiled to Moscow, where he assumed leadership of the party and directed its activities—until its eventual dissolution. Imprisoned and ill, Gramsci produced his seminal *Prison Notebooks*, while Bordiga, disillusioned and ostracized, withdrew from the communist movement after his release—until his return in the 1950s.

Discussion

This paper cannot exhaustively treat Gramsci and Bordiga's post-1926 contributions. Thus, the following discussion focuses on two currents inspired by their respective work.

Bordigist Current

Bordiga's postwar work centered on a return to Marx's critique of political economy and early writings. From the 1940s to the 1970s, he developed a pioneering analysis of the USSR, while developing original theoretical insights from the *Grundrisse*. His later theses—including the equation of social democracy with fascism, the primacy of the party, and the invariance of Marx's 1848 doctrine—remained consistent with his 1920s orthodoxy, emphasizing a rigidly materialist link between economic conditions and consciousness.

In *The Original Content of the Communist Party Manifesto* (1958), Bordiga asserts his conceptualization of the Party. He reads Marx and Engels' *Manifesto* not only as a programme for negating class society but also extends its logic to a broader perspective of the

"Historical Party". Noting the USSR experience, he argues that communists have mistakenly reduced their historical task to abolishing private property and, by institutionalizing the proletariat as an entity of socialism, merely transferred the private ownership of production—a move tantamount to creating new capitalist subjects. Instead, for the communist society to emerge:

there must not survive any subject of property, contrary to the historically sterile petit-bourgeois ideologies, and that there must not survive any object, either: means of production or exchange, land, fixed plant, nor consumer goods; not even individual consumption goods (Bordiga 1958)

Bordiga extended his critique of political economy to both the Russian model and advanced capitalist states, like the US. Precursor, he argued, as early as the 1950s, that the USSR retained elements of capitalism—such as outsourcing to private firms and a gradual reduction of state control—and emphasized the agrarian rather than industrial basis of capitalist social relations. He highlighted the resilience of capitalist structures in Soviet cooperative farms (Kolkhoz) and wage-labour state farms (Sovkhoz), where agrarian production depended foremost on small privately owned plots (Bordiga 2020, 77). Rather, Bordiga remained a tenacious defender of Lenin's New Economic Policy (NEP) in Russia—while reiterating an internationalist perspective (Basso 2020b).

For Bordiga, the revolution from

which capitalism emerged was above all an agrarian one. He contended that the Bolsheviks had skipped the necessary bourgeois revolution and capitalization of agriculture—a contradiction he initially believed could be resolved through the international proletarian revolution and collectivization of agrarian production. After recognizing the failure of “World Revolution”, he predicted the USSR would transition to an intensive phase of accumulation—that is, as Marx outlined, the transformation of peasants into workers in the process of subsumption during phases of primitive accumulation—deepening its internal capitalist tendencies and thus its fundamental political-economic contradiction (Goldner 1995, 80).

Furthermore, Bordiga argued that “socialism in one country” was contradictory to the communist project. Communism, in his view, was not to be conflated with proletarian self-management of production, and the class itself not to be idealized or institutionalized, nor nationalized. In his view, since the proletariat itself is a product of capitalism—a function of its economy—its historical task is not to manage capitalist production but to abolish capital—and ultimately, to abolish itself as a class as it dismantles the political and economic structures that reproduce class society. The “essential thing”, he wrote, was whether the capital was reproduced in the new production process. If profitability and surplus-value extraction persisted, then “there could not be socialist planning” (Bordiga 1958). For him,

even state-controlled economies could not abolish capital, because, as long as it was continued through production, its fundamental aspect was reproduced: capitalist social relations.

Bordiga came to articulate his vision of communism through the concept of *Gemeinwesen*—which translates to community or species-being—Marx theorized in the *Grundrisse* and refers to the human condition or the “human community” of communism. In those terms, since its initial alienation from the earth and the fragmentation of human communities in the division of labour, the human-species is alienated from its communal essence, which it continuously intends to materialize anew. To stabilize the ensuing contradictions, throughout history, various social structures (modes of production, forms of state, cultures, etc.) reified and institutionalized forms of alienation, and incrementally, alienated modes of relation integrated all social aspects of life. In other words, Bordiga actualized the concept of *Gemeinwesen* and radicalized Marx’s analysis of primitive accumulation.

Bordiga’s early critiques of social democracy and fascism coalesced into an original political ecology. He argued that socialist industrialism not only alienated revolutionary forces by restructuring labour but also deepened the *Gemeinwesen’s* alienation from the earth by privatizing and destroying the conditions for fulfilling biological needs. He argued that communist production, established through

a common and rational plan, would constitute its own reward; however, a revolutionary dictatorship over consumption was necessary in this process. Rooted in historical materialism, his programmatic vision of communism was a life plan: the revolution against the structures that alienate human needs. This framework led him to outline strategies such as reducing working hours and consumption, which he considered were the main drivers of capitalist modes of production—and thus the organized destruction of life. In his view, a practical programme was a “unitary, international plan for production and consumption” oriented towards oriented toward “the satisfaction” of human needs (Bordiga 1958).

Bordiga’s radical critique resonated in 1970s left-communist circles, particularly through Jacques Camatte, who translated and expanded his work in the journal *Invariance*. Camatte adopted Bordiga’s view of the party as “the organization of those who have lost their original organic unity with the community” (el-Ojeili 2014, 352). Moreover, he extended the concept of *Gemeinwesen* into an ontological framework. Camatte theorized a “Homo *Gemeinwesen*”—a post-capitalist humanity existing in continuity with nature, driven by need-satisfaction and enjoyment; in contrast to Homo Sapiens whose “processual knowledge” further alienated itself as it aimed to understand its historical separation from nature (Camatte 1978). In his view, communism entails ending

humanity’s “wandering”—a profound identity crisis stemming from its alienation from nature—through “inversion”: the act of “leaving this world” to access the repressed “natural essence” that remains in each individual; rather than engaging in political struggle which, like every social arrangement and organizational project, only mimic the social relations humans can no longer experience (Camatte 1973). Indeed, Camatte (2023) opposes this “inversion” to the “enmity” of politics, which, in his view, corresponds to the division and conflicting logic of capital.

This perspective is fundamentally ahistorical and anti-political, positing a universal alienated ontology across all societies and rejecting conjunctural struggles. While Bordiga grounded his revolutionary theory in historical materialism and political economy, Camatte’s (1978) retreat from material analysis leads toward anarcho-primitivism and communist nihilism, without any grasp on existing strategic landscapes, offering individual withdrawal rather than collective struggle and social transformation.

Gramscian Current

Part of Gramsci’s (1971) enduring contribution lies in his concept of the “modern prince”—developed in the *Prison Notebooks*.

The modern prince, the myth-prince, cannot be a real person, a concrete individual. It can only be an organism, a complex element of so-

ciety in which a collective will, which has already been recognised and has to some extent asserted itself in action, begins to take concrete form (129)

Gramsci does not conceive of this Prince as an individual figure, a circumscribed political subject, or a formal institution valid across historical contexts. On the contrary, the modern prince emerges from a specific historical context—initially conceived as the national terrain. The modern prince represents an expansive and unifying political force; it articulates existing struggles, politicizes and expands them, as much as the struggles, through their unity, give the process a concrete form in its institution. In other words, the modern prince is a “dynamic process” of “institutionalizing” a new form of social organization that expansively connects “subaltern” groups, making them politically active, organically articulating fragmented social forces under a unified programme and worldview (Ciavolella 2015, 123).

The figure of the modern prince embodies a collective will into a long-term strategy. Crucially, for Gramsci, the strength of will does not guarantee the success of revolutionary social forces—the path to a successful revolutionary movement depends on its given strategic landscape. By studying the history of different societies, Gramsci identified different social and political orders and theorized strategic perspectives for each. This analysis is reflected in his conceptualization of hegemony. For Gramsci, an order can be hegemonic or not, relatively stable over a cer-

tain time. In the first case, the ruling class enjoys the consent for its political authority and ideological adherence, whereas, in a situation of non-hegemonic order, the ruling class can assert its dominance only through coercion. Indeed, for Gramsci, rather than the simple coercion of other classes under its supremacy, the hegemony of a ruling class depends on acquiring and maintaining consent for its leadership: “the supremacy of a social group manifests itself in two ways, as ‘domination’ and as ‘intellectual and moral leadership’.” Moreover, to acquire and maintain its hegemony: “A social group can, and indeed must, already exercise ‘leadership’ before winning governmental power (this indeed is one of the principal conditions for winning such power); it subsequently becomes dominant when it exercises power, but even if it holds it firmly in its grasp, it must continue to ‘lead’ as well” (Gramsci 1971, 57–58).

One of Gramsci’s concerns was the politics that emerge when there is a breakdown of hegemony. That is what he conceptualized as a situation of organic crisis; it occurs either because the ruling class loses “consent” of a particular class (or fraction of class) it used to dominate, or because “masses” suddenly passed “from a state of political passivity to a certain activity”—in that situation, even if the masses’ particular demands are not cohesively formulated, they culminate in a revolutionary movement (Gramsci 1971, 210). For Gramsci, a situation of crisis repre-

sents a gap for transforming the prior social order; the organized masses can claim a dominant position in society, which they aim to transform. However, Gramsci considered that, if the revolutionary masses are unable to organize sufficiently and instate a new hegemonic order, the traditional ruling class can re-establish its rule by crushing its adversary. And, in his view, when neither antagonist class has “the strength for victory,” it means a “static equilibrium” exists (Gramsci 1971, 211). Gramsci (1971) described this situation as an “interregnum”: “The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear” (276).

For Gramsci (1971), fascism emerged in such a situation—when “the forces in conflict balance each other in a catastrophic manner” such that “a continuation of the conflict can only terminate in their reciprocal destruction” yet, neither is in a position to prevail, then a “third force” intervenes, “subjugating what is left of both” (219).

Gramsci (1971) recognizes that, often, this third force is embodied by a charismatic figure who promises to reconcile order but ultimately restores the old system through force (210). He conceptualized this form of political reaction as “Caesarism”. Appearing in a situation of organic crisis, when the conflicting social forces reach a catastrophic stalemate, it supposedly responds to the immediate dangers—such as those which accompany the

crisis—but is only adapted to the restoration and reorganisation of the dominant social order.

In the modern world, only those historico-political actions which are immediate and imminent, characterised by the necessity for lightning speed, can be incarnated mythically by a concrete individual (Gramsci 1971, 129)

Crucially, while it can be personified by a charismatic leader, Caesarism can also take impersonal forms. A Cesarist solution can exist without a heroic or representative personality—like all coalition governments. Furthermore, for Gramsci (1971), Caesarism always contains the possibility of going through successive phases — “culminating in a more pure and permanent form”—consolidating itself over a new form of state, as he observed from the March on Rome to the establishment of the full Fascist dictatorship (220).

Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, in their book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985), reinterpreted the concepts hegemony and organic crisis. To describe their contemporary situation, through a post-Marxist lens, they reframed the latter as a “conjuncture of organic crisis”:

A conjuncture where there is a generalized weakening of the relational system defining the identities of a given social or political space, and where, as a result there is a proliferation of floating elements [...] It does not emerge from a single point, but it is the result

of an overdetermination of circumstances; and it reveals itself not only in a proliferation of antagonisms but also in a generalized crisis of social identities (Laclau and Mouffe [1985] 2001, 136)

Laclau and Mouffe argue that the social world is not a closed, predetermined totality governed by economic laws; it exists only as a perpetual political struggle to impose a temporary order on a fundamentally open and unstructured field of discursivity. In their view, any political discourse (e.g., liberalism, socialism, conservatism) is, in essence, a hegemonic project: a contingent attempt to dominate said field, to fix the flow of differences, and to create a temporary structure of meaning. However, the success of this project is always partial and temporary—it is a partial fixation. This temporal fixation coalesces around nodal points: “privileged discursive points of this partial fixation” that a hegemonic project empties of a prior fixed meaning and then uses to anchor a whole chain of other meanings, thereby constructing a new political reality (Laclau and Mouffe [1985] 2001, 112).

Where Gramsci rooted hegemony in material antagonisms, Laclau and Mouffe consider that social identities and political demands are not fixed by class or economics but are discursively constructed through contingent articulations. Rejecting class as the central political subject, they argue that socialist strategy rests on articulating diverse struggles under a hegemonic project; the contingent, political process of

constructing a collective will, a people, out of a plurality of disparate social demands. What is at stake, for Laclau and Mouffe, is how to bridge a multiplicity of actors with heterogeneous demands by mobilising them against a stated, common adversary. In this view, charismatic political individualities represent an effective option for building a collective subject.

Laclau and Mouffe extend Gramsci’s insight that Caesarism can be reactionary or progressive, focusing on how charismatic figures can unify diverse actors against a common adversary. Their strategy assumes the second possibility. However, their rejection of objective material interests and class articulation leads to a critical flaw: the political direction of such movements becomes inherently unpredictable. They discard the question of whether the struggles are objectively antagonistic to capital. By prioritizing discursive contingency over capitalism’s structural logic, they fail to distinguish between genuinely anti-capitalist forces and those merely using oppositional rhetoric to reinforce the status quo. In other words, their contingentist strategy risks conflating revolutionary change with restorative populism, overlooking how class dynamics and capitalist social relations persistently shape social conflicts—as well as identity.

The strategic landscape

A brief outline of the political landscape’s evolution in the past decades helps to decipher the relevance—and

shortcomings—of Gramsci and Bordiga’s analysis and insights.

With the neoliberal period came the abandonment of traditional party programmes in favour of more charismatic political figures and, tendentially, a profound popular disenchantment with the prevailing social and political institutions (Betz 1993). In core capitalist countries, traditional parties underwent a strategic shift. In the 1980s in particular, as left parties adopted more economically liberal agendas while emphasizing progressive rhetoric—the “centrist” Third Way movement, in the US Democratic party under Bill Clinton and the UK Labour under Tony Blair, for instance—radical right parties combined more socially conservative positions with more economically liberal policies, turning from their ideological heritage to adopt a more consensual electoral image—the Front National’s *dédiabolisation* under Marine Le Pen as a prime example. Both sides shared an opposition to the form of state that had prevailed since the 1930s: the left promoted market deregulation and reduction of the bureaucratic developmental welfare state, while the right promoted more economic *laissez-faire*, and cutting taxation and state programs (Calinicos 2001). After 1989, the collapse of the USSR—and the Stalinist regimes—compounded the crisis of Keynesianism, confirming, in ideological terms, the already broadly accepted belief that “no alternative” to capitalism was possible—signalling, for the following decades, the globalization and consoli-

dation of the neoliberal order (Davidson 2017, 622).

In the mid-2000s, the contradictions of this new regime were becoming obvious. In dominant neoliberal states, as the political economic impacts of global neoliberalism—including increasing inequalities and the stratification of the working class, the stagnation or decline in real wages, unprecedented levels of household debt, unemployment after the onslaught on the labour movement or total capitulation of major trade unions to the state, and, within the workplace, the corresponding transfer of authority to management under corporate restructuring, amidst the general hollowing of democratic institutions and normalization of disembedded economic orders—spread increasingly among the population, the disconnect between traditional parties and their base widened, and distrust toward the new political and economic elite heightened (Davidson 2017; Ruggie 1982; Mair 2006).

The 2007–2008 global financial crisis completed the social and political rupture in those states. In its wake, the far-right was particularly successful with the petty bourgeoisie. It was both appealed to by right-wing discourse and pushed by class constraints. For the past three decades, the petty bourgeoisie had been experiencing the decline of its traditional social and economic standing; yet, because of its class articulation to the state, it could not turn to radical left alternatives—not to social movements such as Occupy Wall Street

in the US, nor electoral programmes such as Podemos in Spain (or other left “populist” options and contingentist strategies). Indeed, the petty bourgeoisie remained invested in the prevailing capitalist model conducive to its accumulation and in the form of state that valorised its social and cultural status.

In terms of discourse, the left lost its previous traction: if progressive rhetoric had previously justified drawing the assets and debts of greater segments of the population into the financial system—promoting, for instance, the expansion of mortgage lending as benefiting homeownership in marginalized and racialized populations—it lost all credibility after the crisis, especially since it affected predominantly the poorer while governments issued bailouts to the capitalist class responsible for the catastrophe. Conversely, the far-right provided external scapegoats for economic anxieties: immigrants and the “establishment” at the forefront appealed to segments of the unemployed, disenfranchised population who felt economic competition, and to the petty bourgeoisie’s historical attachment to the national state, while the promise to evict neoliberal elites and recapture the state turned popular discontent into political support (Short 2014, 122–23; Albo 2008).

While the structural transformations associated with neoliberalism achieved the disarray of the political left’s organizational foundations—by restructuring labour relations, reorganizing the state, and fragmenting

the working class—it benefited the far-right. Across the world, the current rise of far-right forces is characterized not only by charismatic figures but also by the articulation of national reactionary programmes into international organizations and networks—most often promoted and subsidized by the upper segment of the transnational capitalist class (Stewart 2020; Orellana and Michelsen 2019). However, unlike previous periods, neither far-right forces nor transnational capital face the powerful and “intractable enemies” that communist parties and the Soviet Union embodied (Badiou 2019, 12–13).

Conclusion

What can be drawn from the debate between Gramsci and Bordiga, 100 years on? To be sure, as the current conjuncture shares structural conditions—of economy, class, and politics—with the interwar period, their insights remain urgently relevant. From their debate emerges a necessary synthesis for our time. The PCd’I’s failure to transform the revolutionary energy of Italy’s *biennio rosso* into lasting political transformations illustrates the fatal gap between conflicting strategic perspectives. Gramsci and Bordiga represent two essential poles of this problem: a strategy of counter-hegemonic articulation, emphasizing the patient work of building collective will across diverse struggles; a theory of revolutionary invariance, insisting on theoretical rigor and unwavering commitment to the

communist programme. Their perspectives reveal both insights and limitations: Gramsci's expansive strategy risks dilution without theoretical rigor, while Bordiga's invariance risks sectarian isolation without adaptive articulation. Yet, the contrast between the two suggests a register for current emancipatory politics. This register comprises at least three points.

The first concerns analysis: the strategy must be grounded in material and historical analysis. Indeed, effective organization must begin not with abstract principles, but with a rigorous analysis of concrete conditions. The key to both Gramsci and Bordiga's most acute and lasting contributions derives from their shared materialist method—analyzing fascism through class composition, and agrarian production through political economy and social relations—which remains essential. Gramsci's analysis of fascism was not only correct, contrasting in its complexity with that of his contemporaries, but also pointed to a concrete strategy. Bordiga's political economic analyses were not only sophisticated and precursory—revealing contradictions that would be determining for Russia's agrarian sector—but also fostered a new, precise, and relevant programme. Indeed, material realities, not ideological positionality, can both inform strategic priorities and offer a threshold for convergence. Portraying the strategic landscape's concrete conditions is a collective effort from which diverging struggles can emerge and various tactical options can be undertaken—diverse

practices articulated in a direction informed by a common understanding of the strategic priorities.

The second concerns the strategy. It is necessary to articulate immediate struggles with a revolutionary strategy. The task is connecting everyday demands to systemic transformation: to show how immediate needs are indeed political issues, and how instant policies cannot fully overcome them, since the fundamental alienation they reveal is anchored in capitalist social relations.

The second point concerns the programme and organization. Revolutionary organizations need both Gramsci's flexible perspective and Bordiga's invariance: the capacity to build tactical alliances and articulate diverse struggles within an expansive political form, and to maintain clear revolutionary horizons against reformist dilution while centering on structural historical struggles. They must be flexible enough to incorporate new movements and perspectives yet structured sufficiently—around a basic programme—to maintain strategic direction through periods of ebb and to foster prompt, efficient action in the face of reaction.

None of these points is sufficient on its own: no analysis, nor organization, is strategic without an efficient practice. It is only with the third point—the development of a normative action plan—that the first two are completed. Any contemporary communist project must navigate this dialectic: combining theoretical rigor with flexible articulation, grounding strategy in historical

and material analysis while building the capacity to connect diverse struggles through a shared revolutionary project. This synthesis, not the resurrection of past forms, can direct today's radical energies into lasting political transformations. Gramsci and Bordiga's century-old debate provides not ready-made solutions but essential strategic keys. What remains is the difficult work of construction: building movements that can simultaneously analyze, articulate, and act—transforming today's capitalist crises into tomorrow's emancipatory possibilities. The present task is to give them analytical coherence, strategic cohesion, and a revolutionary form.

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Being Old and Being Modern: Amedeo Modigliani at the 17th Venice Biennale

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Abstract In this article we propose an analysis of the reception of the works of Italian artist Amedeo Modigliani at the XVII Biennale di Venezia in 1930 as a way to critique the discourse of Fascism in the field of art. The Biennale's motto, according to its organizer Antonio Maraini, was to begin the task of renewing Italian art in open rivalry with the French avant-garde, following the project of national reconstruction promoted by Benito Mussolini. Modigliani is interpreted by Maraini as a modern Italian artist *par excellence* and as a model for the new generation of artists. Mainly due to the linear aspect of his style and his insistence on the genres of the nude and the portrait, he is taken as representing the "Return to Order" and the affirmation of an "intrinsic Italianness." At the same time, the exhibition's curator, art historian and critic Lionello Venturi, doesn't share this interpretation. On the contrary, Venturi sees Modigliani as a follower of French modernism and Cézanne, offering another way of considering the role of Italian tradition in his works. Our aim is to show how ideas about the relationship between modernity and tradition were contested in Italy, and to examine the terms in which dissent was possible within an institution subjugated by Fascist ideology, based on the argument that Venturi's position confronts the conception of tradition tied to the realistic and descriptive aspect of social life.

The Return to Order at the 17th Venice Biennale

During the Fascist era in Italy, Mussolini's government played a central role in controlling artistic and cultural institutions, restructuring them to align with the regime's ideological prerogatives. In the case of the Venice Biennale, the management of the institution was centralized in 1927, when its administration was transferred from the commune of Venice to the state. That same year, the sculptor Antonio Maraini was appointed secretary-general of the Biennale, marking an important step in the regime's appropriation of the institution. Maraini was responsible for implementing changes to the

exhibition structure and intervened directly in foreign pavilions, reducing both the number of artists and the quantity of works each could exhibit. According to Massimo De Sabbata, the intention was to weaken the impact of French art, the only one that could disrupt the project of asserting the supremacy of modern Italian art, by shifting the center of modern art from France to Italy. Furthermore, according to the author, Maraini's priority was to exercise diplomatic control over the Italian and French pavilions (2014, 84). By the 17th Venice Biennale in 1930, this endeavour was already underway and was directly expressed in the texts that made up the catalogue.

The general proposal of the event is stated in the very first paragraph of the *Programma* that opens the exhibition catalogue: “With the 17th Biennale opening in the spring of 1930, year VIII, the reconstructive work of these generations must begin, from which Italy expects the seal, in Art, of its renewed greatness” (1930a, 5). It is, therefore, a matter of presenting a revision of current modern Italian art in order to demonstrate that the new tastes and trends that matured in Europe after the First World War revive the great Italian pictorial tradition, positioning Italy as the new centre of influence in modern art. The statement of this project is directly linked to the claim of overcoming French taste. The antagonism with French art had been unfolding since the early years of the Venice Biennale, initially concerning French Impressionism and later regarding French art in general.

Regarding the reception of Impressionism at the Biennale, the discourse was not so much about undermining the value of this artistic experience but about removing the French hegemony over the style. Giuliana Donzello (2021) comments that, in the early days of the Biennale, the relationship with Impressionism was ambiguous, as it represented an antithesis to the prevailing taste in Italy, which was more linked to romantic and sentimentalist experiences that Ragghianti (1990), in *Profilo*, associates with “purism.” Laura Cecchini (2020) also presents

interesting insights for evaluating the developments of this reception, arguing that Impressionism came to be understood as an international phenomenon rather than a purely French one. The effect of this discourse on the Biennale was to favour artists of other nationalities who worked in the vein of French Impressionism over the French themselves. This can be seen in the success achieved by, for example, the Irishman John Lavery, the Spaniard Ignacio Zuloaga, or the Swede Anders Zorn. In this sense, the “accepted” form of Impressionism was a more moderate one, less radical than the artistic experiments of the French Impressionists.

This mistrust or resistance toward the French was neither new nor unique to the period when Fascism appropriated Italian cultural institutions. What is new, however, is the explicitly declared character of the rivalry, which was used to bolster the discourse that the future of modern art depended on leaving behind the abstracting experiences initiated by French Impressionism and continued by the avant-garde. In this sense, the rivalry with French art created the basis for a nationalist discourse advocating a return to Italian pictorial traditions, linked not only to realism but to an entire way of life associated with the idea of “intrinsic Italianness.”

Amidst this rivalry with French art, the organizers of the Biennale state in the *Programma* that the aim of the exhibition is not to impose a fixed

aesthetic program; on the contrary, they claim to foster artistic freedom (1930a, 5). It is explicitly suggested that the broad influence of French abstract art marked a period of restricted freedom, since “genuine expressions in art” are those where “the artist’s individual sensitivity vibrates and speaks the universal sentiment of a people, embodying the aspirations and ideals of a historical moment” (1930a, 5). They advocate a “healthy” return to Italian tradition at the expense of the “entirely theoretical cerebralism” of French trends, which, according to the organizers, incited artists to withdraw into the “ivory tower of uncompromising subjectivism” (1930a, 5). There are two important elements here supporting the revival of Italian tradition: the first concerns the theoretical and “cerebral” nature of modern French art, which is seen as opposed to the spirit and sentiment of the Italian people. The second is the understanding that the subjectivist aspect of French art corrodes the “profoundly human nature” that characterized the Italian tradition. Therefore, they hope that the Biennale will fulfill its purpose by creating favorable conditions for the revival of this tradition, allowing artists to renew themselves through the immutable and timeless values that, in their view, characterize true art: “the instinctive and healthy taste for beauty as in Raphael, symmetry and proportion as Michelangelo described, and the expression and character that Leonardo taught” (1930a, 6).

“Uncompromising subjectivism” and “aesthetic of theoretical cerebralism” are terms used to characterize modern French art and to contrast it with Italian art. Thus, the idea of reconstruction should be understood in two senses: first, as the rebuilding and renewal a glorious Italian pictorial tradition dating back to the Renaissance; and second, as the re-establishment of ties between art and the reality of the Italian people in the present. The organizers state that the new generation of artists, renewing contemporary Italian art, is part of a larger movement as their mission participates in the “great national reconstruction work of Benito Mussolini” (1930a, 6). Responding to the aspirations and ideals of that historical moment in Italy meant a certain ideological subordination to the regime’s principles. Moreover, another passage highlights that the exhibition prizes would be awarded to those who, “with the desire to represent the events and feelings characteristic of Italian life, address themes of political, social, family, agricultural, industrial, maritime, sporting life, etc.” (1930a, 6). We see that the project is therefore explicitly linked to the desire to overcome abstraction in favor of a realist aesthetic that depicts the social life of the Italian people in its characteristic features.

In this sense, the rivalry with French art is marked by a critique of the cosmopolitan aspect of its aesthetics. Seeking to reconcile the

revival of Italian tradition, habits, and life with the idea of artistic freedom, the Biennale organizers aim to convince their audience that the intensity of cultural exchange among nations, which prevailed in the years before the First World War, was responsible for corrupting artists, leading them down a path of artificially constructed paradigms and programmes. Although these ideals are explicitly present in the *Programma*, there is a certain mediation. It is not about failing to recognize that the Parisian environment produced true talents, but of attributing the artist's estrangement from the trends and traditions of their own people to the cosmopolitan aesthetic climate.

From a strictly pictorial and formal standpoint, the intention is to assert elements of *classicità* as an alternative to French abstraction. It is argued that abstraction led artists to isolate themselves in an overly analytical perspective, distancing them from the concrete and tangible world. The elements of the Italian pictorial tradition referred to in the text, such as affirming a "profoundly human nature" and recovering an "instinctive and healthy taste for beauty," are directly connected to a figurative and "truly" realistic representational model. The valorization of these elements over French trends is advocated as a stance not only in art but also in life: an attitude privileging sensitivity over intellect. Instead of emptying the form of meaning and making it

increasingly abstract and subjective regarding historical and social content, the Italians propose to restore the centrality of the human figure and sentiment.

This diagnosis relates to what became known as the *Return to Order*, a term describing the artistic phenomenon of the interwar period as a reaction to the paths taken by abstract avant-gardes. Jean Clair (1981) emphasizes that these were proposals grounded in a return to a type of realism, not in the sense of a scrupulous observation of reality, but one that adapted the perceived reality to the artwork's need for autonomy. It was not about returning to the rules that governed art within the Academies, such as the norms of anatomical drawing, perspective, and colour, but about recovering the integrity of form, which had been disintegrated by the avant-garde outside academic molds, informed by the idea of art's autonomy. The *Return to Order* is characterized by a return to figuration and the reinterpretation of elements from the Western artistic tradition, especially classical art linked to Greco-Roman culture and its reinterpretation through the Italian Renaissance experience. It also involves revaluing traditional artistic techniques (such as mural painting, particularly fresco, and easel painting) and traditional painting genres (especially still life, portrait, and landscape).

From the panorama outlined above, we see that the regime and its

cultural institutions appropriated a climate of patriotism and anti-French sentiment that had been developing even before the First World War. Through this appropriation, they set in motion a project of positioning Italy not only at the center of the modern art narrative but doing so in alignment with Fascist ideology, committed to justifying the idea of a strong and superior nation through art. In the case of the 1930 Biennale, this task was pursued through two main pillars: first, the evocation of traditional values and figurative systems, which took on “mythological” contours in the sense that such values were superficially, and even anachronistically, transported to the contemporary era; and second, by encouraging the penetration of art into Italian social life, promoting poetics that broadly addressed national themes.

Modigliani at the 17th Venice Biennale

Against the backdrop of the proposal of the 17th Biennale, focused on its rivalry with French art and

its attempt to promote a nationalist discourse, we turn to the reception of the artist Amedeo Modigliani, who, for the first time and posthumously, had an individual room dedicated to the exhibition of his works at this Biennale.

Amedeo Modigliani was an Italian artist who established his career in Paris during the early decades of the twentieth century. His work included elements shared by artists in the cosmopolitan Parisian environment, sensitive to the Cézanne-influenced trends that shaped the avant-garde movements. Like many of his contemporaries, he spent much time exploring African and so-called “primitive”¹ art. During his lifetime, Modigliani achieved relative fame, although it was mainly restricted to the French scene, with exhibitions at the *Salon des Indépendants* and the *Salon d'Automne*, highlighting his connection to Cubist poetics.² In the 1910s and 1920s, a period of significant activity for the artist, his work was often associated with the French avant-garde and, at times, considered less

1. In general, the term “primitive” has been used since at least the mid nineteenth century to distinguish contemporary European societies and their cultures from other societies and cultures that were then considered less civilized and seen as “closer to nature.” Until the mid nineteenth century, the term was also used to Italian and Flemish works from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. However, by the turn of the twentieth century, its scope was broadened to refer to ancient Egyptian, Persian, Indian, and Japanese cultures, as well as what many historians of the time called the “tribal” art of Africa and Oceania. The label “primitivism” was used generically to describe a Western interest in societies designated as “primitive” and their cultural artifacts, as well as to reorganize them within Western art.

2. The main exhibition of his sculptures took place at the Salon d'Automne in 1912, where seven sculptures titled *Heads - Decorative Group* were included in the Cubist room, alongside works by artists like Picabia, Metzinger, Kupka, and Le Fauconnier.

original by comparison.³ Modigliani never gained substantial recognition in Italy and was largely ignored, except for a brief moment in 1922 when Vittorio Pica, then secretary-general of the Venice Biennale, organized a room featuring some of his works. Even then, his art received little attention, with occasional negative responses from critics. However, at the 1930 Venice Biennale, the situation changed dramatically: an individual room was dedicated to him, showcasing thirty-nine paintings, two sculptures, and five drawings. This marked a significantly different context, where Modigliani was exalted as a quintessential modern artist and received by critics as an exemplar for the new generation of Italian artists. In this context, art critics ideologically aligned with the Fascist regime rehabilitated Modigliani's image, positioning him as an artist who avoided the "aesthetic of theoretical cerebralism" and was powerful precisely for expressing what they understood as the most genuine Italian spirit.

In a brief comment from the introductory text of the *Catalogue*, Maraini justifies Modigliani's presence at the exhibition by emphasizing three main points: his intrinsically Italian character, the presence of the Italian pictorial tradition, and the combination of past and present in his work.

3. Modigliani is criticized for not promoting any formal innovation, especially in comparison with Cubism. "Among the Italians: (...) only Amedeo Modigliani draws attention; he performs skillful and rather unexpected distortions, but his work, as interesting as it is, is too hasty and sometimes lacks true originality." (Olivier, 1920, p.10).

The painful and glorious experience of Amedeo Modigliani [...] finally finds its first worthy recognition in his homeland, ten years after his death, in the room dedicated to him by the Biennale, curated by Lionello Venturi. For, although it was in Paris that the painter from Livorno reached the decisive formula of his genius, in the exaggerated tension of that cosmopolitan climate, he was always shaped by a purely Italian scene, characterized by clarity and frankness of style. So much so that his biographers and admirers do not hesitate to trace in these qualities, and in the mysterious charm that seems to fix his images, a distant heritage of the Sienese primitives and the linearity of Botticelli. This is Modigliani's lesson: to be both ancient and modern—timeless. And always Italian. (1930a, 30)

The comment about the artist made by Margherita Sarfatti in the newspaper *Il Popolo d'Italia* helps explain the reception of Modigliani and his connection to the *Return to Order* movement. Her article opens with the assertion that the watchwords are "severity, austerity, precision, determination, and classicism," and that Impressionism, like Romanticism, belongs to the past.

Amedeo Modigliani fulfilled one of the typical roles of Italian genius in all fields: to point to new paths for the future. The influence of the avant-garde

French cosmopolitan environment acted on him in the purest and best way, because, through the assimilation of others' experiences, he was able, with clairvoyant confidence, to gain courage and an intimate awareness of himself.

This man from Livorno, who died very young in poverty, is one of the guiding spirits of modern painting, and his influence greatly contributes to bringing out the element of Tuscan, Sieneese, and Botticellian Italianism.

From the primitives of Siena and Botticelli, he, a close relative, in fact a direct descendant, brings to modern painting the soul and even the forms, without any archaism, actually with total originality. A little heavy matter is enough for him, so that the humanity of his creatures emerges from the slender lamp. Unlike the Gothic style, this happens without torment or disturbance of the distorted forms; it is achieved in the manner of Italy, with high harmony. Modigliani, like the Sieneese, devoutly adores that consecrated flesh, tabernacle and revelation of the spirit, from which each feature is carved and imprinted by inner light. From the shoulders, the neck becomes long and slender, supporting the slender flower of the face, and his nudes, although close to Gauguin in the plastic and chromatic scheme, transform the decorative elements into more delicate meanings, shivers of voluptuousness and poetry of virtual motherhood.

Of all his works, perhaps the Self-Portrait is Modigliani's strongest piece, sober and resplendent, with restrained coloristic skill. (1930b)

In both Maraini's and Sarfatti's commentaries, there is the idea that the French cosmopolitan environment, instead of corrupting the artist, allowed him, through antithesis, to express what is truly Italian in his taste. Both highlight that the artist does not succumb to a programmatic avant-garde style, insisting on a unique style, even when it runs counter to the taste of French critics of the period. We see that the analysis of the pictorial elements of Modigliani's work is intertwined with a discourse that appeals to the sentimental and spiritual aspect of his approach to art. That is, by linking his style to the Tuscan and Sieneese masters, it highlights not only the linearity that connects him to Botticelli but also an almost devotional aspect, where "flesh is a revelation of the spirit." Sarfatti does not exclude his connection to the artists of his time, emphasizing the plastic and chromatic scheme that links him to contemporary artists. The author mentions Gauguin, while other critics reference Toulouse-Lautrec and Brancusi, for example. However, it is emphasized that the decorative element in Modigliani assumes a more affectionate aspect. Modigliani's modernity, therefore, lies in his ability to reconcile tradition and modernity, embodying the principle that true art cannot be reduced to an individual whim but must reflect the universal of a people in its particular expression.

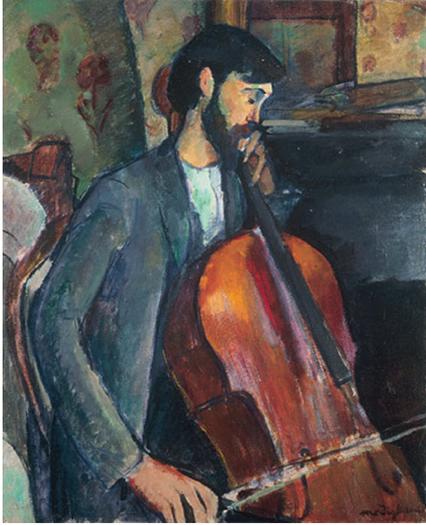
Regarding this interpretation of Modigliani as a continuator of the

best Italian tradition, expressing the cherished “Italianity,” we cannot deny that there is something in his poetics that supports this viewpoint. It is undeniable that the artist develops his style without fully embracing the abstracting tendencies of the avant-garde, not adhering to the “manifesto trends” of Cubism, Fauvism, or Futurism. Indeed, from a formal standpoint, Modigliani’s style changes significantly after he moved to Paris and came into contact with French modernist trends. If we compare one of the few known paintings from his Italian period, *The Tuscan Road* (1889), with a work from his early years in Paris, *The Cellist* (1909), we can perceive this influence. While the former falls within a naturalistic

perspective typical of a learning phase, the latter reveals how his work shifts towards an emphasis on color masses that structure the composition, characteristic of Cézanne’s works. In 1911, Modigliani began to focus more on drawing and sculpture, with caryatids as his almost exclusive theme, reflecting the modernist interest in so-called “primitive art.” In this context, Modigliani’s sculptures were displayed alongside Cubist paintings, indicating shared interests and possibly an attempt to align with this group, especially considering elements of simultaneity and decomposition that Cubists introduced in their imagery. Some of his watercolor caryatid sketches, as well as his portraits, especially those created between 1914 and 1917, also



Amadeo Modigliani, *The Tuscan Road*, 1898, Museo Civico Fattori, Livorno



Amedeo Modigliani, The Cellist, 1909, Archive Abelló Collection, Madrid. (left) and Amedeo Modigliani, Bride and Groom, 1915, MoMa, NY (right).

recall Picasso's use of color and space construction, as exemplified in *The Bride and Groom* (1915). Modigliani's return to painting in 1916 focused exclusively on nudes and portraits. During this period, the Cézanne-like elements of color masses and the synthetic, austere scheme of "primitive" sculpture persisted. Yet Modigliani never adopted the Cubist syntax of fragmenting figures and space. On the contrary, he maintained a strong linearity and psychological characterization of figures, elements contrary to avant-garde experimentation. In *Reclining Nude* (1919), the female figure is outlined by a long, sinuous line, contrasted with an abstracted space constructed by overlapping layers of color and a delicate decorative element that merely suggests the pillows of a bed.

The question regarding Modigliani is aptly expressed by Giulio Carlo Argan:

At the origin of this simultaneity of movements, this intricate play of curves and counter-curves, of light and dark masses, lies not the chromatic version of the Fauves, but the Cubist decomposition. However, the mechanism that activates all the elements of the painting is the sharp drawing of the pointed nose, the crooked mouth, in other words, the features that describe the character's physiognomy and psychology. Why does Modigliani, after assimilating the Cubist syntax, not take it to its ultimate consequences? Why does he return to the traditional type of portrait and nude? Because, instead of bringing things and space together in a single



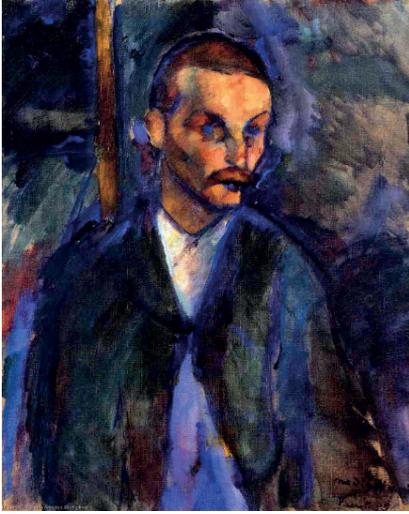
Amedeo Modigliani, Reclined Nude, 1919, MoMa, NY

architecture, he isolates a fragment of space, now significant, sensitized by the presence of a person characterized in physiognomic and psychological terms? (2006, p. 468)

In this sense, it is this retreat from the extreme abstraction of the avant-garde that allows the faction most closely aligned with the Fascist regime, namely Maraini and Sarfatti, to consider him an expression of the *Return to Order* movement. Modigliani became the perfect figure to support the argument the claim that a return to tradition was the most appropriate path for modern art. However, Iamurri (2012) raises a pertinent point in this context, suggesting that the attempt to appropriate the Livorno artist in terms of a national celebration, turning him into a defender of “Italianity”, can only have a dubious and partial outcome. “The laborious verbal constructions of contemporary critics demonstrate

the difficulty of reconciling the quality of the paintings with the schemes imposed by a generalized ideological structure” (2012, p.154). Iamurri rightly highlights the artificial, and in our view even anachronistic, manner in which this appropriation is made. When we consider not only Modigliani’s figure what but also his own writings on his artistic and creative process, as well as what his closest friends said about his aspirations, we see an artist who was not content with the artistic canon emerging in the late 1920s and early 1930s. That is, while distant from the more radical forms of abstraction, the artist was equally uninterested in the ideas of a return to realism, the primacy of plastic form, or the expression of the life and feelings of a people.

In contrast to the artificial alignment of Modigliani with the *Return to Order* movement, the



Amadeo Modigliani, The Beggar of Livorno, 1909, Private Collection (left), and Amadeo Modigliani, Self-Portrait, 1919, MAC, São Paulo

interpretation of the historian and art critic Lionello Venturi, curator of the room dedicated to Modigliani, emerges as a counterpoint. Venturi's position is particularly compelling because, while rejecting this forced, ideological, and nationalistic alignment, he manages to articulate this dissent in a way that remains acceptable by critics aligned with Fascism. Through carefully calibrated mediations, he is able to assert his position and intervene in a cultural scene increasingly dominated by the regime's ideology.

In the text on Modigliani in the exhibition catalogue, Venturi's rejection of the artist's association with the *Return to Order* is conveyed more implicitly than explicitly. From a formal perspective, Venturi compares two of Modigliani's works to show that his starting point is Cézanne:

The Beggar of Livorno (1909) and *Self-Portrait* (1919). In the first, "masses and volumes are arranged according to color and tone. The principle of line has not yet appeared" (1930a, p. 114). In the second, "[t]he tonal masses and volumes remain, but line is integrated into them to fulfill its synthesizing function" (1930a, p. 114). We have here the first element through which Venturi distances Modigliani from the Return to Order. For Venturi, line in Modigliani's work has a synthesizing function. But what does this mean? Firstly, it indicates that this line is not reclaimed from tradition; rather, it emerges from the positive influx of various influences that only the cosmopolitan Parisian environment could provide: African sculpture, French Gothic sculpture, Italian primitives, Japanese art, and

El Greco. Venturi understands that these influences were mobilized by artists in Paris not as fixed dogmas or artistic trends to be perpetuated, but as a means of liberation from the weight of a single tradition. Secondly, the line pursued by the artist does not serve to firmly delineate contours; instead, it holds a value of simplification, liberation from the contingent, and a quest for the essential.

Venturi thus argues that the line in Modigliani's work should be seen as resolving the antithesis between structure, derived from Cézanne's lessons, and decoration, rooted in the Impressionist taste. To maintain the third dimension while preserving the decorative element, Modigliani employs a line that, far from simply outlining, works simultaneously with overlapping planes, bringing the image to the surface and contorting not just the pose but the very form of the image. In this sense, the interplay of curves and counter-curves in Modigliani's composition serves to surface elements created for depth, achieving a three-dimensional vision through a deliberately superficial appearance. This effort to reconcile structure and decoration demands deformation as a formal system.

For the line to emerge with the pictorial mass rather than being added, it had to be more than a contour; it needed to move the masses toward a new order and proportion. Thus, the elongation of Modigliani's

images, excessive compared to natural measures, was the essential necessity of a style that encapsulated the antithesis of depth and surface, the constructive and decorative, the cognitive ideal of reality and the mere phantom of grace. (1930a, pp. 114-115)

This formal analysis of the function of line in Modigliani's work in the catalogue, while hinting at Venturi's criticism regarding the artist's association with the *Return to Order*, does not extend to the full interpretation of his poetics. Although the critic acknowledges that Modigliani remained distant from the cold abstractions of Cubism and Futurism, he does not attribute this distance to any intention of returning to tradition. This argument becomes clearer when we examine other texts by the critic that address more directly the issue of Modigliani's relationship with tradition.

In the article "Sulla linea di Modigliani," published in the magazine *Poligono* in 1930, Venturi clarifies his view that the linear element in Modigliani responds to an antithesis between structure and decoration that only makes sense within the context of modern art. For this reason, he disagrees with comparisons made between Modigliani's line and those of Simone Martini, Botticelli, or Cosmè Tura. In the catalogue, the critic had already hinted at this opposition between constructive and decorative elements, attributing to the line the ability to synthesize the two by deforming not

just the figure but the whole image. In the article, Venturi reinforces that the problem Modigliani sought to solve—the antithesis between depth and surface, constructive and decorative—was posed by Cézanne in relation to the language of Impressionism.

In Cézanne, if depth is seen as a symbol of constructive vision and Monet as a symbol of decorative vision on the surface, it seems that Modigliani is far from both—he speaks a different language. [...] Between color and form, between surface and depth, there seems to be a contrast in the details that perfectly softens the overall vision, precisely through the line. [...] Decorative extension on the plane and constructive superposition in depth: two originally antithetical visions, reconciled in the painter's genius. (1930c, pp. 194, 196)

The importance Venturi assigns to the linear element, against the undeniable dominance of the Impressionists' coloured areas or Cézanne's plastic planes, is to be understood as an attempt to resolve an antithesis unique to modern art. For Venturi, the line itself, even if slender and undulating, a receptacle of "decorative grace," is not enough to make his art contemporary. It must also be realized as a solution to a modern dilemma, meeting two conditions: representing the invisible, that is, depth, and becoming a symbol of the unknowable.

Venturi establishes a continuity between the production of the Impressionists, Cézanne, and the

twentieth-century avant-garde concerning what he understands as "French taste." He identifies a simplification in French taste, initiated by the Impressionists and continued by Cézanne. The French succeeded in freeing themselves from the prescriptive programmes of the Academy, avoiding any preference for naturalistic or historically limited elements of vision, thereby achieving a simple "scheme" free from imitative or "rational" prejudices. The critic praises Manet, Monet, Cézanne, and other Post-Impressionist artists for the sincerity and originality of their initial impulses and their refusal to adhere to academic prescriptions. Regarding the Impressionists, Venturi notes that "the Impressionist painter sees the image, not caring how it is, but how it appears, and perceives it as a created subjective phantom, not as a reproduced objective reality" (1930d, 93). He argues that Modigliani's poetics should be seen as an expression of the "extreme simplification of French taste," precisely because it does not commit to reproducing objective reality. In this sense, Venturi believes that a return to a neoclassical taste is detrimental, even when not strictly based on the rules of academic art, because the prejudices stemming from a preference for a rational and objective scheme of reality, rooted in classical taste, would prevent the recognition of modern artistic experiences in their true potential.

In this sense, Modigliani is viewed as an artist whose works should be interpreted as a reaction

against the *Return to Order* trends, where “classicism” and “realism” are taken in a strictly historical sense—verisimilitude and objectification of external reality—while Venturi argues they should have a philosophical meaning, not serving as absolute value criteria. The resolute and demanding simplification of taste, initiated by the Impressionists, continued by Cézanne, and present in Modigliani, signifies for Venturi an abandonment of extra-artistic concerns—a necessary condition for freeing art from tradition as a burden and from the privileging of any historically determined element. Here lies the power of Venturi’s interpretation: the extreme simplification of taste, inherited from the French experiences of the Impressionists and Cézanne, allows Modigliani to detach from a conception of art as the expression of objective reality, the sentiment of a people, or the character of an era. It means claiming the autonomy of art in its deepest sense, where the originality and authenticity of the creative spirit are not hindered by any attempt to conform to a particular program, style, or trend.

Thus, it is not about denying that there are formal elements in Modigliani’s work that distance him from the proposals of the French avant-garde, nor of suggesting a discontinuity between Modigliani and the Italian tradition. Rather, it is about affirming that none of these aspects indicates even partial adherence to programmes and

precepts based on a neoclassical taste. The assimilation of French taste as a form of creative freedom, culminating in a simplification of form, is seen by Venturi as essential for Modigliani to fully realize his art. This does not mean that his recognition stems from a stronger abstract tendency than that admitted by the *Return to Order* critics; rather, it lies in a poetics that, while appreciating various traditions, manages to avoid the opposition between classicism and romanticism.

We see that, on the one hand, Venturi’s interpretation denotes a common project among intellectuals aimed at securing Italy’s place in the history of modernism. This approach aligns with a broader context linked to the growth of art collections, the establishment of museums and institutions, and the creation of specialized magazines focused on modern art. On the other hand, Venturi does so without resorting to artificial and anachronistic approaches. Instead, he seeks, albeit subtly, to promote a different conception of modernism: one less bound to programmes and canons, and more closely tied to the idea of creative freedom. The Modigliani case allows us to understand how narrative disputes occurred within institutions already ideologically informed by Fascism, and how dissenting opinions regarding both the direction of modern art and ideological alignment with the Fascist regime could be echoed. Our intention was, therefore, to highlight that the development of a discourse

valorising Italian modern art was not free from disputes and contradictions.

Some Considerations

When discussing Modigliani's reception in 1930, particularly in the context of the XVII Venice Biennale, we do not cover some significant developments of this reception. By restricting the argument to the debate conducted at this specific historical moment, one might be led to conclude that Venturi belonged to an undeniably anti-Fascist current of criticism, even though his discourse at the Biennale was measured and mediated, precisely because it was a confrontation within an institution already controlled by the regime. However, there remains an unavoidable issue regarding his critique of Modigliani that cannot go unnoticed.

In the 1950s, after the end of the Second World War II and his return from exile in the United States, Venturi writes again about Modigliani:

It is true that Modigliani is completely Italian, not only by the accident of birth but also by his temperament: that instinctive devotion to an ideal of beauty, his natural tendency to sympathize with the world around him, and the streak of sentimentality that runs through his work - all are typically Italian (1952, p.153).

Modigliani's art originated from the fusion of an innate, essentially Italian desire for beauty with the stimulating

ferment of early 20th-century Paris. His originality is due to the fact that this foundation in the past is solid enough to withstand the violent tensions of his brief but brilliant career, and to allow tradition to take shape in accordance with our time. (1952, p.153)

In 1930, Venturi's assertion that Modigliani was "completely Italian" or "essentially Italian" could be interpreted as an attempt to place Italy at the gravitational center of modernism—a gesture that was indeed important at the time, for if Italy wanted to regain the artistic relevance it had been losing, it fell to critics to argue and defend the value of its artistic production. In the 1950s, however, especially after the implementation of racial laws in 1938 and the concrete consequences of the radicalization of national identity, such statements sounded controversial and provocative, given Modigliani was Jewish and Venturi himself a famous anti-Fascist.

We must admit that we do not have a definitive answer as to why Venturi, in this new historical context, chose to rehabilitate Modigliani in terms suspicious to liberal and socialist anti-Fascists. Perhaps it was an attempt to save him at a time when art identified as "Judeo-Masonic" was condemned without reservation. Perhaps he truly believed that Modigliani's Jewish descent was a minor aspect compared to the impact of his Italian *fin-de-siècle* experience on his poetics. In this sense, the comment made by Argan, Venturi's

student and an intellectual strongly influenced by Venturian criticism, resonates:

What Modigliani has of 'Italian' is only the internal restlessness (the same as the futurists) that arises from the void of the romantic experience, which was not fully embraced by Italian culture, or if it was, it was done incompletely. Therefore, he does not accept the idea of analytical painting; poetry must be poetry (Argan, 2006, p.468).

As we mentioned, we do not have a definitive answer to this question, but it certainly complicates how we should interpret Venturi's stance regarding Modigliani. In any case, it indicates that the political landscape, deeply intertwined with art criticism, had changed radically. By this time, statements that in 1930 carried one meaning required much greater caution. It also shows how Venturi's own development, often viewed as homogeneous and linear, reflects the contradictions of a period marked by violence and censure.

Final considerations

Given the Biennale organizers' overall proposal to foster the reconstructive task of a new generation of artists, guided by national tradition and by a realistic pictorial language, in open rivalry with French artistic experiences, the creation of an individual room dedicated to Amedeo Modigliani appears as a way of authenticating this discourse on

modern art. However, what we see in the catalogue is a dispute over the very meaning of modernity expressed by the artist's poetics and, consequently, over the terms in which Modigliani can be considered a guide for contemporary painting in Italy. Our intention with this investigation into Modigliani's presence at the Biennale, and into the role of tradition in his poetics, has been to highlight that Venturi, from within the institution, was able to develop an interpretative approach that sought to block a nationalist and ideological appropriation of the artist's works. By conceiving him as a continuer of the simplifying trend of French taste, Venturi allows for a recognition of his resistance to extreme abstraction without affiliating him with the Fascist movement aimed at reviving a historical sense of the notion of the "classical." In this sense, Venturi engaged in the effort to valorize modern Italian art, yet he stood apart from the ideological and programmatic narratives of supposed superiority of feeling over intellect or of verisimilitude over reality. Precisely because his criticism remained attentive to the singularity of Modigliani's poetics, Venturi realized that the artist's work could not be explained through major models, neither those of tradition nor of the avant-garde. By focusing on the object itself, that is, the final product of the artistic process—the finished artwork—Venturi able to determine the modernist ideals and aspirations of Modigliani's poetics.

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La résistance esthétique au fascisme chez Benjamin et Adorno : entre politisation de l'art et autonomie formelle

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Résumé Le potentiel antifasciste de l'art fut notamment au cœur d'un échange épistolaire entre deux des plus grands penseurs de l'esthétique du 20^e siècle : Theodor W. Adorno et Walter Benjamin. Cet article s'appuie sur deux concepts clés qui structurent leur dialogue : l'aura et l'autonomie de l'art. À partir de ces concepts, l'article explore les divergences entre leurs approches, pourtant réfléchies à partir d'un même constat : le désenchantement de l'art par la modernité technique. L'article s'attarde ensuite aux limites de l'approche de Benjamin que souligne Adorno, notamment l'impuissance à laquelle, selon lui, l'art politisé est condamné. Enfin, il entend aussi montrer, en pensant avec Adorno, que la résistance esthétique au fascisme ne passe pas par l'instrumentalisation politique de l'art, mais par le maintien de son autonomie formelle.

« Toute oeuvre d'art est un crime non perpétré »
Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 150

Introduction

Au moment d'écrire ces lignes, Donald Trump, nouveau président des États-Unis, tente de remodeler l'Amérique à l'aune de son idéal réactionnaire bien connu : « Make America Great Again ». Cet idéal, on l'aura deviné, exprime une nostalgie pour une Amérique blanche, masculine et hétérosexuelle, et est en tout point opposé au fameux « wokisme » que brandissent en épouvantail la droite et l'extrême droite en Occident. Cet agenda « anti-woke » se manifeste notamment par la suppression des politiques dites « EDI » (Équité, Diversité et Inclusion), dont les répercussions se font entre

autres sentir dans le domaine des arts. Pour donner suite à l'abrogation par décret de ces politiques, le National Endowment for the Arts, organisme fédéral américain responsable du soutien financier aux artistes et aux institutions artistiques, a radicalement changé ses règles d'attribution¹. La majorité des fonds ont été réaffectés à des projets liés aux célébrations patriotiques du 250^e anniversaire d'existence des États-Unis. Résultat : certains établissements, tels que le Stonewall National Museum of Art, musée consacré à l'histoire de la communauté LGBTQ+, pourraient disparaître². L'administration Trump a également émis un décret pour rappeler

1. Torey Akers, « NEA shuts down arts grant for 'underserved communities' amid flurry of Trump executive orders », *The Art Newspaper*, 7 février 2025.

2. Joséphine Bindé, « Expos annulées, programmes supprimés... Les purges de Trump dans le milieu de l'art américain », *BeauxArts*, 12 mars 2025.

à l'ordre la Smithsonian Institution, un complexe de 21 musées qui comprend notamment la plus grande galerie d'art américain au monde. Aux dires de l'administration, pour qui le seul art acceptable est celui qui évoque l'exceptionnalité et l'unité exemplaire de la nation américaine, la Smithsonian Institution est porteuse d'une vision « diversitaire » et « clivante » de l'histoire américaine³.

Ces décisions rappellent le rapport craintif et instrumental que de nombreux mouvements réactionnaires, voire fascistes, ont à la production artistique. Pour le mouvement nazi — exemple paradigmatique —, l'art authentique témoigne de la vitalité d'une race et de la vigueur de son sang, et doit conduire les masses allemandes vers l'affirmation de sa suprématie raciale. L'art ne répondant pas à ces critères esthétiques est qualifié d'*Entartete Kunst*, d'art dégénéré. La statuaire grecque reçoit ainsi leur approbation (Chapoutot 2020, 122), puisqu'elle exprime selon eux un sang sain et que sa pierre évoque la chair allemande, alors que l'expressionnisme et le cubisme, pour leur part, expriment un sang malade. L'artiste qui peint des chevaux bleus (Franz Mark) ou qui décompose le réel en figures géométriques (Picasso) doit vraisemblablement souffrir d'une quelconque infériorité biologique! (ibid) Dans l'art nazi, on laisse très peu de place à l'expérimentation, car celle-ci

éloigne l'artiste des vérités biologiques fondamentales. Les fascistes, d'hier et d'aujourd'hui, semblent avoir connaissance de la dangerosité de l'art : le contrôle qu'ils exercent sur l'art trahit leur conscience inquiète de son potentiel subversif. La production artistique, en raison de son potentiel de débordement, se distingue effectivement des conceptions idéologiques fixes et rigides sur lesquelles repose toute idéologie fasciste. La réception d'une œuvre d'art suppose elle aussi un travail de l'imagination pouvant échapper aux tentatives d'instrumentalisation. Ce potentiel antifasciste de l'art fut notamment au cœur d'un échange épistolaire entre deux des plus grands penseurs de l'esthétique du 20^e siècle : Theodor W. Adorno et Walter Benjamin.

Cet article s'appuie sur deux concepts clés qui structurent leur dialogue : l'aura et l'autonomie de l'art. À partir de ces concepts, j'explorerai les divergences entre leurs approches, pourtant réfléchies à partir d'un même constat : le désenchantement de l'art par la modernité technique. Je ferai surtout ressortir les limites de l'approche de Benjamin soulignées par Adorno, notamment l'impuissance à laquelle, selon lui, l'art politisé est condamné : en ne prenant pas suffisamment en compte la marchandisation de l'art au sein de la société capitaliste, Benjamin témoignerait d'un optimisme mal placé. Cet article entend aussi montrer, en

3. The White House, « Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Restores Truth and Sanity to American History », *The White House*, 27 mars 2025.

pensant avec Adorno, que la résistance esthétique au fascisme ne passe pas par l'instrumentalisation politique de l'art, mais par le maintien de son autonomie formelle. Entendu ainsi, il est vrai que l'art n'apporte guère de changements pratiques immédiats : ce n'est pas l'art qui va, par exemple, empêcher l'administration Trump de révoquer le statut légal de plus de 500 000 migrants⁴. Néanmoins, Adorno nous montre que l'art autonome demeure un précieux refuge pour la pensée critique, et qu'il faut le défendre à tout prix si l'on veut résister aux tendances autoritaires et fascisantes de la société capitaliste.

Adorno et Benjamin se rencontrent à Berlin en 1923 par l'entremise de leur ami commun Siegfried Kracauer. Benjamin impressionne passablement Adorno, qui est alors un jeune étudiant au doctorat en philosophie à l'Université de Francfort. Rapidement, Adorno devient l'un des lecteurs privilégiés de Benjamin. Dans sa thèse d'habilitation portant sur l'esthétique de Kierkegaard, Adorno emploie d'ailleurs une méthode historico-matérialiste similaire à celle que Benjamin utilise dans sa fameuse étude *Origine du drame baroque allemand*. La similarité entre les deux travaux est telle que Gershom Scholem,

spécialiste bien connu de la mystique juive, fait remarquer à Benjamin que le livre d'Adorno est un « plagiat sublime »⁵.

L'influence de Benjamin sur Adorno est donc indéniable. Pour cette raison, il est tout à fait juste d'affirmer, comme le fait Jean-Michel Palmier, le biographe de Benjamin, qu'il existe « une relative osmose » entre leurs intuitions esthétiques (Palmier 2003, 383). Il est ainsi aisé de comprendre pourquoi les notions d'aura et d'autonomie de l'art, d'abord introduites par Benjamin dans son livre *L'œuvre d'art à l'époque de sa reproductibilité technique*, paru en 1935, se sont retrouvées au cœur de la théorie esthétique d'Adorno sous une forme altérée. Le transfert de ces concepts résulte, selon Espen Hammer, d'une « critique immanente » de l'œuvre de Benjamin (Hammer 2006, 123). Après la lecture de *L'œuvre d'art*, Adorno lui partage ses impressions dans une lettre datée du 18 mars 1936 qui, à bien des égards, inaugure plusieurs thèmes de sa propre réflexion esthétique. C'est dans cette même lettre qu'Adorno contredit Benjamin sur le sens qu'il accorde aux concepts d'aura et d'autonomie de l'art.

Dans les sections suivantes, après avoir présenté ces concepts tels qu'on

4. Agence France-Press, « La Cour suprême autorise Trump à révoquer le statut légal de plus de 500 000 immigrants », *Radio-Canada*, 30 mai 2025.

5. Walter Benjamin et Gershom Scholem, *The correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem: 1932–1940* (New York: Schocken Books, 1989), 84. Cité par Peter E. Gordon, *A precarious Happiness: Adorno and The Sources of Normativity* (Chicago : University of Chicago Press 2023), 148. Ma traduction. Bien qu'il aurait été pertinent de discuter davantage de l'impact de l'*Origine du drame baroque allemand* sur le travail philosophique d'Adorno, ce sera surtout sa réception de l'essai *L'œuvre d'art à l'époque de sa reproductibilité technique* qui sera abordée ici.

les retrouve dans *L'œuvre d'art*, je procéderai à la reconstitution de la critique immanente qu'en fait Adorno dans la lettre de 1936.

La reproductibilité de l'art et ses effets sur son autonomie et son aura

Dans *L'œuvre d'art à l'époque de sa reproductibilité technique*, Walter Benjamin se penche sur le devenir des œuvres artistiques dans un contexte marqué par leur production industrielle, estimant que l'œuvre d'art traverse un processus de désenchantement prenant racine dans sa reproductibilité technique. Les œuvres d'art anciennes avaient une fonction rituelle, « d'abord magique, puis religieu[se] » (Benjamin 2000, 280). L'art bénéficiait alors d'une « aura » particulière, découlant de sa valeur culturelle. Son statut sacré le rendant difficilement accessible au grand public, seul un groupe restreint pouvait donc l'apprécier à sa juste valeur (les clercs, par exemple). L'aura de l'œuvre d'art était alors intimement liée à la distance que l'œuvre maintenait vis-à-vis les masses, tant sur le plan spatial que symbolique. L'avènement de la reproductibilité technique va, selon Benjamin, marquer le déclin de cette « aura » : la démultiplication de l'œuvre porte atteinte à son unicité et rompt son lien avec le rituel, car un public élargi peut désormais y accéder. Une fois libéré des contraintes de la vénération religieuse, l'art devient effectivement plus accessible. Par exemple, une statue peut être exposée dans différents

endroits, tandis qu'une statue de dieu est généralement confinée à un temple. Le tableau, quant à lui, « est plus exposable que la mosaïque ou la fresque qui l'ont précédé » (284).

Dans ces circonstances, l'art pour l'art, « qui n'est rien d'autre qu'une théologie de l'art » (281), devient une démarche désespérée d'une bourgeoisie asociale cherchant à s'élever au-dessus du commun en se recueillant auprès des œuvres d'art. Dans la photographie et le cinéma, cette valeur religieuse et magique de l'art qu'une certaine élite culturelle bourgeoise cherche à défendre est définitivement évacuée, car les deux médiums s'appuient sur la reproduction des images. Par conséquent, l'art perd progressivement son aura au fur et à mesure que les moyens de sa production technique se développent. L'art perd aussi sa capacité à fonctionner en tant qu'entité autonome lorsqu'il cesse d'être considéré comme magique ou mystique, ce que Benjamin accueille favorablement. La reproductibilité de l'art, selon lui, marque le début d'une forme d'art accessible au grand public. Au cinéma, par exemple, l'attitude de l'expert n'est pas antithétique à la distraction, puisque le spectateur peut profiter du film sans avoir à fournir d'efforts de concentration considérables (313). Un art qui peut être techniquement reproduit, comme le cinéma, n'a donc pas besoin d'être apprécié seulement par la contemplation.

À défaut de s'appuyer sur des principes magiques et religieux, l'art

s'ancre désormais dans la politique, comme le souligne Benjamin (282). En effet, dépourvu de son caractère sacré, l'art peut facilement être instrumentalisé à des fins de propagande. C'est en ce sens que Benjamin parle d'un risque d'une « esthétisation de la politique ». Cette esthétisation de la politique se manifeste par un style artistique qui mobilise les affects propres au fascisme. Par son caractère monumental, l'art fasciste captive et galvanise les foules en les représentant et en imprégnant de nombreux aspects de la vie sociale. L'art fasciste « n'est pas seulement exécuté pour des masses, mais aussi par des masses » (Benjamin 2000, 160). On a donc l'impression, dans l'art fasciste, que les masses ont affaire à elles-mêmes, « dans [l]es théâtres, dans [l]es studios de cinéma et [l]es maisons d'édition ». Toutefois, « l'élite » demeure bien entendu maître de ces lieux (160).

On peut volontiers citer les films de Leni Riefenstahl, en particulier *Le triomphe de la volonté* (1935), comme exemples d'art fasciste. Dans ce film, les prises de vue spectaculaires plongent le spectateur dans une expérience émotionnelle intense, le faisant sombrer dans l'enthousiasme collectif pour le Führer. Cette « esthétisation de la politique » cherche à redonner à l'art son caractère sacré qui a été perdu lors de sa reproduction. Autrement dit, les fascistes veulent recréer artificiellement l'autonomie de l'art en le resacralisant. Grâce à cette aura artificiellement

recréée, les foules, hypnotisées, sont invitées à se prosterner devant un leader, à lui vouer un culte et à le suivre dans ses aventures militaires (Benjamin 2000, 314). Dès 1935, Benjamin entrevoit cette finalité du fascisme qu'est la guerre : seule la guerre peut donner un objectif commun à des masses désœuvrées par les aléas de l'économie tout en préservant le système capitaliste.

Conscient du rôle instrumental de l'art moderne, Benjamin prend garde contre la tentation de restaurer artificiellement son aura par « l'esthétisation de la politique », proposant plutôt de « politiser » l'art. Même si la perte de l'aura entraîne avec elle un risque d'esthétisation de la politique, Benjamin pense qu'elle peut aussi stimuler une prise de conscience auprès des masses. En ce sens, seule la politisation de l'art peut contrer efficacement l'esthétisation de la politique. Dans ce contexte, le cinéma joue un rôle crucial : en nous plaçant derrière l'objectif, il nous aide à saisir les contraintes injustes qui structurent notre vie quotidienne. En outre, en élargissant notre point de vue sur la réalité, le cinéma a le pouvoir d'accroître significativement notre champ d'action :

Nos bistros, les rues de nos métropoles, nos bureaux et nos chambres meublées, nos gares et nos usines semblaient nous enfermer, nous laissant croire que la liberté était hors de portée. Alors vint le cinéma, et, grâce à la

dynamite de ses dixièmes de secondes, fit sauter cet univers carcéral (305).

Autrement dit, les moyens artistiques instrumentalisés par le fascisme pour embrigader les masses peuvent tout aussi bien être utilisés pour les mener vers la « conscience de soi » et la « conscience de classe ». À cet égard, Benjamin s'inspire fortement de son ami Berthold Brecht, dramaturge marxiste, dont le théâtre « didactique » avait justement comme but d'amener les masses à réfléchir sur leurs conditions socio-économiques défavorables grâce à plusieurs procédés dramaturgiques. À l'instar des images d'une pellicule projetées sur grand écran, le théâtre de Brecht, dit Benjamin, « progresse par à-coups ». Le choc entre les différentes situations de la pièce crée chez le public un effet de distanciation qui l'amène à se positionner critique ment « par rapport aux comportements des personnages » (Benjamin 2000, 326). À défaut de s'y identifier, le public s'étonne « des conditions sociales dans lesquelles [ceux-ci] évolu[ent] » (322).

L'autonomie et l'aura de l'art en débat

L'influence de Brecht sur son ami inquiète profondément Adorno. Après avoir lu *L'œuvre d'art à l'époque de sa reproductibilité technique*, il ne manque pas d'exprimer son désaccord profond dans une lettre qu'il envoie à Benjamin en mars 1936. En suivant le parti pris de Brecht pour l'art révolutionnaire, croit Adorno, Benjamin s'empêche

de penser dialectiquement. Plus précisément, Benjamin n'arrive pas à surmonter l'opposition formelle entre art autonome et art reproductible, ignorant ainsi la relation dynamique qui les unit : les deux portent « les stigmates du capital » et sont donc également affectés par le processus de marchandisation de l'œuvre d'art propre au capitalisme (Adorno et Benjamin 2006, 149). Privilégier l'un au détriment de l'autre, dans un tel contexte, relève d'un certain « romantisme ». En effet, les deux formes d'art expriment chacune à leur manière une tension entre aliénation et émancipation.

Adorno admet, comme Benjamin, que de s'en tenir à la défense de l'art autonome, en ignorant les changements technologiques, c'est se cantonner dans un « romantisme bourgeois » (149) réactionnaire. Il souhaite cependant nuancer cette position, car, pour lui, l'art autonome ne se réduit pas à l'art pour l'art dénoncé par Benjamin. À cet égard, Adorno écrit : « [L]e cœur de l'œuvre d'art autonome n'appartient pas lui-même au côté mythique », puisqu'« il est en soi dialectique » (147). Son autonomie n'est pas identique à son élément magique, bien qu'elle en conserve une trace (148-149). Des œuvres comme les romans de Franz Kafka et la musique d'Arnold Schönberg vont jusqu'à se retourner contre leur fondement magique, observe-t-il (Bégot 2017, 236) : la forme dissonante qu'elles adoptent n'évoque en rien la contemplation

harmonieuse. Elles représentent un « signe de liberté », car elles s'éloignent de l'unité organique de l'art pour l'art et s'opposent par extension à celle de la société (Wolin 1994, 192). En somme, le caractère auratique de l'art est en déclin « non seulement du fait de la reproductibilité technique [...], mais avant tout par l'accomplissement de sa loi formelle "autonome" ». Adorno entend par là que l'art autonome suit lui aussi un processus de développement technologique qui, « loin de le transformer en tabou ou fétiche, le rapproche de l'état de liberté » (148).

Pendant, contrairement à Benjamin, Adorno affirme qu'il est impossible de supprimer complètement l'aura de l'œuvre d'art sans compromettre sa capacité émancipatrice. « Selon la thèse de Benjamin, ce n'est pas seulement le hic et nunc de l'œuvre qui constitue son aura, mais ce qui, en elle, dépasse son caractère de pur donné, son contenu : on ne peut pas le supprimer et vouloir l'art » (Adorno 2011, 73-74) écrira-t-il bien plus tard dans *Théorie esthétique*. De plus, selon lui, les résidus théologiques présents dans les œuvres ne peuvent être complètement effacés. S'en débarrasser équivaldrait à achever la « dé-esthétisation de l'art » (73). En héritant d'un élément magique venant du religieux, l'œuvre d'art devient le symbole d'une transcendance des conditions matérielles d'existence qui l'ont vu naître : « Mêmes les œuvres désenchantées [– comme celles de Schönberg et Kafka –] sont plus que leur effectivité » (74), fait-il observer.

Cette transcendance présente dans l'art suggère ainsi que notre monde social, profondément injuste et inégalitaire, n'est pas totalement clos sur lui-même (Gordon 2023, 147-148). Dans sa lettre, Adorno veut faire comprendre à Benjamin que le déclin de l'aura est profondément ambivalent : il permet à l'œuvre d'art de s'émanciper de ses fonctions culturelles, certes, mais il renforce du même coup le pouvoir de la société sur elle, car la liquidation totale de cette fonction permet sa manipulation marchande, un phénomène que Benjamin sous-estime gravement, selon lui. Le manque de dialectique que constate Adorno chez Benjamin se manifeste, dans un premier temps, par l'absence d'une évaluation positive de l'art autonome. Benjamin s'en tient uniquement au négatif et ne voit pas en lui un instrument d'émancipation (Bégot 2017, 234). Ce déficit de dialectique chez Benjamin se manifeste dans un second temps dans sa surévaluation du pouvoir révolutionnaire de l'art reproductible. En ne considérant que son potentiel révolutionnaire, Benjamin se rapproche d'« un romantisme anarchiste » tout aussi délétère que « le romantisme bourgeois » qu'il dénonce (Adorno et Benjamin 2006, 149). Adorno juge ainsi que Benjamin est totalement aveuglé par son optimisme à l'égard des nouvelles possibilités artistiques inaugurées par l'évolution de la technique.

De son côté, Adorno ne se fait pas d'illusions. Pendant une journée passée aux studios de Neubabelsberg, il observe

la production d'un film qu'il résume cyniquement ainsi : «La réalité [y est] bâtie de manière puérile et mimétique» (Adorno et Benjamin 2006, 150). En décrivant en ces termes la production cinématographique, Adorno prend à partie l'assertion voulant que le cinéma provoque chez le public une transformation radicale de la perception. En imitant le réel, le cinéma n'entraîne aucune perturbation de ses schémas perceptifs routiniers. Loin de là, il renforce plutôt ses stéréotypes et stimule son caractère réactionnaire. Par exemple, le rire des spectateurs devant un film de Chaplin ou de Mickey Mouse «n'a rien de bon ni de révolutionnaire; il est rempli du pire sadisme bourgeois» affirme Adorno (149). Le cinéma conditionne les masses au lieu de les émanciper, conditionnement qui s'explique par le contrôle qu'exerce le capital sur la production cinématographique. Entre les mains des capitalistes, le cinéma devient une entreprise dont la lucrativité dépend de la reproduction d'images fidèles à la réalité sociale. En visionnant ces images, les masses s'habituent à leur propre sort : la violence que subit Chaplin ou Mickey à l'écran les prépare à accepter la violence du système.

Dans deux essais publiés subséquemment, Adorno précise sa pensée sur ce détournement marchand de l'art. Dans *Le caractère fétiche dans la musique*, il écrit ceci en réponse à Benjamin : «La technicisation [de l'art] en tant que telle peut entrer au service de la réaction la plus grossière dès qu'elle

s'établit comme un fétiche et qu'elle donne l'impression par sa perfection, que la perfection qui a été manquée dans la société a déjà été réalisée» (Adorno 2001, 78). Dans cet extrait, Adorno met encore une fois en doute l'optimisme de son ami à l'égard du progrès technique de l'art. La position d'Adorno pourrait se résumer ainsi : un art purement immanent n'est pas garant d'émancipation, car sitôt débarrassé de son aura, il est capté par la logique omniprésente du capital. Cela est particulièrement vrai dans le domaine du cinéma, mais aussi dans celui de l'industrie musicale, dont il a une connaissance approfondie étant donné sa formation de musicologue. Observant attentivement les tendances musicales de son époque, il constate en elles une dynamique de fétichisation : la valeur d'échange d'une œuvre musicale, mesurée par sa popularité et sa rentabilité commerciales, relègue au second plan sa valeur d'usage, c'est-à-dire ses qualités esthétiques et expressives (Adorno 2001, 29-30). Le succès d'un artiste musical résulte uniquement de sa popularité commerciale, et non de la qualité de ses productions (Wolin 1994, 195). Cette popularité contraint les autres artistes à suivre la même formule éprouvée. Par conséquent, les succès musicaux se ressemblent tous et ne cherchent qu'à toucher le plus grand nombre de consommateurs possible (Adorno 2001, 22-23). Au lieu de susciter une conscience critique, comme l'espérait Benjamin, le développement technique de l'art reproductible pro-

duit plutôt un système de distribution culturelle qui instrumentalise le besoin de divertissement des consommateurs pour générer du profit (Hammer 2006, 129). Dans un tel contexte, l'art politisé se condamne à l'impuissance, croit Adorno. En voulant communiquer un message revendicateur et révolutionnaire, il renonce à son autonomie et devient une marchandise parmi tant d'autres; un tel art «résiste [...] à condition de s'intégrer» (Adorno et Horkheimer, 1974 : 195). Dans un monde où tout est médiatisé universellement par la marchandise, un art qui prétend parler directement à un public tombe facilement dans une fausse immédiateté (Hammer 2006, 126). Le message qu'il véhicule, même s'il illustre correctement les contradictions internes du capitalisme et la possibilité de son dépassement, contient «un moment de fraternisation avec le monde» (Adorno 1984, 304). Sa force critique n'est donc qu'apparente, car sa valeur d'échange subsume sa valeur d'usage. Ainsi, on ne peut compter sur la politisation de l'art pour combattre le fascisme, d'autant plus que les marchandises culturelles dont fait partie l'art politisé contribuent activement à l'atrophie de la pensée critique de leurs consommateurs, créant ainsi des conditions favorables à la réception des discours autoritaires et fascistes. Ce lien entre industrie culturelle et fascisme sera d'ailleurs exposé dans un autre essai qu'Adorno corédigera avec Max Horkheimer durant leur exil aux États-Unis : *La production industrielle des biens culturels*.

Industrie culturelle et fascisme

Dans *La production industrielle des biens culturels*, Adorno poursuit posthument le dialogue avec Benjamin : n'ayant pas les contacts académiques d'Adorno, alors relocalisé aux États-Unis avec le reste de l'École de Francfort, Benjamin doit se démenner seul pour échapper aux griffes du régime nazi. Fuyant l'inexorable avancée allemande durant la bataille de France en 1940, il se donne la mort à la frontière franco-espagnole. Suite au décès de Benjamin, Adorno prolonge donc la réflexion débutée après la lecture de *L'œuvre d'art*, en incluant cette fois-ci ses observations sur la société de consommation américaine. Constatant dans celle-ci l'omniprésence du divertissement (la musique commerciale, les magazines, les films hollywoodiens, etc.), Adorno y voit un climat culturel délétère pour la pensée critique. Les marchandises produites par l'industrie culturelle offrent un temps de loisir aux individus excédés par les injonctions du capitalisme. Le temps de loisir acquiert chez eux une valeur vitale puisqu'ils sont emprisonnés dans des relations sociales déshumanisantes qui les réduisent à l'état de pur objet. Du point de vue de l'individu, le temps de loisir permet effectivement de se ressourcer et d'échapper, ne serait-ce que momentanément, à la réification. En ce sens, s'amuser «signifie être d'accord [...], ne penser à rien, oublier la souffrance même là où elle est montrée», affirme Adorno avec provocation (Adorno et Horkheimer 1974, 214). Fuyant la

souffrance d'une vie réifiée, l'individu cherche à se débarrasser du fardeau de la pensée, en évitant à tout prix toute confrontation avec la complexité du réel (226). Il trouve alors dans les marchandises culturelles — un film hollywoodien ou un feuilleton télévisé, par exemple — une simplicité rassurante qui rendrait le réel tolérable. En favorisant la consommation standardisée de ses produits, l'industrie culturelle stérilise la faculté d'expérience du sujet et le condamne à une répétition vide (185). Or, cet appauvrissement de l'expérience induit par l'industrie culturelle n'est pas sans conséquence. Il prépare l'adhésion des masses au discours autoritaire et fasciste, nous dit Adorno : « Le fascisme [...] espère exploiter l'entraînement donné ainsi par l'industrie culturelle à ce public avide de gratification pour l'organiser et l'embrigader dans ses bataillons réguliers » (238). Selon Adorno, l'idéologie fasciste n'est pas une création de l'industrie culturelle, mais elle repose sur les mêmes mécanismes psychologiques, notamment la réduction de la pensée à des schémas préfabriqués et l'adhésion a priori à l'autorité du donné. Il notera d'ailleurs ces similitudes dans ses recherches sur la personnalité autoritaire, qu'il mènera en Californie pendant et après la guerre (Adorno 2017). Dans un tel contexte, la résistance esthétique au fascisme ne peut venir que d'une forme d'art qui met ces mécanismes hors jeu, non pas en livrant un contre-discours

explicite, mais en refusant par sa forme de se plier au principe de l'échange. Comme le souligne Adorno, « [s]eul ce qui refuse de se plier à ce principe peut se porter garant de l'absence de domination » (Adorno 2011, 314). L'œuvre d'art oppose une résistance au fascisme en réactivant chez le sujet la capacité à éprouver l'altérité, en le confrontant, autrement dit, à ce qui échappe à l'identité et à la clôture du sens. En résumé, elle résiste au fascisme en refusant son statut de marchandise. Cependant, une telle œuvre ne se laisse pas facilement déchiffrer ; elle gagne sa posture critique en renonçant à sa communicabilité immédiate (Adorno 2011, 335). C'est le prix que l'art doit payer s'il souhaite conserver son autonomie et son aura.

En privilégiant ainsi l'art autonome, Adorno ne s'expose-t-il pas au reproche de ne valoriser que des œuvres réservées à une élite restreinte, ce que Richard Wolin désigne comme une « coterie de spécialistes »⁶ (Wolin 1994, 208) ? Serait-ce là un « repli dans une sorte de romantisme conservateur, résigné » et confiné « dans une critique purement contemplative », pour reprendre les termes d'Enzo Traverso (Traverso 2003, 70) ? Une lecture attentive de la *Théorie esthétique* permet cependant de dissiper ce soupçon d'élitisme. Adorno y insiste en effet sur un point fondamental : si toutes les œuvres d'art passent à travers le prisme de la marchandise, aucune ne saurait être absolument autonome

6. Ma traduction.

(Adorno 2011, 19). Adorno met ainsi en lumière un aspect essentiel de sa pensée : la distinction entre marchandise culturelle et œuvre d'art est d'ordre qualitatif et non typologique (Gordon 2023, 150). Il rappelle le motif principal qui l'a amené à critiquer Benjamin dans sa lettre de 1936 : opposer rigidement art autonome et art reproductible est absurde, car l'ensemble des œuvres d'art sont des marchandises. Ensuite, les œuvres peuvent soit contribuer au renforcement de la logique marchande en s'appuyant sur leur valeur d'échange, ce qui favorise l'émergence des conditions propices au fascisme, soit actualiser leur valeur d'usage par une mise à distance relative de la société.

L'art autonome comme résistance esthétique au fascisme

Pour qu'une œuvre soit véritablement autonome, elle doit d'abord résister à l'hétéronomie, c'est-à-dire à la loi de l'échange marchand. Paradoxalement, selon Adorno, c'est en tant que fait social que l'œuvre résiste à l'emprise de la marchandise (Adorno 2011, 312). Ce caractère social de l'œuvre n'apparaît pas immédiatement, car il se manifeste non pas dans son contenu expressif, mais au niveau de sa forme : « [L]es antagonismes non résolus de la réalité se reproduisent dans les œuvres d'art comme problèmes immanents de leur forme » (Adorno 2011, 24).

En tant que forme esthétique, l'œuvre d'art synthétise les éléments dissonants de l'existence sociale, sans

forcer leur réconciliation. Il en va ainsi avec l'œuvre musicale d'Arnold Schönberg, qu'Adorno prend en exemple. La maîtrise des intervalles et des dissonances de cette musique incarne une tension dialectique entre l'unité de la forme et ses singularités constitutives (Adorno 2018, 191). En somme, la forme d'une œuvre autonome, comme celle de Schönberg, souligne les contradictions inhérentes aux structures sociales. En les portant en elle, elle finit par devenir « l'antithèse de la société » (Adorno 2011, 25). L'œuvre d'art est donc un fait social, non pas à cause d'une prise de position manifeste, mais parce qu'on retrouve en elle un mouvement immanent contre la société (313), mouvement incarné par la forme de l'œuvre plutôt que par son contenu. Ainsi, « [l'] art ne consiste pas à proposer des solutions alternatives, mais à se rebeller, uniquement par sa forme, contre le flot incessant de la société qui menace constamment les individus » (Adorno 1984, 289). Adorno contredit une fois de plus Brecht et Benjamin en soutenant que la force réellement subversive de l'œuvre d'art ne découle pas d'un message politique clair : en s'opposant à la société par sa forme même, elle résiste aux tentatives fascistes d'uniformisation idéologique en offrant au sujet un espace où sa pensée critique peut s'épanouir librement.

L'œuvre d'art évoque aussi par sa forme la possibilité d'un monde vrai et émancipé, où les antagonismes seront enfin résolus. En montrant le présent sous son jour le plus négatif, elle dessine

du même geste un avenir possible où il sera chose du passé. Comme évoqué un peu plus haut, il s'agit là d'une transcendance que le désenchantement induit par la modernité technique ne saurait effacer. Pour Adorno, la transcendance persiste dans l'art sous la forme d'une utopie négative. Daniel Payot a les mots justes pour la décrire : «[e]lle traite l'étant, l'existant, non comme une évidence absolue, mais comme un matériau; et, par-là, elle ouvre le champ des possibles, ceux qui se trouvent confinés dans ce matériau et peuvent être à nouveau exhumés» (Payot 2018, 145). L'œuvre autonome est utopique, car elle est, pour citer Adorno, «la négation déterminée d'une société déterminée» (Adorno 2011, 312). En s'opposant à la société, elle ne se limite pas à refléter ses antagonistes immanents, mais elles les élève à un niveau de perception supérieur où ils révèlent sa contingence et suggèrent, du même coup, son hypothétique dépassement. L'œuvre d'art refuse le fascisme, parce que sa forme indique dialectiquement que l'existence sociale ne saurait purement se limiter à la domination. Pour illustrer ce processus dialectique, où l'utopie apparaît dans le sillage du négatif, Adorno convoque fréquemment l'œuvre de Franz Kafka. Les romans de Kafka, en particulier *Le Procès* et *Le Château*, brossent un portrait sombre de l'humanité, qui est caractérisée par l'impuissance des individus face à une bureaucratie omnipotente dont les règles et procédures impénétrables

transforment l'existence en cauchemar. Par un langage froid et dépouillé, Kafka parvient à reproduire mimétiquement l'irrationalité du capitalisme avancé — un monde où l'individu se heurte à une société qui lui est foncièrement étrangère — tout en exposant son caractère non nécessaire (Adorno 2011, 318-319). En mettant en lumière la fausseté de notre totalité sociale, Kafka maintient en vie la possibilité de sa rédemption (Adorno 2018, 349). Dans la lecture qu'en propose Adorno, Kafka apparaît ainsi comme le penseur d'une utopie négative : «Si Kafka est pour Adorno l'écrivain et le penseur du refus du désespoir absolu, c'est précisément qu'il s'emploie à donner à voir dans la réalité ce qu'elle comporte d'incommensurable», résume Daniel Payot (2018, 95).

Suivant l'argumentaire d'Adorno, il apparaît que l'effet politique de l'œuvre d'art est «hautement» indirect. L'œuvre change le regard sur les choses familières, ce qui amène la personne qui l'expérimente à se décentrer. À travers la confrontation esthétique, l'individu sort de lui-même. L'œuvre d'art peut ainsi transformer la conscience et, à terme, infléchir la réalité (Adorno 2011, 335-336). À cet égard, Adorno raconte une anecdote à propos de Picasso qui rend bien compte de cette capacité transformatrice de l'œuvre d'art : «Un officier allemand de l'armée d'occupation lui rendit visite un jour dans son atelier et lui demanda, devant le tableau de Guernica : "Est-ce vous qui avez fait cela?"; et Picasso aurait répondu : "Non, c'est vous"» (Adorno 1984, 300).

La réponse cinglante de Picasso révèle la capacité qu'a son tableau à entretenir la culpabilité des atrocités de la guerre, à nommer la souffrance et à dénoncer la barbarie, sans pourtant communiquer un propos explicite.

Faire de l'art après Auschwitz

Ce rôle transformateur de l'art acquiert une importance primordiale dans le contexte d'après-guerre, marqué par l'ombre d'Auschwitz. L'œuvre d'art, estime Adorno, ne peut plus se permettre d'être gaie, car l'Holocauste, rendu possible par la logique réificatrice inhérente au capitalisme, a radicalement changé les conditions de possibilité de l'expression artistique : «Écrire un poème après Auschwitz est barbare, et ce fait affecte même la connaissance qui explique pourquoi il est devenu impossible d'écrire aujourd'hui des poèmes» (Adorno 2018, 28). Bien sûr, Adorno n'entend pas par-là que la poésie est impossible après Auschwitz. Seulement, les conditions de son expression ont été drastiquement altérées : «[L]a phrase selon laquelle on ne peut plus écrire de poème après Auschwitz n'est pas à prendre telle quelle, mais il est certain qu'après cela, parce que cela a été possible, et que cela reste possible indéfiniment, on ne peut plus présenter un art qui soit gai» précise-t-il (Adorno 1984, 433).

À partir de ce constat, Adorno formule un nouvel impératif catégorique propre à l'après-Auschwitz : «Penser et agir en sorte qu'Auschwitz ne se répète pas, que rien de semblable

ne puisse se produire» (Adorno 2016, 442). Dès lors, une œuvre d'art n'est véritablement authentique que lorsqu'elle dialogue avec la négativité inhérente à la condition humaine. Autrement dit, une œuvre nous parle lorsqu'elle attire l'attention du regard sur notre monde social profondément problématique. Peter Gordon, dans un ouvrage récent, apporte à cet égard des précisions salutaires : «An artwork cannot succeed in the relevant sense if it remains indifferent to the problems that besiege us as social beings» (Gordon 2023, 155). En intégrant les antagonistes sociaux dans sa forme, une œuvre d'art entre en dialogue avec la souffrance qu'ils suscitent; en mettant en scène la souffrance humaine qui résulte de la réification pour en montrer le caractère intolérable, Kafka incite son lecteur à agir. Suivant cela, une œuvre d'art authentique ne se contente pas de stimuler l'esprit critique : elle contribue aussi à la formation d'un sujet moral qui trouve sa source dans «l'horreur éprouvée face à l'insoutenable douleur physique à laquelle sont exposés les individus» (Adorno 2016, 442). L'art, lorsqu'il est vrai, fait donc appel à cette sensibilité morale en rendant visible cette souffrance réelle que l'industrie culturelle cherche à la dissimuler. Un art vrai empêche donc le sujet de se clore sur lui-même. Le sujet fasciste tel que le conçoit Adorno s'en tient au monde tel qu'il est, car il s'avère incapable d'intégrer de nouvelles expériences. Plus précisément, le sujet fasciste interagit avec le social en mobilisant des

stéréotypes qui transforment la réalité « en une sorte de questionnaire à choix multiples où chaque question est classée et peut être tranchée par le signe plus ou moins ». Cette pensée stéréotypique du sujet fasciste tient ainsi « le monde en état de distance, d'abstraction » et de « non-expérience » (Adorno 2017, 242 ; Gordon 2023, 200). Cette mutilation de l'expérience est indissociable des conditions objectives du capitalisme avancé, puisqu'elle procède de la standardisation des mentalités et des perceptions qu'accompagne la diffusion des marchandises culturelles. L'œuvre d'art authentique contrecarre ces tendances en ouvrant le sujet à l'altérité. Il est alors exposé à la négativité du monde social, négativité masquée par le loisir et le divertissement qui sont produits par l'industrie culturelle. À défaut de conscientiser directement les masses sur les dangers du fascisme, l'œuvre d'art autonome suggère donc une expérience de la dissonance qui rend perceptible l'inadéquation entre l'individu et le monde social réifié. Elle désorganise les schémas perceptifs routiniers que le divertissement standardisé tend à consolider et force ainsi la pensée à se mettre au travail. En ce sens, la résistance au fascisme que propose l'art autonome demeure silencieuse, mais reste néanmoins inscrite dans la durée.

Conclusion

Si l'on s'attendait à ce que l'esthétique adornienne propose une vision engagée de l'art, comparable à celle de Walter

Benjamin, on sera vraisemblablement déçu. En revanche, à la suite d'Adorno, j'estime que de vouloir attribuer à l'art une orientation militante et politisée serait se tromper sur le rôle qu'il a à jouer. L'art résiste justement en s'abstenant de prendre position. Autrement dit, il gagne son autonomie en ne souscrivant pas aux impératifs de l'utilitarisme, pas seulement marchand, mais aussi militant. En s'inspirant d'Adorno, on peut affirmer, avec un brin de provocation, que l'art accomplit sa vocation critique en ne servant effectivement à « rien ». Cela ne veut pas pour autant dire que l'art autonome tel qu'Adorno l'entend est totalement déconnecté de la société, loin de là : il conquiert son autonomie en intégrant dans sa forme les contradictions sociales. Par ce geste, l'œuvre transperce la clôture de sens imposée par l'industrie culturelle et désarçonne le sujet. C'est ainsi que l'art résiste au fascisme ; il permet au sujet d'expérimenter autre chose que la répétition ad nauseam du plaisir manufacturé. Suivant cela, l'œuvre d'art authentique est donc celle qui maintient la tension entre la singularité de la dissonance et l'harmonie de la forme.

Malgré cette absence d'engagement en faveur de l'art politisé, je soutiens, à l'instar de Daniel Payot (2018), que l'esthétique adornienne est profondément ancrée dans des questions politiques. En effet, il n'y a rien de plus politique que la question de l'agencement entre le singulier et le tout (141). La bonne forme esthétique, selon Adorno, est celle qui aménage le singulier en son

sein. Par analogie, on peut inférer qu'il en est de même avec la forme politique, c'est-à-dire la forme que revêt une communauté politique. Suivant Adorno, la bonne forme politique est donc celle qui accommode ses singularités constitutives. Sur ce point, l'esthétique adornienne est aussi résolument antifasciste, car elle présente l'œuvre d'art autonome comme un condensé de ce que devrait être une communauté politique adéquate. Une communauté politique calquée sur le modèle de la forme esthétique adornienne est une communauté où l'individu singulier n'aurait pas à craindre l'effacement de sa particularité. C'est, en somme, une communauté authentiquement démocratique, au sens où l'entend Claude Lefort, c'est-à-dire une communauté sans totalisation coercitive, où l'être du social fait l'objet « d'un questionnement interminable » (Lefort 1986, 292-294). Malheureusement, ces pierres angulaires de la communauté démocratique deviennent de plus en plus menacées à notre époque, alors que l'extrême droite connaît un succès indéniable un peu partout en Occident, et en particulier aux États-Unis.

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Esthétique de la peur et partage du sensible dans les discours politiques sur les immigrants

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Résumé Cet article examine l'usage de la peur dans les discours politiques et médiatiques sur l'immigration en Occident, à partir du concept d'esthétique de la politique développé par Jacques Rancière. La peur est analysée comme un élément du *partage du sensible*, structurant ce qui est rendu visible et audible dans l'espace public. L'étude distingue l'esthétique de la politique de la politique de l'esthétique, en la replaçant dans l'héritage critique de Walter Benjamin. À partir d'exemples européens et nord-américains, l'analyse montre comment images, lexiques et cadrages médiatiques construisent un imaginaire où les personnes immigrantes apparaissent comme menace ou comme objets de compassion sélective. Ces représentations, renforcées par le sensationnalisme, influencent l'opinion publique et légitiment des politiques restrictives. En conclusion, l'article met en lumière que cette esthétisation de la peur produit de la visibilité pour mieux organiser l'invisibilité et appelle à une vigilance critique face à ces reconfigurations sensibles du politique.

Introduction

Dans un contexte de transformation de la mondialisation, l'expansion des réseaux économiques, médiatiques et culturels a alimenté les mouvements de populations dans des régions autrefois peu touchées par l'immigration et auprès de populations historiquement sédentaires. Ces dernières quittent désormais leurs pays d'origine pour des raisons sociales, économiques ou autres, à la recherche de conditions de vie meilleures. On estime aujourd'hui à 280 millions le nombre

de personnes ne vivant plus dans le pays où elles sont nées (HCR 2023). Les migrants occupent une place centrale dans les agendas politiques¹ internationaux et régionaux, faisant l'objet de concertations intergouvernementales portant sur des enjeux juridiques, économiques, sociaux, politiques et démographiques, ainsi que sur un conflit paradigmatique entre la souveraineté des États et les droits fondamentaux des migrants. Ces enjeux concernent l'ensemble des migrants, quel que soit leur statut juridique

1. Philippe Garraud (1990, 27) définit l'agenda politique comme « l'ensemble des problèmes faisant l'objet d'un traitement, sous quelque forme que ce soit, de la part des autorités publiques et donc susceptibles de faire l'objet d'une ou plusieurs décisions, qu'il y ait controverse publique, médiatisation, mobilisation ou demande sociale et mise sur le "marché" politique ou non ». Pour plus de détails, voir Maillard et Kübler (2016), « Chapitre 1. Les processus de mise à l'agenda ».

ou la raison de leur immigration. Ils impliquent également les États, qui exercent un contrôle plus strict de l'immigration sur leur territoire par crainte que les personnes immigrantes perturbent la sécurité, la conservation culturelle ou les services fournis par l'État-providence (Bigo 1998).

Depuis les attentats du 11 septembre 2001 aux États-Unis, la sécurité est devenue un axe central des politiques d'immigration dans de nombreux États occidentaux (Crépeau et Nakache 2003; Haince 2011). Cet évènement a renforcé un amalgame déjà présent entre immigration, réfugiés et terrorisme (Dorais 2006) et a légitimé un durcissement des mesures migratoires. Parallèlement, depuis les années 1980, les partis prônant un contrôle strict de l'immigration ont gagné en influence et, plus récemment, les discours politique et médiatique se sont cristallisés autour d'une supposée « crise » migratoire (Garbaye 2014), alimentée par les arrivées en provenance de pays en conflit tels que la Syrie, l'Irak ou l'Ukraine. La mondialisation et l'augmentation des flux migratoires ont accru l'anxiété collective (Baylis et al. 2020, 337), tandis que la montée du populisme a vu certains partis associer l'immigration à la criminalité et aux troubles sociaux pour séduire un électorat mécontent (Mudde 2021, 56). Dans ce contexte, l'immigration est construite comme une menace pour la sécurité des frontières, plaçant la gestion migratoire et la sécurisation au centre des agendas politiques et des campagnes

électorales (Zienkowski et Breeze 2019; Givens 2022; Combeau 2022).

De la même manière, ces enjeux se retrouvent au cœur de ce que Jacques Rancière nomme « l'esthétique de la politique », concept qui ne renvoie pas à une simple mise en scène par les politiciennes et politiciens, mais plutôt à une configuration du partage du sensible – c'est-à-dire à la manière dont l'espace commun est structuré en fonction de ce qui peut être vu, entendu et dit. Cette esthétique est traversée par des rapports de pouvoir, notamment entre groupes dominants et groupes marginalisés, comme les personnes immigrantes, souvent reléguées à la périphérie du visible et de l'audible dans les sociétés occidentales.

En ce sens, le présent article propose de montrer comment le concept d'esthétique de la politique permet d'analyser les discours politiques sur l'immigration en Occident (c'est-à-dire les pays d'Europe occidentale, d'Amérique du Nord et d'Océanie liés par une histoire coloniale commune et un modèle politique libéral). Plus précisément, nous discuterons de la manière dont la peur s'inscrit dans ce partage du sensible afin de banaliser des politiques restrictives, malgré leurs conséquences pour la sécurité des personnes immigrantes. L'espace public devient ainsi un lieu performatif où les personnes immigrantes et réfugiées sont objectivées dans une stratégie de contrôle des représentations sociales de l'immigration (Moliner et al. 2018), servant à légitimer des

politiques hostiles à leur rencontre. Nous commencerons par définir le concept d'esthétique de la politique et le rôle central de la peur comme outil de persuasion. Nous aborderons ensuite le conflit entre la sécurisation de l'immigration et le respect des droits humains, ainsi que les liens entre ces logiques sécuritaires, l'augmentation du racisme et le repli nationaliste.

Cet article propose d'analyser l'esthétique de la politique, en tant que structuration du sensible au sens de Rancière, à partir de la peur. Nous considérons la peur comme un filtre de perception qui structure l'expérience, hiérarchise le visible et l'audible, et détermine qui peut ou non prendre part au discours public. En articulant cette approche avec l'analyse des représentations médiatiques et politiques de l'immigration, l'article montre comment la peur reconfigure les représentations collectives, légitime l'exclusion et consolide les rapports de pouvoir. Cette perspective permet d'inscrire la peur dans un cadre esthétique et politique qui éclaire les dynamiques contemporaines de l'hostilité envers les personnes immigrantes.

L'esthétique de la politique: quelques notions clés

La réflexion philosophique sur les liens entre esthétique et politique trouve ses racines dans l'Antiquité, notamment

chez Platon, qui s'interrogeait sur l'influence de l'art et de la poésie sur les citoyens de la cité. Au XVIIIe siècle, Immanuel Kant formalise le concept d'esthétique à travers la notion de jugement de goût, qu'il définit comme une expérience subjective mais revendiquée comme universelle, fondée sur un désintéressement. Jacques Rancière critique cette conception kantienne en soulignant que l'esthétique n'est jamais neutre ni purement formelle : elle participe au *partage du sensible*, c'est-à-dire à la manière dont une société détermine ce qui peut être vu, dit, entendu et reconnu. Pour Rancière, l'esthétique est intrinsèquement politique, car elle façonne les conditions de visibilité des sujets et des discours.

Au XXe siècle, Walter Benjamin propose une critique marxiste de l'« esthétisation de la politique » dans son essai *L'œuvre d'art à l'époque de sa reproductibilité technique*. Il y dénonce les régimes fascistes qui mobilisent les moyens artistiques et techniques (cinéma, architecture, propagande visuelle) pour séduire et manipuler les masses, et appelle à une politisation de l'art pour contrer cette logique². Rancière reprend en partie cette analyse, mais il en critique la structure binaire. Il considère que la relation entre art et politique ne peut se réduire à une opposition entre esthétisation fasciste et politisation émancipatrice.

2. Voir à ce propos Walter Benjamin, *L'œuvre d'art à l'époque de sa reproductibilité technique* (Paris, Payot & Rivages, 2013 [1936]).

Pour lui, l'esthétique de la politique réside dans la manière dont une configuration sensible rend possible – ou non – l'émergence de nouveaux sujets politiques, comme les personnes marginalisées, invisibilisées ou réduites au silence.

Plus récemment, au tournant des années 2000, le philosophe Jacques Rancière est devenu une figure incontournable de la réflexion sur les rapports entre art et politique. Un aspect important de la pensée de Rancière est la distinction claire qu'il fait entre « la politique de l'esthétique » et « l'esthétique de la politique », deux notions complémentaires mais distinctes (Rancière 2000).

La politique de l'esthétique désigne la manière dont les œuvres d'art ou les formes esthétiques participent à la configuration du *partage du sensible* – c'est-à-dire à la distribution du visible, de l'audible et du dicible dans une société. L'art est politique en ce qu'il peut rendre perceptibles des réalités, des sujets ou des expériences jusque-là invisibilisés, et ainsi bousculer les hiérarchies établies entre ce qui est considéré comme digne d'être vu, entendu ou reconnu. Il ne s'agit donc pas de rendre compte de l'engagement explicite d'une œuvre, mais plutôt de sa capacité à reconfigurer notre perception du monde et à faire émerger de nouveaux sujets politiques, au-delà des appartenances sociales ou des revendications institutionnelles.

L'esthétique de la politique, à l'inverse, renvoie au fait que la

politique elle-même est une mise en forme du sensible. Elle produit ses propres agencements esthétiques : elle décide qui peut apparaître dans l'espace public, qui est audible, qui est légitime pour parler et agir. Il s'agit d'un processus durable et soutenu par lequel la politique organise la réalité sensible. Ainsi, les pratiques discursives, symboliques ou institutionnelles des pouvoirs politiques et médiatiques participent à une configuration du réel, en structurant la visibilité ou l'invisibilité de certains groupes, comme les personnes immigrantes, et contribuent ainsi à la reproduction des discours dominants. Plus précisément, les mots et les images employés dans le discours public ont un effet sur les préoccupations et opinions citoyennes, souvent au détriment de groupes marginalisés (Bigo 1998).

À la thèse d'une politique-spectacle, qui voudrait que la politique à l'ère du capitalisme communicationnel relève du simulacre spectaculaire, Rancière (1994) oppose celle d'une société de l'affiche :

La société de la marchandise et de la communication n'est pas la société du spectacle, mais celle de l'affiche. L'affiche est ce qui supprime le spectacle, ce qui le transforme en déjà-vu. L'incessant affichage télévisuel du réel le transforme de fait en un déjà-vu sans surprise, de la même manière que le sondage permanent transforme le peuple démocratique en collection toujours déjà comptée comme identique à la somme sociologique de ses parties (86-87).

La politique n'est pas un monde d'apparences s'opposant au réel – plutôt est-elle une sphère de l'apparence, qui configure et est configurée par le social (Rancière 1994). Ainsi, la politique de l'esthétique est créatrice de relations de pouvoir, dans l'optique où elle maintient l'oppression par les groupes dominants ou, au contraire, permet l'émancipation des personnes marginalisées par la société. Celles-ci peuvent perturber l'ordre esthétique établi de la société pour revendiquer leur place et leurs droits (Rancière 2000). Rancière, comme les penseurs de l'École de Francfort, interroge ainsi les liens entre art et résistance (Adorno 1970).

Contrôler les représentations sociales : la peur comme outil de gain politique

Suivant les intuitions critiques de l'École de Francfort et surtout de Rancière quant aux liens entre politique et esthétique, il est possible d'insister sur l'importance des discours dans le partage du sensible. Les représentations sociales sont en effet fortement influencées par les discours sociaux, qui répondent à des besoins politiques précis. L'esthétique de la politique, telle que définie par Rancière, repose sur le partage du sensible : elle organise ce qui peut être vu, entendu ou dit dans l'espace public, mais aussi qui est reconnu comme sujet politique légitime. Ce partage détermine non seulement ce qui est socialement représenté, mais qui peut apparaître sur la scène

publique et y prendre la parole. Il hiérarchise les relations sociales en rendant certains groupes visibles et audibles, tandis qu'il en relègue d'autres à l'invisibilité ou au silence. La notion d'esthétique de la politique se prête donc particulièrement bien à l'analyse critique du discours, notamment au concept de cadrage (*framing*) (Entman 1993), qui désigne la manière dont certains aspects de la réalité sont sélectionnés et définis, notamment au sein des discours médiatiques, invitant ainsi à certaines réactions, interprétations, évaluations morales et recommandations (ibid).

Dans cette perspective, les représentations sociales des personnes immigrantes au sein des pays occidentaux jouent un rôle clé, puisqu'elles sont rarement présentes dans l'espace public ou politique et ont peu d'occasions de s'exprimer directement, ce qui les rend particulièrement vulnérables aux discours tenus à leur sujet sans possibilité de réponse (Bélangier et al. 2023 ; Fourquet et Manternach 2023 ; Delescluse 2023). Cette absence de parole contribue à un partage du sensible inégalitaire où les personnes immigrantes deviennent des objets de discours, plutôt que des sujets, c'est-à-dire qu'ils sont souvent le sujet de conversation, sans pour autant avoir un espace où exprimer leur réalité selon leur propre perception, plutôt qu'uniquement la perception des groupes dominants.

La répétition des récits médiatiques négatifs à l'encontre des personnes immigrantes façonne une trame narrative

qui alimente les amalgames et les préjugés. Une fois repris et amplifiés par les médias, ces discours construisent l'opinion publique (Joffe et Orfali 2005; Lagacé et al. 2011; Moliner et al. 2018). Les images, en particulier, produisent des effets sensibles puissants : elles suscitent des émotions, renforcent certaines perceptions et construisent visuellement la figure de l'« autre ». Moliner et ses collègues (2018) notent par exemple que les personnes immigrantes sont souvent représentées comme :

Des hommes [...] en groupes importants (donc potentiellement dangereux), en extérieur (donc hors de contrôle) et de jour (donc identifiables du point de vue de leur origine ethnique) (17).

En Belgique, Hoops (2020) montre que les journaux utilisent des termes anxigènes et sensationnalistes pour parler des immigrés, les associant à la maladie, à la loi islamique, à la violence, ou encore à une menace militaire :

The articles analysed contained depictions of (im)migrants in terms of disease (Belga, 2018 April), Sharia law (Belga, 2018 June), extremist violence (Gazet, 2016 November; Belga, 2018 June) natural disaster, military invasion (Knack, 2019 February), “wolves in sheepskin” (De Morgen, 2016 July), and also as people in need (Gazet, 2018 July). For example, Belga (2016 April) quotes a member of the Vlaams Belang party: “Whoever wanted to know what Hitler was planning on with the Jews should read ‘Mein Kampf? Whoever

wants to know what Islam is planning on with Europe should read the Koran” [...] (180)

Ces représentations influencent ce que les membres de la société voient et ressentent au sujet des personnes immigrantes, et participent ainsi à leur exclusion du champ politique.

Ajoutons l'exemple de l'Italie, où les personnes migrantes sont paradoxalement dépeintes à la fois comme des victimes devant être sauvées et comme une menace au pays d'accueil :

Migrants are depicted as victims in need of saving, and the humanitarian crisis was symbolized by the images of migrant deaths on the sea [...]. On the other hand, migrants are primarily understood as a threat to receiving countries [...] In addition, vulnerability often emerges as the product of specific gendered ideas of who is worthy of compassion and protection: while women and children are usually portrayed as innocents, male adults can be either ‘real’ (i.e. innocuous and hence de-masculinized) refugees or super-masculinized and bearers of all guilt [...] (De Blasio et al. 2024, 298-299).

Ces exemples montrent bien comment la couverture médiatique véhicule fréquemment des conceptions stigmatisantes des personnes migrantes. Or, ces représentations médiatiques entraînent des conséquences réelles sur la formation de l'opinion publique et la mise en place de politiques. À ce propos, Sheshadri et ses collègues (2021) montrent par exemple comment la

présentation médiatique des personnes immigrantes au Royaume-Uni a influencé les politiques publiques mises en place par le gouvernement. Martens et ses collègues (2019) font le même constat dans une étude qui regroupe plusieurs pays occidentaux. La façon dont on « cadre » les phénomènes migratoires et l'arrivée de personnes immigrantes influence en effet le diagnostic d'une situation et suggère un certain type d'action politique, comme l'expliquent De Blasio et al. :

[F]rames are the result of 'strategies of selection' of the reality that deserves to be represented and narrated, in contrast to all that is left outside of such frames [...] Studies on this matter have used frame analysis to isolate three framing processes brought about by collective actors: diagnostic, prognostic and motivational. The diagnostic framing identifies which is the problem to address; the prognostic framing suggests a possible solution; the motivational framing serves to justify the urgency of the intervention (De Blasio et al 2024, 299-300).

Ainsi, au-delà des images, les mots ont également un impact sur le sujet qui sera discuté dans la sphère publique et sur la façon dont le sujet sera reçu et compris par la majorité. Les politiciens sélectionnent activement les cadres interprétatifs les plus compatibles avec leurs systèmes de croyances et leurs valeurs politiques (Lakoff 2004 ;

Chong et Druckman, 2007). Ces choix demeurent toutefois contraints par les cadres dominants qui structurent la culture politique et le champ médiatique (Entman 1993 ; Van Gorp 2007). Ces choix guident, à leur tour, la façon dont les citoyens reçoivent l'information et forment une opinion (Entman 1993). L'opinion publique est également influencée par ce que le texte omet de mentionner, puisque la réponse des personnes recevant de l'information sera fortement affectée par l'absence d'interprétations ou de faits alternatifs³ (Entman 1993, 54). Le cadrage des enjeux a également un rôle important pour les politiciennes et les politiciens lorsqu'ils souhaitent obtenir l'appui de la population (Entman 1989 ; Riker 1986 ; Zaller 1992). Par le cadrage, ils peuvent influencer l'opinion publique en faveur de leur vision et justifier les politiques de leurs partis (Zaller 1992).

Le choix stratégique des mots et des images pour représenter l'immigration a donc un effet sur le débat public et sur l'obtention, ou non, de légitimité par certains acteurs sociaux.

La peur et son rôle dans les politiques anti-immigration

Le durcissement des politiques en matière d'immigration et le contrôle accru des frontières des pays occidentaux sont souvent expliqués par l'importance des flux migratoires en provenance

3. Pour des exemples de l'influence des inclusions et omissions dans un texte sur la formation de l'opinion publique, voir Kahneman et Tversky (1984).

de pays touchés par diverses crises. Or, un autre évènement moins récent est aussi identifié comme un point tournant dans la gestion frontalière : les attentats de 2001 aux États-Unis. Bien que, dans les années 1990, les discours contre l'immigration prenaient déjà de l'importance (Bigo 1998; Crépeau 1996), les évènements survenus à New York ont été majeurs dans la justification des discours anti-migratoires. Dans les semaines qui ont suivi les attentats, la majorité des pays occidentaux ont largement augmenté leur sécurité aux frontières et raffermi leurs exigences en termes d'immigration, particulièrement en provenance de pays non occidentaux (Crépeau et Nakache 2003; Haince 2011). Tant l'évènement en lui-même que la réponse à ce dernier ont renforcé l'amalgame entre l'immigration et le terrorisme (Dorais 2006; Pellerin 2014; Bérubé 2021). À ce propos, Koulisch et Woude (2020) expliquent en quoi le 11 septembre a facilité la propagation d'un cadrage où crime et immigration convergent :

A major characteristic of the resulting counterterrorist strategies has been the focus on maximum surveillance, especially in relation to immigration and the movement of people. As a result, immigration and crime—and especially serious crimes such as terrorism—are more explicitly framed as one single problematic issue (4).

Les auteurs évoquent aussi un autre évènement responsable de la peur de

l'immigration et du contrôle accru des frontières : l'élargissement de l'Union européenne en 2004, 2007 et 2013 qui a repoussé les frontières à l'est de l'Europe et ont augmenté le nombre de pays membres de 15 à 28 (Koulisch et Woude 2020, 4).

Les discours populistes et les couvertures médiatiques négatives de l'immigration ont contribué à associer les personnes immigrantes à une montée de la criminalité, ainsi qu'à un affaiblissement de l'État providence, de la cohésion sociale et des identités nationales (Minville 2015; Bigo 1998; Crépeau 1996). Ce climat a créé ce que Baylis et ses collègues (2020, 337) appellent une « anxiété mondiale ». Cette anxiété a provoqué une plus grande sécurisation des frontières et la mise en place de politiques d'externalisation par les pays occidentaux, soit le fait de confier la gestion des frontières à des firmes privées ou des pays limitrophes. Le pays conclut donc des accords pour que certains États voisins contrôlent les flux d'immigrants avant que ceux-ci atteignent ses frontières, agissant comme des zones tampons (Clot 2016; Pombo 2020). Les accords peuvent comprendre des ressources matérielles ou financières (Clot 2016; Garlick 2021). L'Union européenne a d'ailleurs officialisé les recours à l'externalisation dans sa politique migratoire de 2004 (Rodier 2008). Ainsi, la Libye, l'Algérie et le Maroc ont des ententes avec l'Union européenne pour contenir les flux migratoires, notamment par la mise en place d'espaces de

réention des demandeurs d'asile (Audebert et Robin 2009; Rodier 2008). Les États-Unis et le Mexique ont également des ententes d'externalisation en échange d'une importante contribution monétaire des Américains et de dons de matériel militaire hautement sophistiqué (Maillard 2022; Faret 2017).

Ces pratiques ont cependant des implications légales et morales importantes. D'abord, l'externalisation tend à entraver la traverse des frontières des immigrants, en les interceptant dans des pays tiers. Ceci empêche les personnes qui souhaiteraient demander l'asile aux États-Unis, au Canada ou dans un pays de l'Union européenne de le faire. En effet, il faut être physiquement à l'intérieur du pays dans lequel on veut demander l'asile pour y avoir droit. Un principe de non-refoulement est pourtant inscrit dans plusieurs conventions internationales, notamment dans le Protocole additionnel de 1967 à la Convention de Genève de 1951, signé par les pays de l'Union européenne et le Canada, et la Convention contre la torture de 1984 signés par les États-Unis, le Canada et les pays de l'Union européenne (Gammeltoft-Hansen et Hathaway 2015). Si le principe de non-refoulement ne parle pas expressément de l'externalisation de la gestion migratoire, il interdit le fait de renvoyer une personne dans les frontières des territoires où sa vie ou sa liberté seraient menacées en raison de sa race, de sa religion, de sa nationalité, de son appartenance à un certain groupe social ou de ses opinions poli-

tiques. Or, le fait d'intercepter les personnes immigrantes dans les pays tiers pourrait les mettre dans des situations où leurs droits ne sont pas respectés ou les empêcher de demander l'asile dans les pays occidentaux.

Deux paradigmes sont particulièrement prévalents au sein des discours anti-immigration occidentaux. Le premier concerne l'amalgame entre les immigrants, la criminalité et le terrorisme. Le second est relié à l'idée que les immigrants nuisent au bon fonctionnement social, notamment aux services publics, comme l'État-providence, au marché de l'emploi et à la conservation culturelle, en plus de créer des fragmentations sociales qui nuisent au climat social. En amont du premier schéma comme du deuxième, la peur est utilisée comme moteur; d'un côté, on craint pour notre sécurité personnelle, de l'autre pour notre conservation en tant que peuple. Or, plusieurs études montrent comment la peur est un moteur puissant pour justifier des actions politiques et influencer les représentations publiques (Füredi 2005; Wodak 2005; Mythen et Walklate 2006; Nellis et Savage 2012; Callanan 2012). À ce propos, Didier Bigo (1998) reprend le concept de sécurisation de l'immigration proposé par l'école de Copenhague et l'un de ses auteurs principaux, Ole Waever (1997). Cette notion suggère qu'on transforme un enjeu (ici l'immigration) en question prioritaire et urgente en la posant comme une menace à la sécurité, ce qui justifie des mesures particulièrement coercitives

pour y répondre. Ainsi, la menace n'est pas objective, mais construite discursivement pour répondre à des impératifs politiques. Didier Bigo (1998) explique que ces discours mêlent habilement l'expérience immédiate aux exemples de délinquance les plus extrêmes, pour créer un sentiment de peur auprès de la population :

Le discours de sécurité [...] commence par un jeu rhétorique qui mêle habilement quelques expériences parmi les plus quotidiennes des populations, par exemple en matière de délinquance, les délits les plus fréquents et souvent les plus anodins comme le vol à la tire, quelques-unes de leurs peurs (peur du crime, peur du viol, peur du chômage, peur de l'avenir) et un ou deux exemples extrêmes (tirés de la grande criminalité, ou du terrorisme) pour faire croire qu'il y a continuité entre ces séries hétérogènes de l'expérience immédiate et les événements les plus médiatisés. Il s'agit de convaincre que le danger est là, dans l'avenir proche et que si rien n'est fait pour rétablir l'ordre social et moral, tout le monde sera responsable du chaos qui s'en suivra. Il s'agit [...] de troubler et d'inquiéter la population pour mieux sécuriser... (6)

Depuis l'École de Copenhague qui est née dans les années 1980 et l'École de Paris associée à Didier Bigo, la mondialisation a accru les mouvements de population et changé le paysage politique. Cependant, la rhétorique

des discours entourant l'immigration a peu changé, nonobstant le fait que les amalgames entre l'immigration, le terrorisme et la criminalité ou la mise en péril du nationalisme aient, depuis, maintes fois été réfutés par les experts⁴.

Le succès de ces rhétoriques s'explique notamment par le fait que la peur est une émotion puissante. En effet, la peur produit des effets physiologiques, principalement sur l'amygdale, une région du cerveau. La stimulation de cette région envoie des hormones de stress qui provoquent une réaction de fuite ou de combat, et prédispose à une plus grande acceptation des discours provenant des élites offrant des solutions vues comme protectrices (Albertson et Gadarian 2015, 13). La peur, qui crée physiquement un état d'urgence, conduit généralement à faire confiance aux politiques cadrées en termes de sécurisation (Albertson et Gadarian 2015).

La peur contribue, par exemple, à ce que les résidents de l'Union européenne acceptent de sacrifier une partie de leur liberté de mouvement en augmentant le contrôle aux frontières, en mettant en place des barrières physiques et en augmentant la surveillance des individus, bien que ces mesures soient contraires aux fondements mêmes de l'Union européenne d'après l'accord de Schengen de 1985. Cet accord instituait, en effet, la libre circulation des Européens, la coopération entre

4. Voir à ce propos : Bigo (1998) « Sécurité et immigration : vers une gouvernamentalité par l'inquiétude ? ».

les États et la mise en place d'un visa commun (Woude et Berlo 2015). De même, bien que l'importante hausse migratoire connue entre 2015 et 2016 se soit estompée (l'Union européenne a reçu, en 2017, 43 % moins de demandes d'asile (European Asylum Support Office 2017)), le sentiment de peur et les discours anti-immigration ne semblent pas, de leur côté, sur le point de calmer. Il faut dire que les politiciens et les autres acteurs à qui la sécurisation des frontières profite semblent mettre des efforts pour, au contraire, garder cette crainte bien présente chez la population (Woude 2020).

Ajoutons qu'en plus de l'argument sécuritaire, les politiciennes et politiciens réfèrent souvent au nationalisme pour justifier des politiques anti-migratoires. Si, comme la peur du crime et du terrorisme, le nationalisme peut lui aussi jouer sur cet affect, ses bases discursives sont quelque peu différentes. En effet, certains discours nationalistes identitaires s'appuient sur la peur de l'« envahissement » (par des populations désignées comme « étrangères ») et par la peur que le peuple perde son « identité ». Les différences culturelles sont ici présentées comme une menace pour l'identité collective qu'il faut donc, afin de préserver l'identité nationale, exclure. Maggie Ibrahim (2005) explique que ce type de discours relève d'une obsession pour l'homogénéité culturelle, qui associe les immigrants à « la mort de la nation ». Woude (2020) ajoute que cette insistance sur les différences

culturelles s'inscrit dans une forme de néoracisme :

Whereas in many European countries—as a result of the atrocities of WWII—the term “race” is not openly used, it is important to see and to acknowledge that it has been replaced by the term “culture,” [...] Nationalism supports the protection of territorially bound national communities and justifies the physical as well as psychological exclusion of those perceived as different (230).

Malgré la signature de différents accords internationaux, on accepte de rejeter les principes d'égalité des droits entre les êtres humains pour privilégier un nationalisme qui pose certaines nations comme étant plus méritantes que les autres (Gliszczynska-Grabias et Klaus 2018). De nombreux États occidentaux et leurs citoyens, autrement dit, acceptent – au nom de la sécurité – la mise en place de politiques outrepassant le droit à la sécurité des personnes immigrantes et allant à l'encontre des conventions internationales signées par ces mêmes États.

Conclusion

Bien que l'esthétique de la politique soit un concept datant du siècle dernier, il demeure pertinent dans l'analyse de la sécurisation de l'immigration qui s'accroît depuis la fin des années 1990. Les discours médiatiques dominants jouent encore un rôle clé dans la priorisation de

certaines enjeux au détriment d'autres et dans la hiérarchisation des relations sociales. Plus encore, l'utilisation de la peur au centre des discours dominants constitue une arme importante pour justifier des politiques sociales qui vont à l'encontre du respect des droits de la personne. Cette tactique, elle aussi loin d'être nouvelle, demeure toutefois efficace puisque la peur génère des réactions favorables aux solutions vues comme sécuritaires et aux discours des élites considérées compétentes pour répondre au problème. Ainsi, présenter l'immigration comme une menace à la sécurité de l'Occident est bénéfique aux politiciens mettant de l'avant des politiques populistes, nationalistes et identitaires. La sécurisation de l'immigration pousse les personnes immigrantes à emprunter des routes non conventionnelles pour atteindre les frontières des pays occidentaux, ce qui les met en danger. Les États occidentaux, par ce type de politiques, enfreignent leur responsabilité de protection des personnes vulnérables. Ainsi, si l'art a longtemps été mobilisé comme un outil affirmatif de propagande – notamment dans les régimes totalitaires du XXe siècle –, l'esthétique politique contemporaine opère souvent sur un mode appauvri du sensible. Elle produit de la visibilité pour mieux organiser l'invisibilité : faire voir, dans ce contexte, revient à déterminer ce qui doit rester ignoré, exclu ou inaudible. Cette configuration appelle à une vigilance critique constante de la part de la population.

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Le roman face à l'histoire.

Lukács, critique de l'antifascisme libéral

Sur *La lutte entre libéralisme et démocratie au miroir du roman historique des antifascistes allemands* de Georg Lukács

Antoine Deslauriers, enseignant de philosophie
Cégep de Saint-Laurent

« L'individu qui se hisse à la hauteur des circonstances
et saisit que la cause qu'il défend dépasse sa propre vie
peut aussi en ressentir le vent. »

Pierre Popovic, *La mélancolie des misérables*

Pour Georg Lukács (1885-1971), les années 1930 sont l'occasion d'un « retour au roman » (Fondu 2021, 31-43). Sous l'impulsion conjuguée de facteurs historiques et biographiques, l'auteur d'*Histoire et conscience de classe* se lance dans l'écriture d'une série de textes sur et autour du genre romanesque. Ayant renoncé de longue date à l'idéalisme de ses premiers travaux littéraires¹, Lukács, alors en poste à Moscou, participe activement aux débats qui animent les sphères culturelles et artistiques soviétiques. Avec Mikhaïl Lifshitz, notamment, il s'attache à « jeter les bases d'une esthétique marxienne puis marxiste » (Fondu 2021, 34) et, dans la foulée du premier Congrès des écrivains

socialistes, se penche sur les problèmes de la narration et de la mise en récit de l'histoire (37). Son attention se porte tout particulièrement sur le roman historique, qu'il considère comme la forme littéraire par excellence du camp démocratique, et auquel il consacre un ouvrage éponyme en 1937². Face à la propagande fasciste, Lukács estime que la littérature doit cesser d'être une chose « négative, dénuée de contenu et d'orientation » (Lukács 2023 [1942]); elle doit (re) devenir force de proposition en « fourni[ssant] aux hommes du présent des buts et des idéaux » (Lukács 1965 [1937], 308) qu'elle ira puiser dans l'histoire des luttes du passé. Aux yeux du philosophe hongrois, cet usage

1. Georg Lukács, *L'âme et les formes*, trad. Guy Haarscher, (Paris, Gallimard, 1974 [1911]), et *La théorie du roman*, trad. Jean Clairevoye, (Paris, Éditions Denoël, 1968 [1916]).

2. Voir Georg Lukács, *Le Roman historique*, trad. Robert Saille, (Paris, Payot, 1965 [1937]).

littéraire et antifasciste de l'histoire présuppose néanmoins une critique de la tradition libérale et de son influence sur le roman historique moderne. De fait, si cette tradition refuse le fascisme, elle se contente généralement d'une opposition de principe et demeure étrangère à toute analyse de classe du phénomène fasciste.

Cette lutte contre l'influence du libéralisme sur les écrits antifascistes constitue l'objet d'un long article que Lukács publie en 1938 dans la revue *Internationale Literatur*. Comme son titre l'indique — «La lutte entre libéralisme et démocratie au miroir du roman historique des antifascistes allemands» (Lukács 2023 [1938]) —, cet article entend montrer que le manque de perspective politique de la littérature antifasciste allemande prend sa source dans la «vision du monde» (27) qui la sous-tend — le libéralisme — et dans sa rupture d'avec les «intérêts [matériels] du peuple» (28). En discutant le «contenu idéologique» (Macherey 1966) du libéralisme, Lukács aspire non seulement à contribuer à son abolition sociale et politique, mais aussi à son dépassement littéraire et artistique.

Le compte rendu que nous proposons ici vise d'abord à expliquer pourquoi Lukács affirme que la «faiblesse artistique [de la littérature antifasciste allemande] est en même temps une faiblesse politique» (56). Pour le philosophe, en effet, c'est la «dimension poétique» (22) du roman historique qui fait sa force politique. Sans cette dimension, écrit Lukács, sans le travail

de médiation que suppose toute œuvre littéraire ou artistique, le genre aurait du mal à s'élever au-delà de la «parole pamphlétaire» (Angenot 1982) et à évoquer autre chose que les seules préoccupations du moment. Or, si le roman historique a vocation à «jouer un rôle dirigeant» (19) dans la lutte contre le fascisme, c'est parce qu'il a la capacité d'inscrire cette lutte dans «une perspective historique de grande ampleur» (23) : celle du peuple et de ses combats en faveur «des idéaux humanistes», afin d'en tirer un «guide pour l'action» (Engels 1966 [1886]). En d'autres termes, c'est la capacité de «figuration» (25) du roman historique qui intéresse Lukács, car c'est elle qui permet à cette forme romanesque d'opérer une mise en texte de la victoire sur le fascisme.

L'article de Lukács prend pour point de départ l'«arrachement de la littérature [...] à la vie des masses» (24). Ce phénomène, qui va de pair avec le triomphe du libéralisme au milieu du XIXe siècle, voit les écrivains renoncer à «représenter [...] de façon révolutionnaire et démocratique les intérêts du peuple» (31) par peur d'une transformation rapide et radicale de la société. Cette crainte, observe Lukács, découle avant tout de la division capitaliste du travail, laquelle place l'immense majorité des écrivain·es dans une situation de «dépendance matérielle et spirituelle» (33) vis-à-vis de l'ordre bourgeois, si bien qu'ils et elles s'en font souvent le relais dans leurs œuvres. Le roman historique de l'antifascisme allemand n'échappe pas à cette tendance, ainsi que le prouve l'un

de ses meilleurs représentants : Stefan Zweig. Ce dernier a produit avec son *Érasme* (1934) un ouvrage que Lukács considère comme le type même de l'«idéologie libérale» (39), en ce qu'il met en scène un héros qui est convaincu que «presque tous les différends [peuvent] [...] être réglés de manière consensuelle» (Zweig 2019, cité dans Lukács 2023 [1938], 40). Refuser la conflictualité politique sous prétexte d'éviter «tout bouleversement violent de la société» (39) pose problème, toutefois, lorsque l'on affronte un adversaire tel que le fascisme, chez qui il existe une «culture de guerre» (Mosse 1999), et qui érige la violence en phénomène esthétique (Lacroix 2004). C'est la raison pour laquelle Lukács en appelle à la (re)création d'«un art qui se confond avec la vie du peuple» (46) et qui, ce faisant, renoue avec ses aspirations révolutionnaires et démocratiques.

Pour parvenir à (re)créer un art qui soit véritablement populaire, cependant, il est nécessaire, estime Lukács, de lutter contre la «falsification réactionnaire de l'histoire» (46). Pouvant compter sur les travaux d'une tradition historiographique ancienne (Jesi 2023 [1979]), le fascisme s'attache à effacer du passé toute trace de vie démocratique, au profit d'une histoire faite par et pour les grands hommes. Cette «légende historique» (47) est doublement critiquable, écrit Lukács; d'une part parce qu'elle fait l'impasse sur la composante sociale qui sous-tend l'action des classes dirigeantes; d'autre part parce qu'elle nie le pouvoir d'agir

des masses populaires. Face à cette représentation tronquée de l'histoire, il incombe à la littérature antifasciste de se saisir du passé et de son héritage démocratique, afin d'en donner une interprétation dans laquelle le peuple redevient la figure centrale du processus historique. Ce recours au passé n'a donc rien d'un projet conservateur ou réactionnaire : pour Lukács (2023 [1938]), au contraire, l'objectif est que l'art littéraire (re) fasse sienne l'idée que «la préhistoire [...] de la vie actuelle» (58) constitue une réserve d'«hypothèses stratégiques» (Bensaïd 2023 [2011]) pour les combats du camp progressiste. Par là, le philosophe hongrois ne cherche pas à imposer de direction en matière de thématique ou d'intrigue aux auteurs antifascistes; «chaque artiste, écrit-il, choisit le thème qui s'empare de lui [...] et nul n'a le droit de lui donner des “conseils” sur de telles questions» (48). Ce qui importe, en revanche, c'est que les écrivain-es qui œuvrent contre la «barbarie fasciste» (46) optent pour un mode de figuration artistique leur permettant de mettre en évidence le caractère populaire de l'histoire et de souligner comment celle-ci peut servir, si ce n'est de «modèle normatif» (Bensaïd 2023 [2011], 16), tout du moins de source d'inspiration.

Lukács ajoute que ce combat pour l'«héritage démocratique de l'histoire» est étroitement lié à la lutte qui, au sein comme en dehors de la sphère littéraire, «vise à défendre l'héritage artistique classique» (48). Certes, la très large diffusion dont bénéficient encore

les œuvres classiques peut laisser à penser que cet héritage se prolonge dans le présent; selon Lukács, toutefois, ces œuvres «ont perdu leur valeur de boussole et d'exemple» (49), puisqu'elles sont aujourd'hui reléguées au rang de curiosités historiques. On continue sans doute de lire et d'enseigner Hugo, Goethe et Dostoïevski : seulement, on peine de plus en plus à affirmer et à reconnaître que leurs travaux entretiennent «la moindre relation avec les problèmes du présent» (49). Cette difficulté à concevoir les œuvres classiques autrement que comme des vestiges du passé explique en partie pourquoi le camp conservateur a pu s'approprier aussi aisément le patrimoine littéraire et artistique. Rien de plus facile, en effet, que de contester le potentiel progressiste des classiques, lorsque la vaste majorité des personnes — artistes et écrivain·es compris — soutiennent que ces œuvres sont vieillissantes et qu'elles n'offrent plus de modèles d'avenir.

Ce constat, écrit Lukács, vaut singulièrement pour le roman historique, car c'est «là que l'héritage classique est le plus profondément tombé dans l'oubli» (50). Il est vrai que, parmi les grands noms du «roman historique classique» (50), on trouve peu de démocrates. Politiquement, Scott, Pouchkine ou Balzac appartiennent au camp conservateur et préfèrent nettement l'ordre ancien à celui des révolutions libérales et bourgeoises. Il n'empêche que leurs romans, eux, témoignent d'une vigueur démocratique qui, d'après Lukács, fait défaut à la plupart des œuvres antifas-

cistes, puisqu'ils «montrent comment les valeurs humaines [...] naissent organiquement de la vie du peuple» (50). Dans *Guerre et Paix*, par exemple, Tolstoï fait du général Koutouzov l'expression des masses populaires russes : ce sont elles, avance le philosophe hongrois, qui lui «confèrent [...] un rôle dans l'histoire» (53) — celui de venir à bout de Napoléon et de ses armées — et qui, «une fois la crise surmontée» (51), le renvoient à l'anonymat de la vie civile. La littérature de l'antifascisme allemand présente les choses différemment : plus proche des orientations esthétiques du «roman moderne» que de celles du roman classique, elle met en scène des héros «qui se tiennent à l'écart [...] [d]es grands événements qui se jouent autour d'eux» (51) ou qui, lorsqu'ils y prennent part, le font pour ainsi dire malgré eux. Ce détachement par rapport à la marche de l'histoire n'est peut-être pas aussi marqué que chez «les héros de Conrad Ferdinand Meyer» ou de Flaubert (51), reconnaît Lukács; il n'en reste pas moins que la «composition artistique» des œuvres antifascistes entre régulièrement en contradiction avec «ce que veulent les auteurs sur le plan politique» (53), étant donné qu'elle aboutit à une séparation des héros d'avec le peuple et ses aspirations démocratiques.

Lukács estime d'ailleurs que ce problème ne doit pas être compris en un sens «étroitement artistique» (59). Car en empruntant à la forme du roman moderne, les œuvres antifascistes empruntent aussi à sa vision du monde,

laquelle stipule que le peuple est à la remorque des grands hommes et que, lorsque ceux-ci font l'histoire, ils la font en vertu de leur seule force morale. Cantonnées au rôle de « simple décor », les masses populaires sont par ailleurs présentées comme une entité lointaine, qui n'a d'existence historique que dans la mesure où elle « constitue un tremplin pour [l]a grandeur individuelle » de quelques-uns (56). C'est notamment ce que Lukács reproche au *Henri IV* de Heinrich Mann, lequel, écrit-il, a conçu une œuvre qui « est riche de réflexions historiques profondes », mais qui, du fait de « [s]a méthode biographique », ne parvient pas à rendre justice au peuple et à la fonction motrice que ce dernier occupe dans l'histoire (57). De fait, si le peuple n'est pas totalement absent du livre de Mann, sa participation à l'intrigue, en revanche, est à peine suggérée, de sorte que la « confrontation historique » qui structure le roman, et qui oppose protestants et catholiques, prend souvent la forme d'un conflit « psychologique ou générationn[el] entre [d]es dirigeants » (57). Il en résulte une œuvre dont Lukács dit qu'elle conserve « un certain caractère abstrait », surtout dans sa manière de dépeindre « les idéaux antifascistes », qui « apparaissent comme [autant] [d'] images et d[e] symboles [...] projetés dans l'histoire » (58). Là encore, le problème n'a pas à voir avec le positionnement politique de l'auteur lui-même

étant donné que « Mann est bien plus démocrate que Walter Scott ou Manzoni » (53). Ce qui dessert le livre du romancier allemand, c'est le mode de figuration artistique auquel il obéit — d'inspiration moderne plutôt que classique — et qui, remarque Lukács, l'empêche de représenter son héros « à partir des mouvements du peuple » (53).

C'est dire que les figures héroïques n'ont pas à être exclues du roman historique pour que celui-ci fonctionne politiquement. Afin qu'il donne à voir une « juste proportion entre peuple et dirigeant » (56), cependant, il faut que le roman historique soit composé de façon à rendre compte de la secondarité de ces figures au regard de l'action des masses et de leurs intérêts matériels. Or, conclut Lukács, pour accoucher de telles œuvres, il est besoin d'écrivain·es qui sont « ven[u-es] à bout d[e] [...] la vision du monde libérale » (60); d'abord en renouant avec la vie du peuple, ensuite en travaillant à fournir une traduction artistique de cette vie et de son histoire. En défendant la nécessité d'un roman historique populaire, Lukács ne participe donc pas seulement d'une tendance qui, à gauche, dans les années 1930, cherche à s'opposer au fascisme et à son esthétique par une « politisation de l'art » (Benjamin 2000 [1939], 316); il participe également d'une tradition bien plus ancienne, remontant à Aristote, pour qui l'activité artistique doit contribuer à l'élévation

morale et intellectuelle des individus ainsi qu'à la formation des citoyens³. Pour l'auteur d'*Histoire et conscience de classe*, cette fonction pédagogique de l'art revêt toute son importance lors des périodes de crise, c'est-à-dire lorsque les contradictions objectives d'une séquence historique atteignent un point de rupture, et qu'un état d'incertitude politique s'installe. Durant ces moments de flottement, il est essentiel de pouvoir s'appuyer sur des œuvres qui, à l'instar de celles de Tolstoï ou de Balzac, ne se contentent pas de réinscrire les conflits en cours dans la longue durée, mais s'efforcent aussi de figurer leur dépassement. Le passé, dans cette optique, n'est jamais chose morte; même lointain, il s'agit d'un réservoir d'expériences et d'enseignements, dont l'art en général, et le roman historique en particulier, gagnent à s'emparer afin de nourrir et d'informer les luttes du présent.

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3. Cf. notamment Aristote, *Les politiques*, trad. Pierre Pellegrin, (Paris, Flammarion, 2006), 528 et s., et *La poétique*, trad. Michel Magnien, (Paris, Le Livre de poche, 1990), 105 et s.

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