Theories and Methodologies

Shades of Red

BENJAMIN KOHLMANN

Look closely at the body of the Leviathan in Abraham Bosse's famous frontispiece to Thomas Hobbes's treatise of 1651 and you might notice something unexpected. When it's seen at the usual reading distance, Bosse's engraving offers the familiar image of the single sovereign whose body is composed of a homogenous mass of diminutive figures. If you focus more closely on the Leviathan's body, however, the outline of the monarch begins to dissolve into the haziness of your peripheral vision, and as it disappears, you'll begin to see a multitude of individual figures, some of whom are looking left, some right, and others up. The mass that thus becomes visible in Bosse's frontispiece is not entirely dissimilar to the doodle by Friedrich Engels that features as the frontispiece of Eduardo Cadava and Sara Nadal-Melsió's *Politically Red* (9). For Cadava and Nadal-Melsió, Engels's dense assemblage of heads—drawn on a manuscript page of *The German Ideology*—is an emblem of democratic "massification," of an authority that is "shared" and therefore "scattered" (18). By contrast, Cadava and Nadal-Melsió regard the Leviathan as a figure of authoritarian coercion and control. In their account, Bosse's Leviathan and Engels's doodles illustrate two fundamentally opposed understandings of politics: the sovereign versus the mass; verticality versus horizontality.

It is certainly true that the text of Hobbes's *Leviathan* argues in favor of the centralized power and control exerted by the sovereign. But if we perform the experiment in close looking that I'm proposing here, Bosse's frontispiece captures something else entirely, namely the dialectical coexistence of two sets of concepts that we've come to treat as total opposites: authoritarianism and democracy, the state and the multitude, the one and the many. When it's viewed in this way, Bosse's engraving is not just "an emblem of absolute sovereignty" (Cadava and Nadal-Melsió 18). Instead, it more closely resembles what Walter

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Benjamin once called (in an influential, and notoriously knotty, phrase) a "dialectical image."[1] It produces a glitch that is at once perceptual and conceptual.

Much recent democratic theory positions the Leviathan as the absolute antithesis of horizontal forms of organizing and resistance, as what Antonio Negri dubbed "an artificial demon" (*Insurgencies* 129): "The image of an omnipotent Leviathan," Michael Hardt and Negri explain elsewhere, "is just a fable that serves to terrify the poor and the subordinated into submission" (*Assembly* xvii). Hardt and Negri's influential account of the mass as the site of an emancipatory "constituent potential" (36) is echoed in Cadava and Nadal-Melsió's hopeful emphasis on "a politics of multiplicity" (129). Indeed, the multiplicity that *Politically Red* finds embodied in the mass is a version of the irreducibly plural "multitudes" and "assemblies" that are celebrated (often with some philosophical help from Baruch Spinoza) in many horizontalist theories of collective deliberation and political praxis (Butler; Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*; Negri, *Savage Anomaly*). Cadava and Nadal-Melsió's multiplicity constitutes "a shared common-wealth of the mind" (218)—it "belongs to the motility of an endless process without a subject" that is "impossible to transform into dogma or to synthesize into a system" (330).

Cadava and Nadal-Melsió discover in the act of reading a model of recursive meaning making that contains multitudes because it is always caught up in a thick "palimpsest" of earlier interpretations (17). In their account, reading is invariably a collaborative (though not frictionless) process: we can only make sense of texts in the context of others' readings of those texts. The genesis of *Politically Red* is a case in point: while the idea for the book originated in a collaborative review of Fredric Jameson's book on Walter Benjamin, Cadava and Nadal-Melsió are equally interested in how reading Benjamin produces alternative ways of (re)reading the radical tradition—from Karl Marx and Engels to Rosa Luxemburg and from W. E. B. Du Bois to Jameson's own work. *Politically Red*, in short, offers a political account not just of this or that theorist (or reader, or writer) but of the act of reading as such and of the rich traditions and multiple cross-fertilizations that are generated by acts of reading.[2]

Benjamin occupies a central position within the group of writers and readers assembled in *Politically Red*. He features importantly in most chapters, and he comes to stand in for the type of horizontalist politics articulated in the book. Benjamin's writerly practice, we are told, works to produce "an untethered subject—a subject willing to sacrifice identitarian certainties in order to participate in an event of disidentification and pluralization" (38). Benjamin's understanding of history, of the work of art, of translatability, and of citationality all converge on a "tendency [of the subject] to disappear into the act of reading that is also an act of writing" (35). In *Politically Red*, Benjamin figures as a kind of anti-Leviathan: he comes to represent "a politics of multiplication and impersonality" that "refus[es] sovereignty not only because authority is shared but also because this shared authority is scattered and massified" (129, 18).

Cadava and Nadal-Melsió commend Benjamin's writings for their horizontalist implications. But it's not difficult to detect in Benjamin's work a generative tension between vertical and horizontal modes of political thought. Readers of Benjamin can experience a version of this dialectic in Benjamin's friendship with Bertolt Brecht. Brecht is one of the more marginal figures in *Politically Red*, but quotations from Brecht feature prominently at key points in the book (including the back-cover blurb). In their opening discussion of Engels's doodles, Cadava and Nadal-Melsió note that "the cumulative effect of Engels's doodling" resembles Benjamin's "point in 'The Author as Producer' when, referencing Brecht, he claims that thinking politically involves 'the art of thinking in other people's heads'" (11). Brecht's observation is never traced back to its textual source. Instead, it is only given to us in Benjamin's own voice, through the paraphrases offered in Benjamin's essay and in a little-known review of a book by the gay rights activist and pacifist Kurt

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Hiller. Of course, this makes sense: Cadava and Nadal-Melsió would argue that the concept of textual origins or sources is an entirely illusory one—ideas are shared property, after all. But the short text in which Brecht first formulates the idea is at least worth glancing at. The piece, from 1930, is a paean to Vladimir Lenin. It sets out to explain how Lenin managed to survive the hardships of exile:

> Wieviel List brauchte er, um an einen Teil jeder Bücher heranzukommen, in denen die Menschheit einige ihrer Erfahrungen aufgespeichert hatte, ich meine z. B. den Platz im Britischen Museum. Er war schlecht genährt, und auch diese Nahrung war nur schwer aufzutreiben. Welche Mühe hatte er, an jene Leute heranzukommen, die er unterstützen wollte und deren Unterstützung er benötigte! Man verjagte ihn und legte zwischen ihn und sie viele Länder, halb Europa.
>
> Er dachte in andern Köpfen, und auch in seinem Kopf dachten andere. Das ist das richtige Denken.
>
> (*Schriften* 420)

> How much cunning did he need to obtain at least some of the books in which humankind has recorded its experiences—in the British Museum, for example. He did not have enough food, and even this food was hard to come by. How he struggled to get close to the people he wanted to support and whose support he needed! He was chased away and his enemies put vast distances—half of the European continent—between him and his comrades.
>
> He thought in other people's heads, and they thought in his. This is the correct kind of thought.[3]

In contrast to Benjamin's impersonal reference to "the art of thinking in other people's heads," Brecht's account of *das richtige Denken* positions Lenin as the authoritative medium of revolutionary consciousness. Brecht's characteristically assertive conclusion ("This is the correct kind of thought") cannot be separated from the adulatory account of Lenin that precedes it—a celebration that reflects the period's common hero-worship of Lenin as communism's central leader figure. The correct kind of thought, Brecht indicates, is Leninist—this thought dispels political inertia, mobilizes the masses, and works to bring about the dictatorship of the proletariat.

In another passage that was important to Benjamin, Brecht specifies what he meant by that confidently prescriptive phrase. Benjamin referenced this passage several times in his writings of the 1930s because he felt that it encapsulated the essence of Brecht's aesthetic (60). The correct kind of thought, Brecht writes in the *Dreigroschenroman* (*Threepenny Novel*), "ist freilich plump gedacht, aber der Wirklichkeit ist dieses Denken sehr nahe. Die Hauptsache ist, plump denken lernen. Plumpes Denken, das ist das Denken der Großen" ("is crude [*plump*], to be sure; but this type of thought gets closer to reality. The most important thing is to learn to think crudely. Crude thought, that's the thought of those who are great"; *Prosa* 173). The examples of *die Großen* ("the greats") offered up in the passage include Prussia's nationalist chancellor Otto von Bismarck, but Brecht makes clear that the category also extends to "Kommunisten" ("communists"). For Brecht, the central figure in this pantheon of communist greats is, once more, Lenin himself.

Benjamin singles out Brecht's phrase *plumpes Denken* in a series of reflections on the *Dreigroschenroman* (recent commentators on the phrase tend to omit Brecht's remark that "das ist das Denken der Großen," presumably because of its undesirable authoritarian connotations). In his gloss, Benjamin notes that *plumpes Denken* in literature suspends "die Illusion" ("illusory fictions") and lends it political "Schlagkraft" ("power to strike"; my trans.; 59, 60). Brecht's attempt to give art political *Schlagkraft* was clearly attractive to Benjamin.[4] As Benjamin's editor Rolf Tiedemann points out, Benjamin initiated the friendship with Brecht and he diligently recorded his conversations with Brecht in his diaries and letters (148–49).[5] Benjamin was not just a friend to Brecht: his attitude toward Brecht was one of "Interesse, Solidarität, vorbehaltloses öffentliches Eintreten" ("interest, solidarity, unquestioning public loyalty"; 180). This suggests that for a few months or years around 1930, Benjamin was willing to entertain Brecht's fantasy of revolutionary greatness. Perhaps Benjamin even came to regard Brecht himself as the embodiment of such greatness—as a Lenin-style figure in the realm of revolutionary art.

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Cadava and Nadal-Melsió's attempt to link Benjamin to a horizontalist political project opens up important and underexplored dimensions of Benjamin's thought, but it also runs the risk of neglecting (or of productively misreading) the internal strains that mark this project. The tensions that run through Benjamin's and Brecht's thinking around 1930—between the desire to imagine a kind of horizontalist mass-thought and the willingness to entertain the idea of revolutionary leadership—come out particularly clearly in their reflections on pedagogy. As Cadava and Nadal-Melsió note, for Benjamin there is a "pedagogy implicit in tracing a sentence in space in order to understand its shape" (30): to the extent that language, for Benjamin, "moves toward what cannot be expressed, . . . refusing to be directed or instrumentalized," art's role as a teacher, too, is "without intention, entirely noninstrumental" (69). "If Benjamin's writings present a pedagogy," Cadava and Nadal-Melsió add, "it is because his training manual for reading, writing, thinking, and even doing politics provides an explicit counter to the processes of identification and indoctrination" (32). In *Politically Red*, this kind of open-ended and nondoctrinal pedagogy is contrasted (through Jameson's reading of Benjamin) with the type of political pedagogy performed by the Maoist Little Red Book: "the Little Red Book offered a pedagogy for the Red Guard that aimed to create a mass political formation whose mimetic proliferation could, in its most ambitious version, transform the world into communism" (31).

The years of Benjamin's closest friendship with Brecht coincided with the period during which Brecht was working on his didactic *Lehrstücke*—and it is not surprising that some of Benjamin's most searching engagements with Brecht's ideas (e.g., "What Is Epic Theater") take the *Lehrstücke* as their object of study. The *Lehrstücke* were written at the height of Brecht's interest in a Leninist version of revolutionary politics: as Erdmut Wizisla notes, these plays illustrate Brecht's "change of direction—completed during his work on *The Measures Taken* from Spring to Autumn 1930—towards Leninism, that is to the dictatorship of the proletariat" (7). Cadava and Nadal-Melsió do not invite their readers to see the *Lehrstücke* as a necessary backdrop for their thinking about pedagogy, arguably because these intensely doctrinal experimental plays make for uncomfortable reading in the context of the more horizontalist and egalitarian account of politics offered in *Politically Red*.

What is so astonishing (and profoundly disturbing) about Brecht's *Lehrstücke* is that they manage to combine a rhetoric of open-ended deliberation with a language of dogmatic prescription and absolute ideological certainty. On the one hand, these plays offer evidence for the kind of politics identified by Cadava and Nadal-Melsió;[6] on the other hand, they are animated by the conviction that art can serve as the purveyor of *das richtige Denken*: this kind of art, Brecht opined in his 1930 text "Theorie der Pädagogien" ("Theory of Pedagogies"), would benefit the socialist state (*Schriften* 398). Brecht's remark is at odds with *Politically Red*'s celebration of the "proletarian general strike," a mass action that, in Benjamin's words, "sets itself the sole task of annihilating state power" and that doubles as a key figure of red politics as such (qtd. in Cadava and Nadal-Melsió 68). Brecht's comment forces us to reckon with the role of the red state—and its artistic instrument, the *Lehrstück*—as it tries to mend "die asozialen Triebe" ("people's asocial impulses"; *Schriften* 398). The *Lehrstücke*, which gave audience members a central role in the performance of the play, were intended to be a medium at once of political emancipation and of indoctrination. Much like Vsevolod Meyerhold's contemporaneous biomechanical theory of actor training, which held that actors could create emotions by performing specific prescribed poses, the *Lehrstücke* were both a practice of heightened expressiveness and an instrument of social conditioning. In their peculiar oscillation between seemingly irreconcilable extremes, Brecht's *Lehrstücke* are the closest textual equivalents of Bosse's Leviathan that I can think of.

It was partly the charisma of Brecht's persona—as well as the kinds of artistic, political, and pedagogical aspirations that Brecht seemed to embody—that attracted Benjamin to him and that helped to shape Benjamin's thinking around 1930

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(Wizisla 32–33). Indeed, Cadava and Nadal-Melsió's understanding of "noninstrumental" pedagogy may owe less to Benjamin's fraught and fascinating engagement with Brecht's *Lehrstücke* than to the kind of "universal teaching" that Jacques Rancière has claimed to derive from the early-nineteenth-century educational philosopher Joseph Jacotot. Universal teaching, as Rancière describes it, experimentally suspends hierarchies by insisting that intelligence is a shared property that belongs in equal parts to teacher and pupil: universal teaching, Rancière writes, "was not a method for instructing the people; it was a benefit to be announced to the poor: they could do everything any man could" (*Ignorant Schoolmaster* 18). Rancière's recuperation of universal teaching was energized by his own appropriation, from the 1970s onward, of broadly Maoist modes of political thought—in particular Mao's call for a radically democratic mass line that Rancière positions against the political and intellectual elitism he detects in his teacher Louis Althusser (Rancière, *Althusser's Lesson*; see also Han).

Rancière's exploration of learning as a distributed and collaborative praxis resonates with *Politically Red*'s arguments about pedagogy. This influence is largely repressed in *Politically Red*, perhaps because Rancière's reading of Mao as an advocate of radical democracy stands in such stark contrast to Cadava and Nadal-Melsió's discussion of the Little Red Book as an instrument of totalitarian indoctrination.[7] The red that *Politically Red* so brilliantly and convincingly analyzes is the red that Rancière has called the color of mass democracy.[8] But Cadava and Nadal-Melsió must also come to terms with that other shade of red—socialism's historical dalliance with forms of authoritarian politics, the state, and mass indoctrination. It is vital for any critical history of twentieth-century radical politics to keep both shades of red in play and to account for their dialectical reversibility.

Some readers of *Politically Red* may find it surprising that Benjamin, who was so concerned to capture the impurities and contradictions (and the sheer messiness) of our collective being, should come to stand in for another kind of purportedly pure antiauthoritarian politics. By the same token, it is surprising to discover that Benjamin—a charismatic thinker most widely associated with his work on categories such as aura and the idea of the event—should stand in for a radically egalitarian "red common-wealth" (27; see also 286–89). It is testimony to the remarkable intellectual energy of *Politically Red* that it manages to make this reading compelling.

And yet, the attempt to think the dialectical reversibility of authoritarianism and democracy, the state and the mass, the one and the many, is not just an academic exercise. The interdependency of these terms has long been central to left struggles—it was certainly central to many of the political experiences of the twentieth century, the era that forms the core of *Politically Red*'s explorations. It is historically reductive to suggest that the left must choose between the stark political extremes of authoritarianism and direct democracy. Indeed, as recent work in political theory has pointed out, any robust vision of radical politics—including notions of direct action, mutual aid, and individual autonomy—needs to allow for the constructive role of institutions and vertical organizational practices in supporting mass democracy. This work includes revisionary accounts of Spinoza's politics of the multitude that recognize the extent to which, for Spinoza, "freedom" itself is "an institutional product rather than a natural possession" (Field, "Marx" 225). Objecting to Hardt and Negri's horizontalist reading of Spinoza, this scholarship insists that "even the power of the multitude is not some prior force, but an institutional result" (225; see also Field, "State"; Armstrong). This growing body of work also includes positions that altogether reject the need to toggle between horizontality and verticality, authority and democracy, by showing that both shades of red are always intertwined in social movements, and that mass mobilization can be energized by nonhorizontalist organizational forms (Lordon; Nunes, *Neither Vertical nor Horizontal* and *Organization*). According to these critical accounts, the choice between authoritarianism and direct democracy is conceptually reductive and, at least in some of its more extreme formulations, politically debilitating.

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Notes

1. "The dialectical image," Buck-Morss explains, "is a way of seeing that crystallizes antithetical elements by providing the axes of their alignment." As such, it is best "pictured in terms of coordinates of contradictory terms, the 'synthesis' of which is not a movement toward resolution, but the point at which their axes intersect" (210).

2. Of course, Cadava and Nadal-Melsió's book—published in 2023, the year before Jameson's death—now stands poignantly as a monument to Jameson himself, the most recent figure in *Politically Red*'s lineage of readers. Jameson's description of reading as a cumulative and collaborative enterprise—"texts come before us as the always-already-read; we apprehend them through sedimented layers of previous interpretations" (ix–x)—hovers in the background of *Politically Red*.

3. All translations from Brecht are mine.

4. As Arendt observes, Benjamin felt the allure of this Brechtian commitment to communism, even as he feared that it might offer a "false salvation" (36). Benjamin occasionally tries to bend Brecht's attention to revolutionary "greatness" back toward the more dispersed mode of being of the mass: "Die Formen des plumpen Denkens wechseln langsam, denn sie sind von den Massen geschaffen worden. Aus den abgestorbenen lässt sich noch lernen" ("Forms of crude thinking are slow to change, because they have been created by the masses. Even its ossified forms are still instructive in this regard"; 60; my trans.). Among the "ossified forms" that await collection by the linguistic ragpicker are "Sprichwörter" ("proverbs"), which Benjamin regards as the sedimented traces of collective knowledge.

5. Benjamin's diary entries, letters, and essayistic prose pieces are assembled in the posthumous collection *Versuche über Brecht* (*Essays on Brecht*).

6. For example, the line by Brecht that features on *Politically Red*'s cover jacket—"Reading is class struggle"—is taken from the *Lehrstück Die Mutter*, where it is used to subvert the Teacher's unquestioning and undialectical rehashing of party dogma.

7. Another figure notable for his absence in *Politically Red* is Roland Barthes. Barthes's absence is striking not merely because of his well-documented fondness for Brecht's phrase—taken up by Benjamin—"thinking in the heads of others" (Barthes, *Rustle* 213; see also *Grain* 195), nor because of his passing interest in Maoism (*Travels*). More germane to the argument of the book is Barthes's centering of the neutral and nonexpressive "depth" of language—as opposed to "its instrumentality or beauty" (*Criticism* 23, 24)—which resonates precisely with Cadava and Nadal-Melsió's Benjaminian contention that "language moves toward what cannot be expressed, working to express this expressionlessness, . . . refusing to be directed or instrumentalized" (69).

8. Jean-Luc Godard's film *La Chinoise*, writes Rancière, is "a film about red as the color of a line of thought" (*Film Fables* 148). Rancière attempts to square the circle by proposing that reading the Little Red Book can itself involve a liberatory practice of "learning to see, hear, speak, or read" (144). This reading of the Little Red Book in turn generates a form of *plumpes Denken*: "*La Chinoise* is certainly a film from the red epoch, the epoch of straightforward colors and simple ideas. Not simplistic ideas, but the idea of trying to see what simple ideas look like" (149).

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