Theories and Methodologies

Reading Red, Reading Palestine

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Writing may be solitary, but reading is collective. This is the core idea that runs through *Politically Red*: that reading is a politically and historically situated practice that is fundamentally social. A key visualization of this premise in Eduardo Cadava and Sara Nadal-Melsió's book is the frontispiece, which features an early page draft from Karl Marx's *The German Ideology*. Composed by both Marx and Friedrich Engels, the manuscript page is equal parts handwriting and doodling, which for Cadava and Nadal-Melsió represents a "living archive of a collaborative process" (17). The mess of doodling is visually striking for its representation of distracted thinking, one that reveals a social unconscious embedded in the practice of reading and writing. There is vitality in this sociality, but also an element of violence. The authors remind readers that "the violence implicit in reading and thinking in other people's thoughts eliminates the possibility of an innocent reading altogether" (17). Reading is thus never individual or pure, but always adulterated by the conditions of a historical moment. For Cadava and Nadal-Melsió, to read Marx and Marxism through Walter Benjamin, Rosa Luxemburg, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Fredric Jameson means to simultaneously read into COVID-19 and the summer 2020 Black Lives Matter protests. Today, it is genocide. Cadava and Nadal-Melsió ask: "How can a text become a resource for thinking about the present?" (22). One way to read *Politically Red* without innocence is to read Palestine.

In the gap between the 2020 Black Lives Matter uprisings and the 2023–24 global Palestine solidarity movement, the conditions of revolutionary solidarity have shifted. Writing in the tumult of the pandemic, Cadava and Nadal-Melsió offer a forecast for socialist futures that remains elusive. Their tentativeness is captured in the way they zero in on Jameson's aside that "race"—and particularly anti-

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Blackness—is the reason there is no socialism in the United States (Cadava and Nadal-Melsió 154). In other words, racism is so deeply entrenched in the history of US capitalism that it remains the central impediment to a socialist transition. Jameson's comment "extends and racializes capitalist bribery" (177), building on Lenin's insistence on the danger of capital's capacity to bribe its workers. Given that Jameson's comment appears in his last book, *The Benjamin Files*, published on election day in 2020, Cadava and Nadal-Melsió concede that "we do not know whether the note was written before or after the summer's events" (173). This question takes on renewed significance in the aftermath of Jameson's passing. Would he say that race remains the central impediment to socialism, and what do we make of the interracial and transnational expressions of solidarity that have erupted to challenge the liberal order?

To read *Politically Red* in the current conjuncture is to confront the closing ranks of the global capitalist order more unambiguously than in 2020, despite the worldwide mobilization that followed the police killing of George Floyd. The current genocide in Gaza has the near total support of Western liberal democratic states and has been referred to as the "first advanced late capitalist genocide" (Malm). The brutal repression of student solidarity encampments on college campuses, including those that were beacons of the free speech movement, underscores the particular threat that Palestine solidarity poses to this order. Zionist exceptionalism has also gone into overdrive, absolving white nationalism while weaponizing anti-Semitism against Black and brown people of the postcolonial world. Exemplifying the distortion of DEI principles, Germany's requirement that all new applicants for citizenship declare their belief in Israel's right to exist deploys Zionism as an "antiracist" means of policing migrants of color, especially Muslims (Abourahme and Day).

The antidote to this warped antiracism has been political education and mass mobilization. The scale of the global solidarity movement has exposed the lie of the international rules-based order, while student encampments have amplified universities' complicity with US military support for Israel. Supplying military contractors with cheap research and development in applied sciences while defunding the humanities, universities have increasingly become positioned as publicly funded arms of the military-industrial complex.

The Critique of Violence

Although there is growing consensus on the liberal left that Israel's war in Gaza is also an American war (Bayoumi), there remains intense disagreement on the subject of violence. The question of whether support for Palestine amounts to support for Hamas has revealed deep political rifts (Abdaljawad). Within these debates, anticolonial struggle has frequently been reduced to pathologies of sadism, bloodlust, and vengeance, recycling the racist language of "barbarism" and "savagery" routinely applied to the colonized (Abourahme 16). These debates take on intriguing resonance when examined through Cadava and Nadal-Melsió's extensive meditation on violence, in which they read between and across Benjamin, Luxemburg, and Du Bois.

For Benjamin, writing in the aftermath of the failed German revolution of 1918, the question of violence begins foremost with recognition of the excessive legal violence dispensed by the state. In "Toward the Critique of Violence," he analyzes the Greek myth of Niobe to dramatize the co-constitution of violence and the law. In the myth, the queen's intimidation of the ruling order results in excessive violence: "kill[ing] all of Niobe's children in front of her and [leaving them] unburied for nine days" before she is transformed into a stone that eternally mourns (Cadava and Nadal-Melsió 89). For Cadava and Nadal-Melsió, Niobe evokes the fate of Luxemburg, whose torture and execution in the revolution was committed in the "name of equality" (89). Reading Niobe's martyrdom into the Palestinian condition accentuates how the colonized remain subject only to the law's violence and terror rather than to its protections. As Benjamin underscores, "murder is not alien to the law"; rather, "it creates the

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law and is considered foundationally necessary whenever the designation and demarcation of illegal subjects suits the state and its legal system" (Cadava and Nadal-Melsió 90). Importantly, "law-positing" or "law-preserving" violence is not suspended or interrupted by peace treaties, which merely "replace the violence of war with that of peace" (64). This distinction captures the correlation between war and peace that Benjamin emphasizes, whether it was the disastrous 1919 Treaty of Versailles that gave rise to fascism, or the 1993 Oslo Accords that led to the further dispossession of Palestinian land.

While a politics of nonviolent resistance appeals to many among the liberal left, Cadava and Nadal-Melsió's discussion of Du Bois's and Benjamin's interventions highlight a misleading and impoverished philosophy of nonviolence. These reflections help deconstruct liberal support for Palestinian freedom, which is often contingent on its articulation with conventions of recognition or legitimacy in the West, where anything not adhering to those conventions is regarded as "terrorism." Nasser Abourahme exposes the dehumanizing assumptions embedded in the conditions placed on Palestinian struggle:

> The issue is not how we make or articulate our demands for freedom, it is that the very demand for Palestinian freedom is fundamentally objectionable. Even in our mass death, our humanity is denied; even as nameless numbers, we are subject to suspicion. This humanity is constitutively exclusive of us and always has been. (18)

Abourahme's observations of the way Palestinian humanity is disarticulated from the morality of resistance resonates with Du Bois's intervention into the mythology of Northern heroism and Black innocent victimhood during the Civil War. Du Bois corrects the perception that the North intended to fight for the humanity and freedom of the enslaved. As he clarifies, "The North did not propose to attack property. It did not propose to free slaves. This was to be a white man's war to preserve the Union." It was only the force of violent rebellion among enslaved Black "armies of emancipation" that compelled Lincoln to issue the Emancipation Proclamation (qtd. in Cadava and Nadal-Melsió 209). Abolition was not inspired by the recognition of the humanity of enslaved Black people. Rather, their humanity became recognizable in violent struggle.

Benjamin's response to Kurt Hiller on the subject of violence further demonstrates how defending the sanctity of human experience requires much more than maintaining a beating heart. Benjamin challenges Hiller's command "that no one be permitted to take the life of one brother in order to bring freedom to another" (Hiller qtd. in Cadava and Nadal-Melsió 110). For Benjamin, Hiller's "dogma of the sanctity of life" (Benjamin qtd. in Cadava and Nadal-Melsió 110) was based on an "impoverished understanding of existence" (114). As the Palestinian struggle demonstrates, existence reduced to "mere life" under colonial occupation is intolerable. Rather, as Benjamin defines it, existence must refer to "the unshakeable aggregate of the 'human being'" (qtd. in Cadava and Nadal-Melsió 114). Palestinians' refusal of "mere life" thus connects them to a global history of anticolonial struggle.

Benjamin's advocacy for the "pure political violence" of the proletarian strike rests on its noninstrumentality, or "pure means without any determinate end beyond the strike itself" (68). This emphasis on means without ends is the essence of what he identifies as the "criticality" of violence, whose risks and rewards are rooted in its violent incalculability. What would it mean to read Al-Aqsa Flood as "sheer means": an "unmediated mediacy" to "enact hope in the midst of hopelessness" (69)? Jameson reinforces this suspended adjudication as a capacity to "neutralize all of the judgments on violence which seek, either positively or negatively, to defend or denounce it in terms of ends, results, overarching values and the like, in order to examine what is called violence as pure means" (qtd. in Cadava and Nadal-Melsió 68). Along with his deferral of "ends," Benjamin's focus on the criticality of violence intersects with Luxemburg's theory of revolutionary *becoming*. For her, the revolutionary mass is created in the movement, not in ideology. As Cadava and Nadal-Melsió emphasize, Luxemburg insists on "a theory of political incalculability, of risk

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and potential" (80). Violence that is indifferent to ends is also, according to Luxemburg, conceptually impure insofar as "plasticity and becoming [are] the essential features of the mass strike" (78).

To approach pure violence as a "means that is neither justified nor unjustified" is not synonymous with an abandonment of ethics (67). It is rather to recognize that, in the case of Palestine, the colonized are not required to justify their means of resistance to their colonizers, or to the Western powers who support their oppressors. Palestinian resistance has always been subject to ethical critique. As Abourahme stresses, "Palestinians have long thought about and grappled with these questions, not as an exercise in publicity, but as a part of their own political dialogue" (19). As pure means, the criticality of Palestine's liberation movement requires a confrontation with its stakes, which is to depose colonial law in order to inaugurate a new historical era.

On Instrumentality

Dismantling the liberal individual at the center of Western humanism is a prime tenet of Marxism. Cadava and Nadal-Melsió demonstrate how Benjamin enacts this premise in his writing, where "the subject disappears . . . it is instead plural, relational, and impersonal. The 'who' of history is no one because it can be everyone; it is the not-yet-existing nonsubject of revolution" (303). This is less a denial of individuality than the affirmative completion of the individual in the collective—one that invites people, in Fred Moten's words, to "consent not to be a single being." In this push to displace the white possessive subject of colonial racial capitalism, one can observe the threads that connect Marxism to the Black Radical tradition, which also operate as an effective critique of what Olúfémi O. Táíwò calls "elite capture."

Cadava and Nadal-Melsió honor the priority of social subjectivity in their committed reading of Benjamin's challenge to the individualism of bourgeois humanism, which is expressed in his impersonal style and avoidance of instrumentalizing public figures. They carefully unpack the way Benjamin's writings employs impersonality "in the different forms of citationality, allusion, and repetition that are their signature" (229). His contemporary Luxemburg, however, stands out uncomfortably as a citational absence in his writing, and the authors admit that "it is surely one of the great mysteries of the essay ["Toward the Critique of Violence"] that Luxemburg is not mentioned explicitly even once" (71). In the spirit of social reading, Cadava and Nadal-Melsió interpret this absence as presence. They read Benjamin's strategy of "memorializing her but also of protecting her from instrumentalization" in the aftermath of her assassination in 1919, withholding her from becoming sensationalized as an iconic martyr, extremist, or terrorist (76). They offer creative readings of the way Luxemburg appears as an enigma in Benjamin's text on violence, as a series of "'ellipses, pauses, interruptions, and displacements' with which she at the same time can never be fully identified" (74). Despite the generosity of this reading of Benjamin, they acknowledge the violence of her erasure, admitting that "Luxemburg's voice is always massified—it is mediated, transformed, ventriloquized in distorted forms, even if at times it was violently silenced" (83). One question that emerges from this inventive reading of Luxemburg's absence is whether Cadava and Nadal-Melsió could conceive of a feminist antibourgeois humanism. Are women so freighted with ideological baggage that they cannot be represented without being instrumentalized?

In the aftermath of the police killing of George Floyd, race, gender, and class coalesced in even more fraught relation to the subject of instrumentalization. Floyd's death galvanized massive antiracist and anticapitalist protests, unprecedented in US history, in which militant protestors across the country destroyed luxury malls and retail stores, even setting fire to Minneapolis's third precinct police headquarters. The uprising was also global in scope, and demonstrators took to the streets in solidarity in cities around the world. Despite this outpouring of activism, these protests may not have represented a turning point in the nation's reckoning with anti-Blackness. As Too Black and Rasul A. Mowatt suggest, political elites could not tolerate Black militant rage in the aftermath of the police killing

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of Michael Brown in Ferguson in 2014, but by 2020 that rage was "laundered" by corporate and political elites who had adapted to the moment. They note that in June 2020, the Democratic National Committee broke its one-month fundraising record by raising $392 million, while $50 billion was pledged by private corporations to fight "racial inequality" (12). Meanwhile the World Bank established a task force on racism, while the United Nations committed to a yearlong study on anti-Blackness. To round out this global state-finance remedy to Black death and white guilt, consumers were encouraged to support Black businesses. "Buying Black" became a central pillar of political economic reparation, regardless of the fact that the vast majority of Black Americans are workers rather than business owners—or that "Black capitalism" would not have altered George Floyd's fate. These strategies are key features of "elite capture," which Táíwò describes as a series of tactics elites use to "fight for their own interests using the banner of group solidarity" (32). Elite capture is an updated modality of the racialized bribery that Jameson blames for the absence of socialism in the United States.

An equally pernicious feature of elite capture is the performance of identity politics divorced from material conditions. While Cadava and Nadal-Melsió offer an expansive reading of Kadir Nelson's artistic rendering of George Floyd on the cover of the 22 June 2020 issue of the *The New Yorker*, it is difficult to disentangle the image from the period's ramping up of corporate DEI and liberal reform efforts. The hypocrisy of these efforts was captured best by the Black mayor of Washington, DC, who requested a budget increase for a police department that had tear-gassed protestors on a street where she had "Black Lives Matter" painted. In the same month, Nancy Pelosi led kente-clad House and Senate Democrats as they knelt in the US Capitol's Emancipation Hall for eight minutes and forty-six seconds, commemorating the time George Floyd was pinned under the police officer Derek Chauvin's knee before he died. The result of these symbolic efforts was negligible. Democrats failed to pass any legislation to address police violence, including the weak George Floyd Policing Act. As many have noted, this was a policy that if enacted would not have saved George Floyd's life. Perhaps the most lasting result of these symbolic identity politics was the backlash that followed. As Táíwò notes, "By June 2021, twenty-five state legislatures had introduced legislation to ban the teaching of 'critical race theory'" (5).

This mixed legacy of the 2020 protests is further captured in the title of Nelson's work, "Say Their Names." On the one hand, the enlistment of "oral performativity as a speech act that constitutes a promise and an alliance to a new community" evokes the transformation of grief into political unity that "enables [Floyd] to contain multitudes" (Cadava and Nadal-Melsió 231, 225). On the other, the speech act may also raise the question of who is grievable. While Cadava and Nadal-Melsió are moved by the conditions of possibility that "prevented this [George Floyd's] particular death from being absorbed and made invisible" (241), Nelson's title's evocation of the #SayHerName project might not sit well with some (Junior). Founded by Kimberlé Crenshaw, the African American Policy Forum and Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies launched #SayHerName to challenge the almost exclusive media focus on police killings of Black men and boys rather than women and girls. The irony of Nelson's citation of #SayHerName to memorialize a Black man is captured in Jared Sexton's broader question about gender-based invisibility within the #BlackLivesMatter movement. He asks, "How did a black radical political-intellectual project generated largely by the labor of black queer women and centrally by the discourse of black feminist and queer theory become associated, again and still, with a masculinist and heteronormative popular reception?" (22). In other words, why does it seem impossible for Black women to invoke the particular universal of this movement?

For readers looking backward and forward in the time of genocide, answers do not come easily. While George Floyd could be memorialized on the cover of *The New Yorker* in 2020, both solidarity politics and collective grief would be foreclosed on the magazine's 20 May 2024 cover. Entitled "Class of 2024," the cartoon image by the artist Barry Blitt acknowledges the repression of student protests that swept the

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nation, which encompassed over one hundred universities across forty-six states. The cover depicts a college graduation ceremony with graduates crossing the stage to receive their diplomas, their hands zip-tied behind their backs and arms held by their arresting police offers. But without a single Palestinian flag, watermelon, or kaffiyeh present, the image is entirely sanitized of historical reference to the genocide that students risked everything to protest. One can only assume that this condescending portrayal of student activism is intended to guard against the possibility that 45,000 dead Palestinians in Gaza might summon an ethical crisis among *The New Yorker*'s readership. Cadava and Nadal-Melsió propose "communal grief" as a framework for understanding the *longue durée* of race in the United States. But for those who remain outside the framework of grievability, a militant rage might be an alternative affect with better chances of withstanding the bribery of multicultural, multinational elites.

The best books demand the most of us as readers even as they produce us as writers and thinkers. If capital is value in motion, its disruption is social mobilization—a counterforce that Cadava and Nadal-Melsió imagine through the collective conjuring of a red common-wealth. They write that Marx encourages us to understand that "communism depends on our capacity to keep a relation to the wonder and surprise" (330). I end with their invocation of the barge pole as the best motif for the push and pull of social reading that can set the masses in motion: "The skillful handling of the barge pole is a form of reading that, taking its point of departure from this resistance, turning stagnation and inertia into movement, enables the historical materialist to move through capital's channels and waterways" (158).

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