Theories and Methodologies

Reading, Writing, and History Making

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It would be difficult to imagine a more apt moment for the publication of Eduardo Cadava and Sara Nadal-Melsió's *Politically Red*, which stresses the sense of emergency that conditions contemporary life globally. All the more so as this sense has become so persistent that there is a risk of its being naturalized or, worse, serving as a pretext for a permanent "state of exception" that legitimates the use of violence and the suspension of rights.[1] In their introduction, the authors delineate the critical sociohistorical circumstances of the 2020s: the continuing "pandemic, the rise of racism in general and anti-Black violence in particular, an upsurge of authoritarianism and fascism around the world, an intensification of different forms of inequality, an escalation of conflicts and wars of all kinds, an increase in the dispossession of populations and in forced migrations, and an acceleration of environmental catastrophes globally" (22).

The older works discussed in *Politically Red* were also written in contexts of historical emergency evincing the need for change; the book thus draws a dialogic nexus of historical, intertextual, and intermedial relations of the present with past texts and moments selected for their radical potential. Key writings by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, W. E. B. Du Bois, Walter Benjamin, Rosa Luxemburg, and Fredric Jameson are closely reread for their continuing political charge, and they are artfully woven into a canvas of activist thinking that forms what the authors call a "red common-wealth" (27; see also 286–89). A play on the homonymy of *red* and *read*, the red common-wealth is here proposed as an ever-expanding repository of reading resources for doing political—especially antiracist—work, to which this extraordinary book is also a valuable addition. The volume opens with the image of a manuscript page of the

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section of *The German Ideology* on Ludwig Feuerbach, which was meant as a critique of the contemplative ahistoricism of the Young Hegelians. This manuscript document of a reading by Marx is tellingly followed by a quotation from Louis Althusser's later project of reading Marx—namely, *Reading* Capital—stating that "only since Marx have we had to begin to suspect what, in theory at least, *reading* and hence writing *means*" (14). These two points of entry into the book suggest the linking of literacy with political action that it takes as its task.

The genesis of the work at hand further underlines the political significance of the connectedness and infinite multiplicity of reading the readings of others in writing that makes up the proposed collective of the red common-wealth in which the book partakes. The notion, expressed by Benjamin, referencing Bertolt Brecht, and quoted in the book, that thinking politically means "thinking in other people's heads" finds here its paradigm (*Selected Writings* 2: 773). The intertextual and collaborative process that resulted in *Politically Red* had started off with the aim of a review essay of Fredric Jameson's *The Benjamin Files*, the book-length culmination of his longtime and, sadly, final engagement with critical theory and Benjamin's oeuvre before his passing in 2024. In this respect, the book can also be taken as part of the afterlife of the work of Jameson, one of the most prominent Marxist critics of our times. However, Cadava and Nadal-Melsió significantly expand Jameson's discussion of Benjamin's writings through their own deep and timely readings of the latter's thought, which are in turn informed by other readings, conversations, and collaborations. Drawing primarily on Benjamin's conceptual legacy, the authors unfold a multiplicity of political associations between his and others' writings, addressing the continuing ills of the modern present, the accumulated violence of history, with a view to change.

The insightful and intricate readings of political texts found in *Politically Red* focus on more experimental or unorthodox work of the Marxian line of thinking, programmatically going against totalizing and instrumentalizing appropriations of this tradition. The aim here is to be attentive to new potentialities of meaning and alternative visions that can be discerned in different sorts of radical writings, in the margins, fissures, and between the lines of political texts, especially when they are read in collaborative and associative ways. Drafts, doodling, crossings-out, ellipses, footnotes, and revisions, which point to what remains unsaid, invisible, or unrealized, are noted and followed up in detail as traces of multiple other possible directions the thinking contained in such writings could take. A good example of this process is found in the elaborate discussion of Marx's late works, especially his *Ethnological Notebooks* from the 1880s, in which he seeks alternatives to capitalist economy through reading avidly about non-Western and precapitalist societies. But, more than this, reading and writing are argued to be a necessary and integral part of history making, that is, of changing the world, as these activities transform the way we think and aim at mobilizing the masses; they are literally "activist."

The activist potential of reading and writing politically against a catastrophic actuality resonates with Benjamin's call for the interruption of the historical continuum, commonly perceived as "progress," in order to allow alternative temporalities and visions to emerge against a history of inequality, oppression, and exploitation initiated by primitive accumulation. This call for action is encapsulated in Benjamin's radical dictum "That things are 'status quo' *is* the catastrophe . . . hell is not something that awaits us, but this life here and now." These words of urgency appear in Convolute N, "On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress," of his incomplete *Ur*-history of modernity provisionally named *Das Passagen-Werk* (*The Arcades Project*). The work is an archive drafted out of collected quotations, comments, and thought-fragments that formed the laboratory or *avant-texte* of most of his published works, including his influential "On the Concept of History," written in 1940, at the height of fascism in Europe. The task of the dialectical historian, as Benjamin defined it, is precisely to "interrupt" the evolutionary narrative of history that justifies the present. Interruption rescues phenomena from their "enshrinement as heritage," which is always defined by the victors of history, so as to allow for alternative

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potentialities to begin to be imagined (*Arcades Project* 473).

Politically Red is inscribed in this history-making gesture of interrupting the status quo by providing remarkable historical and conceptual contextualization of the works read that challenges official narratives and by reading them so closely as to detect in them yet more openings, subtexts, contradictions and aporias, particularly when they are read in combination. Such readings, then, on the one hand, interrupt what goes unquestioned as tradition and, on the other hand, relieve political materials of the past from their putative outdatedness and seek to activate them for the present. The critical questions are posed right from the start: "How can a text become a resource for thinking about the present? How does a historical moment affect the way we read a text—either one that belongs to that moment or one that does not?" (Cadava and Nadal-Melsió 22). All reading is claimed to be an "asymmetrical exchange between the moment in which a text is written and the moment in which it is read" (23). But not all texts have the same political potential at any one moment. The archive of shared resources proposed here represents the effort, through the act of reading and writing together and collaboratively, to redeem past political work in contending with the present conditions of capitalist economy and the violence it entails—particularly racial violence, which, as the authors point out, Marxist thought urgently needs to address if it is to retain its critical and emancipatory force today.

To energize these past works for the present, the authors form what Benjamin called "constellations," which lead "the past to bring the present into a critical state" (*Arcades Project* 471). Constellations create "actuality" ("Aktualität") out of the present moment, insofar as actuality can be defined, in John McCole's apt formulation, as "a mode of reception that activates its object by recognizing the unique temporal constellation between the critic's present and a specific moment in the past" (23). In his theses "On the Concept of History," Benjamin underlines once more the political use of constellations as defined by a time of "danger" that guides the recognizability of the past: "Historical materialism wishes to hold fast that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to the historical subject in a moment of danger" (*Selected Writings* 4: 391). The present moment of danger, a moment of upsurge of racism, fascism, inequality, and other forms of the accumulated violence of capitalist economy, demands recognizing aspects of the past that are "charged with the time of the now [*Jetztzeit*]" or revolutionary time (4: 365).

At the end of their book, Cadava and Nadal-Melsió explicitly invoke the term *constellation* to describe their project:

> The writers we have been reading introduce a crack or fissure into these forms—insisting on the ruin capitalism already bears within it—in order to interrupt them, de-universalize them, recombine their different elements in order to destabilize them and suspend their brutality, if just for a brief moment. The constellation of texts at play here—all constellations, whether celestial or textual, are always in motion, never reducible to a particular moment in time or space—points to the militancy of diverse literacies, all of which begin in the desire to maximize and massify the cracks and fissures in capitalist relations of production. (284–85)

The innovative form of the book itself is in alignment with the constellating method. Articulated over twenty-one titled sections, numbered in Latin and put together in the manner of modernist montage, the contents combine quotations and critical commentary of foundational political writings, historical context, and discussions of utopian fiction with textual epigraphs and diverse images placed throughout the book. The sections are connected but they are also autonomous, allowing different points of entry into the book and nonlinear paths of reading. Their titles have a citational, intertextual quality, mostly drawing on memorable phrases and figures of speech found in the works of the authors discussed. Benjamin's idea that "[o]pening up new contents" involves developing "new forms" finds a paradigmatic application in the book's innovative construction, which signals the importance of form as a mode of intervention in the political and historical process (*Arcades Project* 473). Defending Brecht's vindication

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of new aesthetic devices as inseparable from radical politics, Benjamin writes in his 1934 essay "The Author as Producer," which was originally an address delivered at the Institut pour l'Étude du Fascisme (Institute for the Study of Fascism) in Paris, that "the tendency of a literary work can be politically correct only if it is also literarily correct. That is to say, the politically correct tendency includes a literary tendency" (*Selected Writings* 2: 769). As the authors explicitly acknowledge, the book's experimentalism suits the radical tendency of its contents, alluding to Benjamin's single book publication, entitled *One-Way Street*, which Jameson regards as embodying the "new form that the impossibility of the book brings forth in its place" (9). *One-Way Street* appeared in 1928 as an eclectic collection of short prose fragments—from dreams and aphorisms to commentary on the commodity form and universal equivalence in contemporary politics—that defies classification and was connected, as Cadava and Nadal-Melsió contend, to Benjamin's projected trilogy on politics (59–60).

Among the numerous and powerful constellations that *Politically Red* effects and comprises, however, the images included have a special significance. The apposite choice of images interpolated in the textual body of the work reveals the curatorial experience of the authors, their eye for the imaginative potential of the image in both aesthetic and activist terms. Images generate numerous associations at once. They indeed can be seen as the epitome of the constellating method, since they combine in still simultaneity a past moment with the present of its viewing or reading, confirming Benjamin's famous thought that "[i]t is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill" (*Arcades Project* 462). Although the "dialectical image" is not necessarily visual, the visual images in the book become dialectical precisely as they interrupt an apparent chronological causality that would legitimize the present and reveals instead its regressiveness and unresolved tensions. They are, as Theodor Adorno put it, "objective crystallizations of the historical dynamic" (238), and, in Benjamin's words, they "bear to the highest degree the imprint of the perilous critical moment on which all reading is founded" (*Arcades Project* 463).

The specific images contained in the book open it up to the radical pedagogy of the visual alongside the textual imagination. They are of different sorts: copies of archival material and manuscripts; photographs depicting historical moments; portraits of Benjamin, Luxemburg, and Du Bois captured while reading and writing; figural paintings; contemporary abstract or conceptual paintings and photography; and public artworks such as installations, monuments, and graffiti murals. Sometimes images are invoked to start a theoretical discussion or reinforce an argument, while in other instances the pictures themselves, in their referentiality or allegorical abstraction, become part of the history of the wish to make history.

Politically Red can be read as a tribute to collaboration, connection, multiplicity, and massification as both the premises and the effects of the practices of reading and writing that are always already engaged in conversation and diachronically possess a transformative, mass mobilizing power. Of the images set in dialogic interaction with words, there are some that can be read as bringing together the concept of the mass and the practice of writing, starting with the manuscript page that serves as the frontispiece of the book, which graphically registers the collaboration between Marx and Engels on the drafts and fragments that would be published as *The German Ideology*. On the right-hand part of the page, bursting out of the margins, is a multitude of similar yet singular heads—drawn by Engels—growing out of one another, all looking toward (reading?) Marx's handwriting on the left. The combination of drawing and writing, and particularly the striking doodle of the mass of heads, sets off a rich and complex series of critical associations by Cadava and Nadal-Melsió, including their elaborations on the pedagogical capacity of reading and writing as crucial mobilizers of the masses. The authors also show throughout an acute awareness of the dangers of instrumentalization and complicity that even a red pedagogy may

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involve, as in the case of *The Little Red Book*, which is discussed in detail as a mass-controlling tool of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. More generally, the Marxian call for turning thinking into action and the masses into actors, encapsulated in the famous Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach, poses crucial questions about the condition and the subject of the "mass." Again, Cadava and Nadal-Melsió invoke Benjamin's thought as providing an alternative revolutionary didactics precisely because it is not unconditional but rather "an explicit *counter* to the processes of identification and indoctrination that—in accordance with at least one logic of reproduction and perhaps the most violent one—wish: (1) to produce a homogeneous and identifiable mass formation; (2) to subject a populace to a predetermined and fixed set of ideological positions; and (3) to intensify the cathexis with an authoritarian leader" (31).

The mass as infinite multiplicity is also effectively suggested in some of the art images contained in the book. A 1996 silkscreen print by Glenn Ligon entitled *Red Hands #2* (42) shows a multitude of red-lit hands raised as in a protest, an uprising, or a direct democracy vote, in short, at a moment that offers a glimpse of what "having the wind of world history in one's sails" and "knowing how to set them," as Benjamin phrased it, might look like (*Arcades Project* 473). There is also included an impressive 2011 photograph entitled *Múltiplos: É Nóis!* (*Multiples: It's Us!*), by Cássio Vasconcellos, that highlights the gathering force of a multiplying mass that appears startlingly nondescript (Cadava and Nadal-Melsió 50). The issue of mass movement, of the masses moved by words, entails the question of political agency and subjectivity that informs a long history of critical debates about mass society and mass culture featuring, not least, Adorno, one of Benjamin's main interlocutors, who had influentially conceived the mass as synonymous with anonymity, manipulation, conformism, alienation, and oppression instead of liberation. Inspired by Benjamin "in the very center" of whose thought, according to Jameson, lies "mass politics" (207), one of the many important insights offered by Cadava and Nadal-Melsió into the constitution of the masses vis-à-vis the individual is that the masses are temporary formations, including not just like-minded people but also enemies that may destroy its movement. Moreover, in place of a privileged subject of revolution, what the authors propose is a modernist politics of "impersonality" (149) that resonates with Benjamin's remarks, influenced by Brecht's ideas, in the famous essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," published in 1936:[2]

> At the moment when it takes up its struggle for liberation, this apparently compact mass has actually already begun to loosen. It ceases to be governed by mere reactions; it makes the transition to action. The loosening of the proletarian masses is the work of solidarity. In the solidarity of the proletarian class struggle, the dead, undialectical opposition between individual and mass is abolished.
>
> (*Selected Writings* 3: 129)

Benjamin was quick to realize art's potential to turn a mass into a community. He also saw the connection between mass politics and a new conception of art in modernity, which had to be rescued from organicist or regressively aesthetic appropriations that helped create the fascist mass body. Calling for a politicization of aesthetics to fight the aestheticization of politics effectuated by fascism (3: 139–40), Benjamin reclaims art for politics by positing the impersonality of its mass reproduction, enabled by technology, as a way out of the dangers of the manipulation of the masses by a discourse that promises their "expression" without "granting them rights" (3: 121). Cadava and Nadal-Melsió's discussion of the connections between art, technology, and politics illuminates this strategy, which tends to get blurred by Benjamin's noted ambivalence between the significance of a collective, premodern storytelling and auratic tradition, on the one hand, and the liberating destruction of art's aura by modern mass reproduction techniques, on the other. This complicated function of mass-reproduced and mass-transmitted culture would be worth examining further in relation to the effects and potential of the Internet and other contemporary media.

There is another striking cluster of images of political art in *Politically Red* that is placed in

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constellation with the urgent discussion of the issue of race calling for mass mobilization. Cadava and Nadal-Melsió connect these images with their insightful readings of Du Bois's critical and fictional writings, as well as Benjamin's "Critique of Violence" (1921), the silent subtext of which, they argue, is Rosa Luxemburg, whose activist work and dead body mark a crucial historical moment of mass striking and different sorts of (legal and executive) violence in Europe. Race, as the authors stress, was the salient reason Jameson mentioned to explain why socialism never flourished in the United States (177), echoing Marx's acute observation that race historically proved an obstacle to the solidarity of labor. Responding to the absolute necessity of a radical critique that would emphasize accumulated race violence as effectively concomitant with the history of capitalism, Cadava and Nadal-Melsió put race at the heart of the mass activism that is imperative today. As crucial thresholds to their discussion of this issue, the authors also reproduce and discuss some powerful artworks with greater public visibility.

Two of these, produced in 2020, are explicit responses to George Floyd's brutal police murder by asphyxiation in the same year. One image, a painting by Kadir Nelson that appeared as the cover of *The New Yorker*, is compellingly entitled *Say Their Names* (Cadava and Nadal-Melsió 226). The other is a mural in Houston's Third Ward commemorating George Floyd, signed by Donkeeboy and Donkeemom (234–35). Both artworks register the violence of executive power abolishing civil rights—"I AM A MAN" is written on a sign in Nelson's image, as a poignant reminder. Both artworks make public a trauma and feeling of bereavement, stirring the masses to join the community of the Black Lives Matter world-historical movement. The mass of faces and bodies depicted in Nelson's image as part of Floyd's own body, which is thereby turned into a universal symbol, evokes a history of tortured anonymous slaves alongside the heroes of the Black rights movement in an effort to awaken the dead, aiming at what Benjamin called their "apocatastasis."[3] The second image, painted on a public wall for everyone to see, exhibits a George Floyd with wings, the word "GHETTO" written across his hoodie, and a halo over his head formed by the phrase "FOREVER BREATHING IN OUR HEARTS." These words, accompanied by a drawn symbol of the heart, read as a kind of epitaph made out of the struggling, strangled Floyd's last words—"I can't breathe!"—whose reverberation reignited a mass movement.

Reading this image, Cadava and Nadal-Melsió make a suggestive connection between Floyd's transformation into an angel in this mural and Paul Klee's monoprint *Angelus Novus*, which Benjamin owned and made famous by reading it as an allegory of the "angel of history." The winged Floyd is likened to Benjamin's angel of history who seeks to preserve the past in memory, to protect it against its erasure by the storm of putative progress (*Selected Writings* 4: 392). Floyd's angelic status thus ensures immortality through remembrance, triggering hope of justice for the oppressed and the exploited. After all, as Benjamin notes at the end of his analysis in "Goethe's *Elective Affinities*" (1924–25), "[o]nly for the sake of the hopeless ones have we been given hope" (1: 365).

Notes

1. See Agamben's argument that the creation of a "permanent" state of exception (even when it is not officially declared) has in fact become a basic task of the modern state, including states formally considered democratic, thus dangerously allowing for totalitarianism and the suspension of civil rights (2).

2. Benjamin seems to echo Brecht's questioning of the antithesis between the individual and the mass, aptly articulated while he was attacking György Lukács's criticism of modernism: "Man does not become man again by stepping out of the masses but by stepping back into them. The masses shed their dehumanization and thereby men become men again—but not the same men as before. This is the path that literature must take in outrage when the masses are beginning to attract to themselves everything valuable and human, when they are mobilizing people against the dehumanization produced by capitalism in its fascist phase" (Brecht 69).

3. See Benjamin's call for an apocatastasis of the suppressed and silenced aspects of the past (*Arcades Project* 459).

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