Theories and Methodologies

Can Hope Be Inherited? On Reading *Politically Red* Politically

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In *Politically Red*, Eduardo Cadava and Sara Nadal-Melsió propose a new way of reading politically. They link the practice of literary interpretation to the production of a revolutionary subject through an embattled intimacy with a vast archive of radical texts, ranging from Karl Marx to Walter Benjamin, Rosa Luxemburg, W. E. B. Du Bois, and many others. To reopen this archive, they repurpose the Althusserian paradigm of symptomatic reading as well as other powerful deciphering techniques, especially Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's psychoanalytic cryptonymy. Cadava and Nadal-Melsió's hermeneutic method gives rise to a revolutionary process of cultural transmission. Indeed, reading politically means to summon a repository of written works for the making of an anticapitalist heritage, doing away with capitalist forms of ownership, identity, culture, and inheritance. This book hence contests a given concept of culture that, as Benjamin famously put it, is irremediably entangled in the barbarism and violence of an imperialist capitalism. But what happens if one applies their political reading to their own text, in a sort of fractal topology whereby the pattern they exhibit becomes at the same time a monadological abbreviation and metonymic segment of an infinite concatenation? That is, how does their reading contain, but is at the same time contained, by the process it describes?

In a short answer to this question, it can be anticipated that such a reading would unearth a blank, an empty space encrypted in the very texture of their work. The wager of my response is that this crypt is, in fact, a proper name: Ernst Bloch. Indeed, Bloch sits in the tradition of revolutionary writers addressed in the book. Furthermore, Bloch

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anticipates Cadava and Nadal-Melsió as a thinker of an anticapitalist inheritance that resonates with the "red common-wealth" they propose in the book (27). Even more intimately, Bloch is the materialist thinker of hope as speculative potentiality preserved in the defeats of the past. Bloch's anticapitalist heritage stems from the combination of latency and tendency, or utopian possibility and concrete determination in the course of history. To untangle the trace of an encrypted Bloch, this short response is divided into three parts. In the first part, I show how Cadava and Nadal-Melsió's method can be retroactively applied to *Politically Red*. In the second part, I move from the method of reading to the broader idea of inheritance this form of practice can reveal. The essay concludes by raising the problem of how disappointed hopes from the past can be inherited today. The encrypted legacy of Bloch hence turns the empty casket of the vanquished of history into a dialectical mode of historical possibility.

The Empty Casket in the Empty Casket: Politics of Encryption

One of the most inspiring and illuminating chapters of the book is titled "Rosa's Casket." Cadava and Nadal-Melsió propose a rereading of Benjamin's essay on violence, wherein they discover the unnamed, encrypted presence of Luxemburg. What makes this kind of reading so important is the fact that Benjamin did not mention Luxemburg at all in his essay. This kind of reading somehow resonates with Abraham and Torok's idiosyncratic approach to Freud's case of the "Wolf Man." In a truly revolutionary rethinking of Freud's case, Abraham and Torok discovered the presence of a "crypt" at the heart of the unconscious—of Freud's unconscious as well as his patient's. The crypt is a hidden presence doubly buried within the fractures of the ego, not simply the unconscious but the burial of a burial so to speak, which resists the work of analysis and is not explicable as a return of the repressed. The crypt can be detected when language becomes a sort of broken symbol, a jigsaw puzzle revealing the presence of a burial and a secret, a ghost that comes from and belongs to someone else (Abraham and Torok 79–83). This "crypt" calls for a sophisticated decoding. Language can conserve the key for unlocking the secret, which does not belong to the subject but, in fact, always comes from the outside. Cadava and Nadal-Melsió rework the crypt into a directly political arena: the crypt entombs the wider historical context to which a text is not explicitly responding. History is a sort of radioactive substance that operates on the level of form, rather than a theme.

Thus, the reading of Benjamin takes its cue from a biographical annotation: "Scholem had introduced Benjamin to Luxemburg in 1915 as they engaged in antiwar activity," and Benjamin's brother, Georg, "had given him a copy of Luxemburg's prison letters as a birthday present in 1920—which he read before writing his essay and which he praised in a letter to Scholem" (Cadava and Nadal-Melsió 72). Notwithstanding these precedents, Benjamin did not mention Luxemburg at all in the essay: the question hence becomes whether Luxemburg can be present in Benjamin's essay, and if so how. Cadava and Nadal-Melsió suggest that "Benjamin engages in a militant negativity" by refraining from naming her directly (73). What matters is the fact that it is possible, through a specific kind of reading, to retrieve and summon back to life the traces of Luxemburg's presence in the text and her influence on Benjamin. The value of Cadava and Nadal-Melsió's exercise rests on this eccentric hermeneutic practice. They note and discuss the influence of Luxemburg on Benjamin precisely because, and not despite, her absence from his text. In relation to Luxemburg, Cadava and Nadal-Melsió mobilize a powerful metaphor, the image of the "empty casket." As they explain, when Luxemburg was murdered, on 15 January 1919, her body was thrown in the water and not immediately recovered. Thus, the funeral procession that took place for the members of the murdered Spartacus League militants could show only an open, empty casket since there was no body to display. Cadava and Nadal-Melsió write:

> Her absence already had been monumentalized in the January 25 funeral procession that memorialized the thirty-three revolutionaries killed during the Spartacist uprising and buried in a mass grave in

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> the Berlin-Friedrichsfelde cemetery. The dead included Liebknecht, but, because Luxemburg's body, having been thrown into the Landwehr Canal in Kreuzberg after her assassination, had not yet been recovered, only an empty casket was buried in her stead. (73)

This powerful image of Luxemburg's empty casket guides a rereading of Benjamin's essay as an "afterimage of Luxemburg's murder and could be said to be another empty casket" (73). This guiding figure has important methodological consequences for the program outlined in *Politically Red*.

The image of the empty casket represents a way of reading the blanks, missing words, and silences of a text, in the attempt to recover sedimented historical materials that are incorporated in textual forms without explicit mention. If Benjamin's essay's "notorious difficulty and abstraction disguises and hides a female body, it also obscures its disguise in this encryption. It hides Luxemburg as it holds and preserves her by constructing a series of partitions . . . the crypt that Benjamin's essay is can only keep its secret by fragmenting itself" (76). A true logic of encryption, such as the one studied by Abraham and Torok, is at work here: the crypt conceals the very act of concealing that would make what is encrypted discoverable in the first place. Thus, "Benjamin enciphers Luxemburg . . . by inscribing her within Sorel's text, or, more precisely, by evoking her language alongside his discussion of Sorel" (Cadava and Nadal-Melsió 77). Encryption operates on the level of language, as if Benjamin enacted Luxemburg's theories in his style and phrasing, instead of mentioning her explicitly. Luxemburg's theory of the mass strike is echoed in Benjamin's sentences, "as they activate, disperse, interrupt, and massify any attempt to conceptualize either violence or the emergence of the strike" (76). Cadava and Nadal-Melsió politicize language by showing how style and rhetoric, in sum how literary form, encrypt historical processes, events, and contexts that do not coalesce as an explicit theme or object.

Texts incorporate multitudes, vanquished histories, repressed voices, and a plurality that is cryptically visible in the traces of the text itself. However, one might ask: What are the stakes of this political reading? Why is reading, for example, Benjamin's entombments of Luxemburg through his discussion of Sorel so significant? In the chapter on Luxemburg's casket, the authors note how this strategy of encryption is Benjamin's ultimate gesture of solidarity, an indication that "Luxemburg cannot be annihilated altogether. On the contrary, beyond any determinate position that would instrumentalize her, she survives as an inexpressible and unrepresentable force" (74). The work of encryption is necessary to avoid turning a revolutionary heritage into a dead letter, spoil, monument, or simply the past. Cadava and Nadal-Melsió's methodological intervention feeds into a broader theory of anticapitalist inheritance. The blanks that constellate the repository of revolutionary texts constitute an important, indelible presence and a true inheritance that needs, urgently, to be kept alive, de-crypted, and transmitted in order not to be lost. If this logic holds true for the great revolutionary texts of the past, can it apply to *Politically Red* as well, and what would be the consequences of embedding the book in the very concatenation it attempts to contain?

From Encryption to the Red Common-wealth

Cadava and Nadal-Melsió redefine the significance of political reading by showing the historical and political dimension that operates as an encrypted force within literary form. Instead of placing politics on the level of content, their reading helps redefine a politics that exists in the verbal, stylistic, discursive qualities of writing, a lesson learned by, among others, Fredric Jameson, especially in his masterful reading of critical theorists in *Marxism and Form*. This practice of reading the political leads the authors to propose a new concept of literary inheritance that might constitute what they define, in the last chapter of their book, as a "red common-wealth." The hyphenated use of the word "common-wealth" here marks the distance from other usages of the term, such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's paradigm in their book *Commonwealth*, the final installment in their *Empire* trilogy. Indeed, as Cadava

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and Nadal-Melsió show in the last chapter, their perspective is deeply influenced by Luxemburg's theory of the accumulation of capital and hence the continuing relevance of concepts of imperialism, so-called primitive accumulation, and formal subsumption that Hardt and Negri would refuse. Contrary to Hardt and Negri, Cadava and Nadal-Melsió uphold primitive accumulation and formal subsumption as concrete realities of our century, which have not been eradicated by the rise of a panorama of total subsumption and the demise of Marx's law of value. Cadava and Nadal-Melsió's concept of a red common-wealth is important, especially for literary studies, as a formulation of a rebellious theory of the literary tradition.

Following Marx and Luxemburg, they aim to recover and to transmit "the only inheritance we have that is not entirely governed by ownership and the capitalist barbarism that protects and maintains it" (Cadava and Nadal-Melsió 287). This alternative concept of inheritance would struggle against the continuity and appropriative logics of capitalist transmission. For this reason, they propose a "militant understanding of the inevitable negativity of transmission," which sets "the catastrophic character of transmission against the catastrophe that capital is and, embracing this negativity, remains faithful to what is most enigmatic in what we inherit, resists fixed determinations of what is transmitted to us" (286, 287). This inheritance would be a corpus, what they describe as an "ever-growing collective of texts," but also, most importantly, a mode of transmission able to "read the cracks and fissures in what we inherit, the fugitive shards and fragments of historical ruination" (286). This negative, critical, blasting form of transmission would refuse to turn the body of works that compose the inheritance into a dead letter or private property; this heritage would resist "all delimitations and forms of possession and instrumentalization" to rediscover that "hope becomes legible only when it is shattered" (287). This inheritance of a red common-wealth would hence oppose the capitalist concept of culture as a commodity separate from the material base. And the secret aim of this alternative, insurgent inheritance is the recovery of the open possibilities of history, going back to the past as an open reservoir of historical transformations rather than a list of facts to be safely stored. This inheritance would always speak from the point of view of the vanquished and would offer "a cumulative infrastructure for the political imagination and for the possibility of a different future" (289). I register this idea of a political, anticapitalist inheritance as the ultimate purpose of the acts of political reading of encrypted histories outlined in *Politically Red*.

Even if Bloch's name appears only in passing in the book, Bloch can give a name and a figure to the encrypted, radioactive forces at work in *Politically Red*. Indeed, throughout his oeuvre, especially his masterpiece, *The Principle of Hope*, but also his essays, lectures, and late, still untranslated philosophical works, Bloch extensively developed a concept of anticapitalist inheritance that would actively fight an ideological heritage reduced to extracted wealth, value, monument, and property. Instead, Bloch conjectured a concept of heritage that would preserve and reactivate all "empty caskets" of the past (coincidentally, one of Bloch's late works, *Experimentum Mundi*, is dedicated to Luxemburg). For this reason, Bloch's philosophy would provide a resonant answer to a question opened by the notion of inheritance proposed in *Politically Red*. This question concerns the material, economic, and historical forces that would make the constitution of such an insurgent, oppositional notion of inheritance possible in the first place. If the red common-wealth is "the enemy of culture," as Cadava and Nadal-Melsió write, because "the common-wealth interrupts culture as an 'object' that can be appropriated for national, ideological, or 'cultural' purposes" (288), how can it avoid becoming yet another idealistic, commodified object, under a different name but de facto reproducing the ideological function of culture in a capitalist world? How can the anticapitalist heritage avoid becoming, once again, a spoil or commodity? Deciphering Bloch as the empty casket of *Politically Red* tackles this question by turning the historical, revolutionary crypt of the past into a materialist ontology of hope.

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The Inheritance of Hope

Bloch reconfigured the problem of heritage and historical development in an oppositional, dialectical, and revolutionary way. His idea of hope and of the past as inhabited by the speculative forces of the future resounds in Cadava and Nadal-Melsió's concept of a red common-wealth. Bloch was inspired by the defeats from the past and thought that these defeats should be the basis for the revolutionary efforts of the present. In his late work *Experimentum Mundi*, Bloch adopts the important concept of "Zukunft in der Vergangenheit," a "future in the past" that needs to be retrieved and reimagined in the present. This is a speculative, utopian force that gives rise to a "schöpferisch offenen Kulturerbes" ("creatively open cultural heritage"; 103) that is able to turn the fragments of the past into a "auszufechtendes Zukunftspostulat" ("postulate of the future that needs to be fought out"; 103).[1] Indeed, the failed revolutions of the past, precisely because their ultimate aims were never realized, preserve the seeds of a utopian future that could speak to the demands of the present. Bloch's philosophy reimagines this heritage through the prism of a speculative materialism driven by the objective logics of historical development. In *The Principle of Hope*, Bloch goes through centuries of struggles, discoveries, and utopias to retrieve a sort of transhistorical invariant, the will to live with dignity as the motor of a continuous fight against oppression and exploitation. Bloch completely reimagined the heritage of culture, science, and politics as a reservoir of unfulfilled hopes and still pending demands on the present. The anticapitalist, revolutionary heritage uncovered in *Politically Red* would be driven by Bloch's concept of "Geschichtliche Möglichkeit, mit Freiheit plus Fahrplan" ("historical possibility, with freedom plus timetable"; *Experimentum* 139), as he titles a section of *Experimentum Mundi*.

Bloch vindicates, echoing Luxemburg, a freedom for those who can think and be otherwise, as he writes that "Freiheit ist darin immer die Möglichkeit des Anderskommens" ("freedom is always the possibility of being different"; *Experimentum* 139). Bloch's speculative philosophy of historical possibility hence develops Luxemburg's famous maxim, from a note to her 1918 manuscript on the Russian Revolution, that "Freiheit ist immer Freiheit der Andersdenkenden" ("freedom is always only freedom for those who think differently"). But this freedom is rooted in the "timetable" of history; it does not take place out of the blue. In other works, such as his study on Hegel, Bloch noted that the real task of a revolutionary heritage is the transmission of past generations' hopeful, expectant visions of a future without oppression. As he writes in the book on Hegel, human beings are not inherently slaves, serfs, feudalists, proletarians, or capitalists (*Subjekt-Objekt* 514). There is a surplus, and hope and discontent (*Unzufriedenheit*) are persisting revolutionary forces that go beyond any system of oppression or inequality and testify to the possibility of a being without alienation (515). Hope has a content: a future without dispossession, a reclamation of the *human* of human beings. Accordingly, hope is not just a spontaneous, misplaced, or subjective feeling. For Bloch, hope is the real keyword of the tradition of the oppressed, the revolutionary invariant that constitutes a militant heritage of anticipation. This has to do with the material rooting of hope in the objective historical process rather than in the psychology or the affects of the subject.

In this context, as Bloch writes in his famous inaugural address at the University of Tübingen in 1961, "Kann Hoffnung enttäuscht werden?" ("Can Hope Be Disappointed?"), the point is that "hope holds *eo ipso* the condition of defeat precariously within itself. . . . It stands too close to the indeterminacy of the historical process. . . . It stands too fully within the topos of objectively real possibility" (341). The ontological quality of the heritage of hope directly reflects the indeterminacy of history itself. Hope can be disappointed because it partakes of the forces that put history in motion. The deeply historical dimension of hope envisaged by Bloch is hence one of "*partial* conditionality: that which, being neither complete nor reliable, underlies existing reality, allowing it to become real" (341). In its status of real possibility, hope has a special quality, revealing the historical tendency "in which the

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so-called facts are not standing still, but are circulating and developing" (343). In his short essay on hope, Bloch refers to Luxemburg as a memory of a disappointed hope that can nonetheless still "provide an accurate gauge of how far things have gone under the present regime" (344). Hope is another name for how concrete, living history is encrypted in the archive of revolutionary texts.

Ultimately, Bloch's philosophy raises the question of whether the hopeful, speculative heritages that survive in the crypts of the revolutionary forms can coalesce to give rise to another, anticapitalist kind of tradition, grounded in the material forces of history. This resonates with Cadava and Nadal-Melsió's retrieval of "the entanglement between hopelessness and hope that we have seen under the names Marx, Luxemburg, and Benjamin" (245). For Bloch, hope should never be abstract but always material and concrete, immersed in the actual dynamics of history and responding to them. While hope without hopelessness is wishful thinking, concrete utopia is the speculative reminder that survives as unfulfilled revolutionary potential; it is the survival of the struggles of the past as a gauge of the political status of the present. The encryption of Bloch in *Politically Red* can open the problem of how the disappointed hopes of the past can be inherited. If inheritance is neither property nor "culture," how can the hopes of the past be meaningfully reformulated in the twenty-first century? Perhaps *hope* is really the encrypted word of our age, a word that the Marxist tradition needs to reclaim and redefine in these hopeless, decidedly nonutopian times.

Note

1. All translations of Bloch's works are my own unless otherwise noted.

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