Letter from the Editor

Peer Illner

What are they trying to do? They’re trying to build a better world. What are we trying to do? We’re trying to destroy the world.
—Frank B. Wilderson III

Désœuvrement! Variously translated as unworking or inoperativity is a notion that haunts contemporary political theory and practice. Unworking overturns the typical valuation of work and action as positive and constructive and opens an avenue to think radical passivity and inactivity as aesthetic and political practices that question the modernist mantra of purposeful production and ceaseless activity. At its most basic, unworking is the critique of work and of everything that we imagine as such. The work of community-building for instance, the work of art, work as wage labour, even psychoanalysis, imagined as ‘working through’. This issue of continent is dedicated to unworking in its various guises. Its urgency stems directly from the current political conjuncture, in which the winning slogan “Make America Great Again” testifies to the return of the Grand Design in the work of politics. However, just as much as the great work of politics has returned to the scene, so has the critique of politics as work. From the Ferguson riots and Anonymous’ attacks on global banks to Occupy’s “We have no demands”, a political ambition has emerged that spells out the end of traditional categories of representation, integration and participation. Disillusioned with classical activist campaigns for the extension of civil rights, democratic access and the freedom of speech, these actions in various ways embrace negation, negativity and withdrawal as political strategies, turning unworking into “the paradigm of the coming politics.”

But how does unworking come to us and what are its roots? In this editorial, I offer some historical vantage points that constitute a scattered genealogy of inoperativity to orient the reader in her journey through the issue. While I trace the trajectory of the concept through its various political conjunctures, a number of contributions to this issue highlight its parallel aesthetic lineage.

Summer 1939: Hitler and Stalin agree on a non-aggression pact, between Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia, which essentially allies the two superpowers for a short period of time in a non-belligerence agreement. Seeing this pact with fascism as an early failure of the Soviet Union,
Walter Benjamin, at the time residing in Paris, drafts his *Theses on the Concept of History*, in which he reimagines communism as distinctly separate from Soviet pursuits. Against Lenin’s quip that communism be Fordism plus Soviet power, Benjamin breaks with a politics of rationalisation, one that calculates, haggles and cuts deals. Indeed, Benjamin demotes the whole modernist view of politics as a project that – stemming from instrumental reason – can be realised through a future-oriented action or plan. Instead, Benjamin suggests interrupting the programme. If fascism (and state socialism) are based on the idea of realising history’s potential through unfettered progress, communism means to “brush history against the grain”[3] Indeed, for Benjamin, revolutionary politics must be directed against the current course of history. When orthodox, progressive history proves to be a high speed train, rushing towards disaster, politics must be like “activating the emergency break”. [4]

In 1940, Benjamin has to flee Paris from his approaching Aryan countrymen. He gives a stack of manuscripts to his trusted librarian Georges Bataille, leaves France and dies on the run from the Nazis on September 26th, 1940 in Portbou, Spain.

In Bataille, Benjamin’s manuscripts must have struck a chord. Similarly disillusioned with the strange new bedfellows of Soviet communism and German fascism, Bataille wrote, already in 1933:

“The most minimal hope for revolution has always been described as the withering away of the state: But today it is on the contrary the revolutionary forces themselves that are withering away. At the same time every vital power has today taken the form of a totalitarian state.”[5]

Here, Bataille addresses the same question asked by Benjamin in his 1927 essay the *Critique of Violence*: Can there be a revolution that doesn’t simply replace an existing (law-preserving) power with another (law-making) power? How to exit the vicious cycle of revolution and counter-revolution to arrive at a real change of the political situation?

Spring 1983: After the upheavals of the 1970s economic crisis, the world is in a firm neoliberal stranglehold. Margaret Thatcher has been in power since 1979 and Ronald Reagan since 1981. No end to the Cold War is in sight. Postmodern theories about the end of history abound. In this time of general political depression, Jean-Luc Nancy writes an essay on the meaning of community, in which he diagnoses the sources of our political malaise. A dual belief has structured our political landscape since the advent of modernity. Too long, Nancy argues, political thinking on the Left and the Right
has seen it as its task to either revive an original community that is said to have been lost or create an entirely new community, in which freedom would finally be attained. For Nancy, fascism, liberalism and communism all fall under the purview of this wide-reaching critique. While Nazism was based on resuscitating the long-lost mythical origins of a hypostasized Greco-German culture, liberalism and communism both pursue politics as a futuristic mission. Liberals seek to create a fully immanent society of bounded individuals, pursuing their ‘natural’, self-interest on a rational, communal marketplace. Communism on the other hand seeks to free labour from the fetters of capitalist value extraction and create a collective society of socialized and communal production. Common to all these visions is that they see community as something that politics has to produce through a collective effort or sacrifice:

"Generations of citizens and militants, of workers and servants of the States have imagined their death reabsorbed or sublated in a community, yet to come, that would attain immanence. But by now we have nothing more than the bitter consciousness of the increasing remoteness of such a community, be it the people, the nation, or the society of producers."[8]

Similarly to Théorie Communiste’s belief that it is only now, in the late 20th century, that we can take leave from exhausted political paradigms because we finally see that they don’t hold, Nancy sees in the exhaustion of the communitarian paradigm a chance to think the still unrealised possibility of a community, not centred on work or production. For him, community does not have to be produced. Rather, the communal demand consists in the brute fact of being co-dependent and exposed to other beings in our shared finitude. Rather than attained through work, for Nancy, this inoperative community is both a task and a struggle “that Marx grasped”[9] but socialist pragmatics ignored:

"We stand perhaps to learn from this that it can no longer be a matter of figuring or modeling a communitarian essence in order to present it to ourselves and to celebrate it, but that it is a matter rather of thinking community, that is, of thinking its insistent and possibly still unheard demand, beyond communitarian models or remodelings."[10]

In the same year, Nancy’s radical critique of work and production in political philosophy is taken up by Maurice Blanchot, who, in The Unavowable Community engages with the core themes of Nancy’s text to distil the communist exigency that remains after the exhaustion of state socialism. For Blanchot as for Nancy, this is a communism that breaks with work, production and the foundational myth of immanence. Its utopia is a deconstructed community of reciprocal exposure, detached from finality or intentionality.

Today: Besides the theories of Left Heideggerianisms and the practices of the Ultra-Left, unworking today resonates markedly with political thinking in the realms of Queer and Black Studies that in their own ways see the integrative programmes of multiculturalism, gay marriage and civil partnerships as falling short. Afropessimism, a radical tendency in Black Studies, refuses the integrationist claims of the Civil Rights Movement, which it bluntly sees as having failed. Rather than becoming progressively integrated into white capitalism through the extension of legal and property rights to black subjects, thinkers such as Frank Wilderson and Jared Sexton see a constitutive antiblackness persisting at the heart of social life. Expressed numerically in the skyrocketing black unemployment in the United States that renders blacks superfluous to the productive process, the rampant police killings of unarmed black men represent the interpersonal correlate of white supremacy that renders violence against black lives gratuitous. Rather than constructively refining multiculturalist programmes of integration that leave the white institutions of parliamentary democracy, the penal system and the police intact, Afropessimists unwork the very foundations of these projects, which they see as irredeemably steeped in the historical subjugation of blacks.

Also queer theory is motivated by unworking when it stabs at what Lee Edelman calls reproductive futurity. For Edelman, reproductive futurity is the entrenched, heteronormative belief in the continuation of social life, as we know it, where one generation bequeaths control of the social order trustingly unto the next. For Edelman, this reproductive fantasy subtends the optimism of modernist politics as such, which a la Nancy is always a politics for the future and imagined as a collective working towards the future. Just as Afropessimism casts the modernist-futurist fantasy
as constitutively anti-black, for Edelman and others, the futurist project is also homophobic, since it normalizes heterosexual reproduction as the precondition for the continuation of the human race. The function of the queer to disrupt the harmonious intergenerational fantasy emerges directly from this constitutive exclusion. Edelman takes on the homophobic ascription that queer sexuality is non-reproductive and flips this to signify the political agency of the queer to disrupt the current system. For Edelman, queer sexuality becomes the token that the heteronormative reproductive fantasy of the eternal continuation of the current social order has to remain forever incomplete.

With this brief survey of the variegated political/theoretical trends that all operate with a notion of unworking, rather than merely working differently, we have diagnosed important nodal points of contemporary political theory and practice. The contributions in this issue address different variants of unworking in their own idiosyncratic way, spanning politics, art and gender studies. In her conceptual history of unworking from Heidegger and Blanchot to Jean-Luc Nancy and Giorgio Agamben, Alison Hugill traces the common origin of the concept in both aesthetics and politics. Drawing comparisons with current political trends such as accelerationism and Xenofeminism, Hugill suggests that in the end, unworking remains unique in that it is non-foundational, non-teleological, non-programmatic and non-instrumental. The artistic origins of unworking are further addressed in the contribution by Gertrud Koch and Alexander García Düttmann, who inquire into the nature of the aesthetic canon. What does it mean to move within a canon today? Can one step outside and unwork the canon? Indeed, are we ever outside an established canon? In a philosophical dialogue that bridges Melville’s Bartleby and Sandra Bullock, Koch and García Düttmann get lost in the canon.

The relation of art to negation on the one hand and affirmation on the other is the topic of Marina Vishmidt and Anthony Iles. If art has become a privileged place for critical reflection through its autonomy since the modern era, how does the autonomy of art survive its contemporary social integration as a neoliberal asset, investment and creative strategy? Rather than to positive autonomy, Vishmidt and Iles turn to the negative archive of aesthetic theory to examine artistic discourses of self-abolition, as they relate to communist elaborations of self-abolition in the current era. Can self-abolition in the form of an art strike constitute a shared horizon for art production and politics today? The theme of unworking as self-abolition is also at the core of Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen’s commentary on the recent exchange between the Left Communist Julien Coupat (of Invisible Committee fame), the publisher Eric Hazan and the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy in the French daily Libération. The starting point for Coupat and Hazan is the final exhaustion of parliamentary politics, the dwindling voter turnouts and increasing indistinguishability of parties of the Left and Right. The response according to the duo has to be an unworking of politics they call destitution, in which existing political categories are rendered moot and faith in the present system is withdrawn. Nancy for his part is more cautious. He counters this process of destitution with the more classical categories of engagement and situation, dampening his interlocutors’ revolutionary fervour. In a masterful commentary, Bolt Rasmussen reviews the debate and asks: Can we today still abstain from making a final political choice? Where do we stand on the political spectrum?

Returning to unworking in the realm of art, Peer Illner asks if there can be a realist depiction of the mode of production today. Taking aim at contemporary artistic practices of mapping and cartography that revel in the revelatory pathos of unmasking the hidden links between politics and finance, Illner interrogates why artists today so often wish to be whistleblowers. The next contribution sees inoperativity in full force with a translated transcript of a correspondence with Mehdi Belhaj Kacem. Invited to contribute to continent, Belhaj Kacem said yes, but then did not submit anything. The reason: Désoeuvrement. The ensuing email exchange touches on unworking in relation to writing, autobiography, politics and technology and sees Belhaj Kacem, finally, submit an article. Or maybe not.

Illustrations throughout this issue are provided by Alex Unger. Unger is a young artist and philosopher. Addressing unworking’s subjective, psychoanalytic implications and dilemmas, his imagery explores a tense relationship between terms like the “self” and those “others.” The
“ego,” centered-self; and the “alter,” the other-intruder. Swarming with bodies, limbs, faces that crowd each other out, Unger interrogates whether or not we only find ourselves at the interstices of powerful relations, and in the gaps and hinges of truth-making procedures, or whether we can say we are something more then, different than, unaccounted for, subtracted from, or even more basic than all those things heaped upon us. Generic inoperativity.

It is this uncertainty of the bounded self that comes to the fore in the compiled materials on the work of Laurence Rickels. In a stunning identification with James Bond’s imago, Rickels becomes Bond, a man somehow both maximally and minimally effective, operative and inoperative at once, and certainly unworked.

REFERENCES


[2] In his correspondence with Gershom Sholem, Soma Morgenstern, reported that “News from the Hitler-Stalin Pact gave him an irremediable personal blow [...] Benjamin was so depressed that he came to me almost daily to seek consolation [...] After Benjamin had recovered from the shock, he invited me for dinner and read from ‘Twelve Theses Towards a Revision of Historical-Materialism. I recall the First thesis. It was about a chess machine, which defeated all chess experts.” (Morgenstern to Sholem, November 2, 1973, unpublished), cited in Rolf Tiedemann, “Historical materialism or political messianism? An interpretation of the theses ‘on the concept of history’”, in ed. Peter Osborne, Walter Benjamin. Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory, (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2005), 166, fn. 50.


