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POSTCRITICAL THEORY? DEMANDING THE POSSIBLE

Jeff Pruchnic

Walled States, Waning Sovereignty
by Wendy Brown. New
York: Zone, 2010. Pp. 168, 10
illustrations. \$25.95 cloth.

Cosmopolitics I by Isabelle
Stengers. Translated by Robert
Bononno. Posthumanities Series,
9. Minneapolis: University of
Minnesota Press, 2010. Pp. 310.
\$75.00 cloth; \$25.00 paper.

Fanaticism: On the Uses of an Idea
by Alberto Toscano. London:
Verso, 2010. Pp. 304. \$26.95 cloth.

Envisioning Real Utopias by Erik
Olin Wright. London: Verso,
2010. Pp. 288/416. \$95 cloth;
\$26.95 paper.

“Post” indicates a very particular condition of afterness in which what is past is not left behind, but, on the contrary, relentlessly conditions, even dominates, a present that nevertheless also breaks in some way with this past. In other words, we use the term “post” only for a present whose past continues to capture and structure it.

—Wendy Brown,
Walled States (21)

If learning to think is learning to resist a future that presents itself as obvious, plausible, and normal, we cannot do so either by evoking an abstract future, from which everything subject to our disapproval has been swept aside, or by referring to a distant cause that we could and should imagine to be free of any compromise.

—Isabelle Stengers,
Cosmopolitics I (10)

Popular reports of the demise of critical theory in the humanities and social sciences during the first decade of the new century were far from the first time the “death of theory” had been pronounced. However, they may have been the first in which the enterprise was presented as a victim of its own success. The first influential argument of this type may have been Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s depiction of postmodern and postcolonial theory as little more than “symptoms of passage” toward new

forms of social power that appropriate the generic goals and techniques of leftist thought. As they write in 2000's *Empire*, much like left-oriented critical theorists, international capitalism is also "bent on doing away with those modern forms of sovereignty and on setting difference to play across boundaries," the key difference being that the latter has been much more successful in the endeavor.¹

The more specific co-opting of analytical and rhetorical forms native to critical theory by right-wing ideologues was perhaps most poignantly outlined by Bruno Latour in his contribution to a 2004 issue of *Critical Inquiry* themed around the journal's colloquium on theory's future and, in particular, the rather discouraging coverage of the same by the *New York Times* (an article with the memorably blunt title "The Latest Theory Is That Theory Doesn't Matter"²). In addressing the titular question of his essay "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?" Latour concludes that it is not so much the operation of *critique* itself that has become moribund, but that the methodologies long associated with the practice—the analysis of truth claims in reference to the ideological dispositions of its claimants, the presumption that no institutions of any real social influence are innocent of the effects of social power—had been shown to be equally (more?) successful in the

hands of climate-change deniers, libertarian-influenced conspiracy theorists, and conservative culture warriors of almost all stripes as they had previously been for science and technology studies scholars such as Latour.³ Latour's focus on the amateur theorizing of republican image consultants was to become only one of the first in a long series of such ironic appropriations documented in the coming years; indeed, by the end of the decade, it was increasingly hard to feign surprise at reports that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari were required reading for members of the Israeli Defense Force or that Jean-Francois Lyotard's writings were becoming as popular with advertising and marketing students as they once were with English Lit graduates.⁴

As always, however, the most revealing description comes from the loyal opposition. In a recent interview, the conservative online media mogul Andrew Breitbart discusses the initial confusion he experienced when taking courses in American studies as a Tulane University undergrad—"I don't understand what this deconstructive semiotic bullshit is. Who the fuck is Michel Foucault?"—before he realized the *real* lesson of critical theory.⁵ Arguing for a fairly straight line running from the emigration of Frankfurt school intellectuals to the United States in the 1930s to the election of the "radical" Barack Obama to the US presidency over

a half-century later, Breitbart emphasizes the universal appeal of identifying one's political leanings as oppositional to dominant culture and, more generally, the power of skepticism as a populist messaging strategy. For Breitbart, the American Left have historically been more capable at using this strategy to their advantage, putting American conservatives at an extreme disadvantage. (Who knew that during the same time center-left voters were crowing about the need for a "Democratic Rove," at least one conservative was hoping for the appearance of something like a "Republican Adorno"?)

Breitbart is only one of the more vocal members of a larger group that seemed to have learned a similar lesson and been eager to close the lead that progressives had supposedly gained in the area of cultural critique; from the populism-baiting of the Tea Party, to the by-now-clichéd critiques of the "liberal media," to outright conspiracy theory, skepticism, particularly on the level of whatever is defined as the consensus of "the elites" or of "dominant culture," has become as much, if not more so, the domain of the mainstream conservatism than of intellectual progressivism. Combine this shift in the discursive turf of public politics with international capitalism's ability to thrive in a market of niche identities, and the academic Left seem to be the victims not so much of a backlash

against ideational propriety as they are of an outright theft of intellectual property.

And it is the visibility of this kind of appropriation that makes the most recent proclamations of the death of critical theory all the more hard to bear. If the problem is not that critical theory's reliance on categories of oppositionality, resistance, and skepticism is in need of bolstering, but rather that these categories have turned out to be so powerful that they work even in the service of highly retrograde causes, those of us interested in the progressive possibilities of what we have come to call critical theory over the last several decades are left in something of a quandary.

The popular response by the critically attuned humanities and social sciences to this dilemma was ably summarized by Fredric Jameson in 2002; emphasizing that although one of the major triumphs of critical theory was "to have discredited 'philosophy' in the traditional disciplinary sense," Jameson notes that in the early twentieth-first century a reversal had begun, an emergent "return of traditional philosophy all over the world, beginning with its hoariest subfields, such as ethics." Perhaps more striking today, a decade after Jameson's writing, is the prediction disguised as a question that follows this observation: "[C]an metaphysics be far behind, one wonders (there are New Age speculations about physics that suggest

it), if not theology itself (of which negative theology had promised the undermining)?”⁶

Jameson’s speculation here is one we have seen roughly fulfilled in the recent past of the critical-theory market. The return of ethics seen in the ascendancy of thinkers such as Emmanuel Levinas and Maurice Blanchot around the time of Jameson’s writing quickly gave way to the closest we might come to a return to theology within critical theory, the so-called postsecular turn in theory (one that perhaps found its most charismatic texts in the late writings of Jacques Derrida, but is also clearly present in the imbrication of theology and politics by writers as Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou, and Slavoj Žižek). If that movement seems to be running out of steam as of late—Agamben’s 2007 *Il Regno el la Gloria* (*The Kingdom and the Glory*), which in part suggests that politics is not so much secularized religion but religion “fulfilled” through its own disappearance, like a snake eating its tail, might be a fitting if not necessary bookend—this has only made it all the more clear that the middle term under review here, *metaphysics*, has really been the connecting thread behind recent critical-intellectual work all along. More precisely, we might say that after the “death” of theory, theorists have returned to what Adorno called, in one of the founding texts of critical theory, “that question which today is called

radical and which is really the least radical of all: the question of being (*Sein*) itself.”⁷

Indeed, if there remains a guiding principle to politically attuned philosophy and critical theory today, it is what Carsten Strathausen calls “neo-left ontology.” For Strathausen, although ontology has returned in a big way in the work of pivotal philosophers and theorists, it is one in which the traditional goal of determining categories of transhistorical essence has notably given way to imagining the “historically contingent construction of a different ‘nature’ from the one we presently inhabit” that may, in turn, map potentials for political change.⁸ Strathausen presents a compelling case for how this objective forms at least a family resemblance if not a coherent group identity between a diverse range of recent work by Ernesto Laclau, William Connolly, Jacques Rancière, the “late Derrida,” and Fredric Jameson, in addition to those of more obvious candidates such as Jean-Luc Nancy, Agamben, Negri, Badiou, and Žižek. However, it is really the latter two—Badiou and Žižek—who most exemplify the return to ontology as both critique of, as well as replacement for, the major intellectual trends of the “big theory” error of the humanities and social sciences (which is to say, *theory* as it was commonly understood since at least the early 1980s). Despite significant divergences on a number

of other points, Badiou and Žižek share an approach to bridging the ontological and the political that is perhaps best summarized by the title of Simon Critchley's Levinas- and Badiou-influenced work, *Infininitely Demanding*.⁹ On one side, the subject is "riven," "called," or even "constituted" by a particular event or course of action; on the other, its concrete involvement in the political, or at least the involvement we are aiming for, then emerges in a necessary opposition to the "natural" or apparent conditions of possibility in the contemporary social environment, a demand that exceeds what is offered by the dominant institutions of social power.

In this sense, as Adrian Johnston suggests in his excellent analysis of Badiou's and Žižek's theories of political transformation, it is useful to consider their work on this question in relation to the old saying often associated with May '68: "Be Reasonable: Demand the Impossible!" Although the increasing co-option of postmodern or post-structuralist strategies of critique and resistance by dominant institutions of social power would seem to make radical and revolutionary change ever less of a possibility, "Badiou and Žižek tirelessly remind their audiences that conceptions of realistic possibilities are themselves historically transitory constructions."¹⁰ Such a focus undergirds both their interests in unpacking various logics

of identity and rupture, as well as their shared emphasis on, if not outright fetishization of, the power of revolutionary moments whose historical rarity is inversely proportional to their refiguring of social potentialities.

Although this blend of the metaphysical and the political has for many had the highly salutary effect of explicitly (re)emphasizing how the work of critical theory or philosophy does or should intersect with actual politics, as many critics have pointed out, it also seems to ignore the incremental, quotidian, or pragmatic vectors of political action in favor of the revolutionary, the quirky, and the ideal. In other words, by presenting the relatively rare revolutionary event and the equally exceptional subjects committed to these events as their privileged examples of political change, Badiou and Žižek often seem to neglect the process through which people are motivated to participate in such actions, as well as the steps that must occur between the static present and the hoped-for future. In this sense, when radical transformation is not actively happening, Badiou and Žižek's ontological engagement with politics can also look much like an advocacy of spontaneous commitment (voluntarism), nonengagement (quietism), and the relentless critique of strategies and movements that fail to meet the rigid criteria of what *counts* as change (absolutism).

The books under review in this essay might be taken as representative of a countermovement to the above, an incipient and collective rethinking of critical theory for the present that acknowledges the co-option of many of the strategies associated with leftist theorizing, but attempts to rethink the generic objectives of critical theory itself with stricter attention to questions of human motivation (rather than ideation), and that places a higher priority on strategies for seizing on the constrained possibilities present within existing systems of social power than on critique as traditionally understood. In this sense, the theorizing they offer might be called *postcritical* in the way that one of the authors, Wendy Brown, glosses the term in her foregoing epigraph: their ethos and angle of approach are created through a necessary engagement with, rather than dismissal of, the dominant vectors of recent critical theory.

Concerns over the current state and future direction of critical theory as a politically meaningful enterprise is ostensibly a side issue to Brown's *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* but one inextricably bound up with the book's sharp, exceedingly engaging analysis of state power inside what she codes "the post-Westphalian world" of the present (21). Brown's analysis of the walled states of the book's title—namely, the increasing number of physical barriers being built

around and inside the borders of various nation-states—forms the centerpiece of her investigation into the paradoxes of contemporary social power. The upsurge of interest in such old-fashioned, rigid mechanisms of defense would seem, Brown suggests, rather painfully out of step not only with the ostensibly cosmopolitan and self-assured ethos of the countries building them, but also with the real capabilities and tendencies of the two forces they are most commonly built as bulwarks against: immigration and terrorism.

In addressing the latter, for instance, Brown finds it particularly puzzling that "in a time featuring capacities for destruction historically unparalleled in their combined potency, miniaturization, and mobility" we find "these deadly but incorporeal powers are perversely answered by the stark physicalism of walls" (20). The disconnection between perceived threat and proleptic defense is only part of a broader series of troubling contradictions marking contemporary political economy and international relations that Brown finds embodied in border walls. Most generally, the walls under review in the book appear to Brown as structuring not only the barriers between countries, but the antinomial gap between the idealization of a "world without borders" by humanitarians and neo-liberal politicians alike versus the simultaneous upholding of segregatory

procedures for entrance by countries that pay the greatest lip service to openness and ecumenicity (20). Brown finds a partial resolution in emphasizing what is *new* about current instantiations of the traditional technology of border walls: whereas walls historically were used by sovereign nations as defenses against other sovereign nations, nowadays they instead “target nonstate transitional actors” (21). The specific forces they are intended to protect against—“migration, smuggling, crime, terror”—are only in exceptional circumstances state sponsored or easily aligned with the specific interests of a nation-state (21). If walls used to symbolize the authority and stability of a sovereign nation, they now instead symbolize anxieties over the declining stature of nation-states as the primary political actors of the present, the role they have formally held in the West since the 1648 Peace of Westphalia. More and more today, Brown says, the walls have a “Wizard of Oz quality” about them, staging “an image of state intelligence and control in the face of its opposite” (25).

Brown references a variety of such walls, both old and new, and photographs or blueprints or ten different national barriers are presented in the book’s introduction; the mere listing of the variety of these structures at various points bears its own persuasive import about the ambiguous purposes

these barriers are taken to serve: “Iran is walling out Pakistan. Brunei is walling out immigrants and smugglers from Limbang, Malaysia. China is walling out North Korea to stem the tide of Korean refugees, but parallel to one section of this wall, North Korea is also walling out China” (19). Her most consistent examples, however, are the “separation barriers” in the West Bank and similar Israeli-built structures, as well as various real and proposed walls along the border between the United States and Mexico. These cases do an excellent job of demonstrating the central point Brown returns to in *Walled States*—that we are currently witnessing the migration of “key characteristics of sovereignty” away from the traditional location in the nation-state and toward “the unrelieved domination of capital and God-sanctioned political violence” (23). Indeed, one of the particularly compelling components of Brown’s argument is the creeping similarity between the US and Israeli barriers. Although arguments in the United States for the urgency of fortifying the US–Mexico border have long been discussed via reference to the economic impact of undocumented immigrant laborers, more recently debates over border fortifications to both the South and the North have increasingly referred to the possibilities of “Islamic” terrorists exploiting inadequately defended entryways.

Similarly, whereas the West Bank barrier and its predecessor structures have long had theocratic implications, more recently its role as a barrier to the flow of goods and services has gained much attention. The 2007 documentary film *9 Star Hotel* (by Ido Haar), for instance, follows a group of young Palestinian men who cross illegally into the Israeli city of Modi'in to work construction jobs. (Brown also mentions the striking example of a complaint by the member of an illegal Israeli settlement against the proposed path of the barrier's extension; she was worried that it might block the route taken by her Palestinian maids in reporting for work.)

Interrogations of the relationship between these three forces—theopolitics, capitalist economics, and sovereignty—center each chapter of Brown's relatively slim volume. After an outlining of the paradoxes symbolized in our contemporary "passion for wall-building" ("Waning Sovereignty, Walled Democracy"), the second chapter, "Sovereignty and Enclosure," traces the emergence and refinement of the concept of sovereignty in the West through the works of such figures as Hobbes, Jean Bodin, Locke, and Rousseau. Here, Brown presents a concise, compelling reading of nation-state sovereignty as the political force that marks "the temporal end and spatial limit of the sovereignty of nature or God"

(56) while also attempting to "detach political life from the demands or imperatives of the economic" (58). If Westphalian sovereignty was shaped by the subordination and regulation of the religious and the economic, then we should not be surprised to see its decline result in the redistribution of powers to both of these other domains. This history also helps explain a recent resurgence in attempts to position nation-state sovereignty in theological terms. As Brown writes, "[A]s it is weakened and rivaled by other forces, what remains of nation-state sovereignty becomes openly and aggressively rather than passively theological" (62). Or, as she puts it more bluntly elsewhere, "[S]overeignty needs God more as its other sources and powers thin and its territorial grip falters" (63).

The admixture of the religious and the political that emerges when sovereignty is threatened, Brown suggests, most often appeals to the "decisionist" or "exceptional" power of the sovereign entity *as* sovereign entity, a concept now popularly associated with the work of Carl Schmitt, and one very much opposed to the tradition of popular legislative power prominent in the works of Locke and Rousseau. (Brown does not have to expend much more effort than quoting the second President Bush, who often appears as something like a vaudevillian Carl Schmitt in *Walled States*, to emphasize the recent return of

“absolutist” power in American discussions of sovereignty in the recent past.) However, even a monarch seems outperformed by the market in these times; after all, there are few examples of “sovereignty without the sovereign” better than global capitalism, a force that often appears, Brown suggests, to approximate “a god’s power to make the world without deliberation or calculation” (65). The uneasy interaction between the waning nation-state and the rising theopolitics and global capital is detailed in the third chapter of *Walled States*, which takes up the ways in which walls alternately demonstrate the effects of state-generated discourses of fear and danger, as well as the popular desires and fantasies of its citizenry (“States and Subjects”). The concluding chapter (“Desiring Walls”), presents an even more sustained (and psychoanalytically inclined) focus on the latter, mapping the “psychic reassurances or palliatives” that walls offer modern subjects suffering the anxieties attendant to the decline of nation-state sovereignty. Here, Brown draws extensively on Freud’s study of religion in *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), leaving readers with a depiction of nation-state walls as an inversion of that book’s title, “not the future of an illusion, but the illusion of a future aligned with an idealized past” (133).

Several early responses to *Walled States* questioned whether

the book’s reading of sovereignty might have aged rather abruptly in light of the events now known as the Arab Spring, populist uprisings that started about a month after the text’s publication. These clashes seemed to bring back to the forefront the more procedural legacies of Westphalia (including policies of noninterference between nation-states), as well as the power of at least the *idea* of popular sovereignty, one consistently invoked by participants in the Arab Spring and one that might seem too easily dismissed by Brown as, in her own words, “if not a fiction, something of an abstraction with a tenuous bearing on political reality” (49). However, if the discourses and actions of the citizenry seemed to suggest a great viability of popular sovereignty as a motivating factor, one could equally point to the actions on behalf of sovereign figures themselves—warnings that theocratic or terroristic groups were behind such uprisings or would fill the void created by the absence of a strong ruler, invocations of anarchy or disappearance of the nation-state, frequent references on behalf of all parties to how such incidents might disrupt the “global economic recovery”—as confirming Brown’s larger analysis of the psychic economy surrounding questions of sovereignty and the impositions of global capitalism and theopolitics onto its territories. Perhaps the more interesting question on

this score is the more generic one: What relationship do we expect (or desire) between such phenomena and Brown's text as an instance of theorizing (and thus itself an abstraction) and critique (and thus an analysis into the often hidden conditions and consequences of the forces behind such phenomena)?

This question is itself one also very much under review within *Walled States*; in addition to reflecting on her own methodological approach multiple times in the text—" [W]hat does it mean to treat nation-state walling as a theoretical object when it does not emerge and exist in the world as such?" (27)—Brown also wonders whether much of recent critical theory in general, with its focus on the discursive, the contingent, and the hidden, can adequately address such obvious and physical manifestations of social power as border walls (80). Indeed, contemporary walled states seem to function, Brown writes, as a rebuke not only to "every liberal hope for a global village"—the low-hanging fruit for any leftist critique of this type—but also to "every post-structuralist theorization of power" (81). While Brown references Derrida, Foucault, and Deleuze amongst others as examples of participants in the latter endeavor, more recent critical work on the question of sovereignty, specifically by the likes of Agamben and Hardt and Negri, hardly fairs better in her estimation; indeed, in a piece published

prior to *Walled States* on similar subject matter, she suggests that much "left and liberal theoretical sovereignty talk" may be little more than "a search for a kind of Viagra for the political."¹¹ If critical theory has devoted the majority of its intellectual efforts to teaching us about the immaterial and elusive symbology of power as it functions in language, science, the psyche, etc., perhaps it has prepared us less well to deal with such obvious and material manifestations of social power as the literal walls expanding across the globe.

In this sense, it might be said that the psychoanalytic analysis that forms the final chapter of the text, though perhaps the best example of Brown's reliably powerful argumentation and phrasing, undercuts the book's more consistent strengths. Comparing the walls under review to Anna Freud's study of ego defense—in both cases the defenses thrown up against fear of external threats end up (re)defining the very thing they are meant to protect—is undoubtedly appropriate, but in some ways detracts from Brown's suggestion that the paradoxes of contemporary sovereignty reside in plain sight; in other words, the same point seems to have been already made without needing the help of a psychoanalytic detour such as this one. Although the walls discussed in Brown's text reside physically between nation-states, she also suggests they

mark an “in-between” of modes of power, “a global interregnum” that designates a “time after the era of state sovereignty, but before the articulation or instantiation of an alternate global order” (39). Though it is the great benefit of this text to encapsulate this transition moment within its analysis, we might also posit Brown’s approach here as itself marking a transitional moment in critique of its type. If paradox is the rule rather than exception in the contemporary politics of sovereignty, its exposure or revelation seems to not so much inhibit or negate its power but offer lessons regarding its “uses” in various contexts. Thus for instance, in interviews around the time of the publication of *Walled States*, Brown has more explicitly addressed the “huge space for the Left” opened by renewal of populist anger and ad hoc organizing, even if most recently these areas have (on the American scene at least) been dominated largely by conservative and reactionary groups.¹² In this sense, then, the contribution Brown makes via *Walled States* may be to mark off a transitional moment not only in the concept of sovereignty within the political imaginary but also within the movement of left-political theorizing and critical praxis.

On this score, and in regards to the larger question with which we began, it was highly enlightening to read *Walled States*, *Waning*

Sovereignty in conjunction with recent works by Alberto Toscano, Isabelle Stengers, and Erik Olin Wright. If Brown’s text can be read as a diagnostic of the transitional moment of global social power and a concomitant reconsideration of the role of critique and left-theorizing, these texts similarly combine these objectives while pushing toward more specific rethinkings of the role of intellectual abstraction in politics as a whole (Toscano), the formation of attachments between people and new constellations of thought and knowledge (Stengers), and the appropriate strategies for forwarding egalitarian political goals (Wright).

Alberto Toscano’s *Fanaticism* is a far-reaching study of the various ways that its title subject, one Toscano cleanly defines, following Hegel, as “enthusiasm for the abstract,” has driven intellectual history and populist politics (xi). Emphasizing the identification of fanaticism with a commitment to abstract principles, as opposed to our knee-jerk associations with religion or the irrational, allows Toscano, on the one hand, to emphasize the historical flexibility of the term, notably the role of ostensibly “anti-fanatical” or “neutral” discourses, such as secularism or the “free market,” to function as fanaticisms in their own right. On the other, it also allows Toscano to underscore the long history of fanaticism as a concept within political

philosophy and cultural theory, disciplines that have consistently attempted to identify the relationship between ideational abstraction and concrete action, as well as to sort out fanaticism from its more benevolent cousins: enthusiasm, partisanship, and commitment.

The former of these objectives is well served by Toscano's wide-ranging survey of the "uses of the idea" of fanaticism from the Enlightenment onward. And *Fanaticism's* topics and sites are indeed expansive; the first chapter ("Figures of Extremism") alone moves from a consideration of American abolitionist struggles, to revolts against British colonialism, to the emergence of the "politics of passion" as a sticking point in twentieth-century political thought (as seen in the works of Francis Fukuyama, Michael Walzer, Peter Sloterdijk, and Badiou, amongst others). Chapter 2 ("The Birth of Modern Politics Out of the Spirit of Millenarianism") takes up the legacy of the German Peasants' War of the early sixteenth century and considers how its historical condemnation influenced twentieth-century radical thought (and, in turn, largely set the stage for critiques of fanaticism within revolutionary political strategy generally). The third chapter ("Raving with Reason: Fanaticism and the Enlightenment") presents a striking reading of the centrality of debates over fanaticism, "enthusiasm," and

related concepts within the thinking of key Enlightenment figures. Chapter 4 ("The Revolutions of the East: Islam, Hegel, Psychoanalysis") expertly rereads Hegel's writing on Islam as part of a broader consideration of the religion's use as the reliable default image of fanaticism for the West. Finally, chapter 5 ("The Cold War and the Messiah: On Political Religion") engages the postsecular turn in recent critical theory and the general resurgence of popular interest in the relationship between politics and religion in recent times.

As mentioned, part of the value of such a broad, diverse inquiry into discourses "of" and about fanaticism is its emphasis of the ambiguity of the term; readers may be surprised to discover, for instance, the consistent depiction of antislavery activists prior to the Civil War as fanatics, a charge memorialized, amongst other places, in the title of William Drayton's 1836 *The South Vindicated from the Treason and Fanaticism of the Northern Abolitionists*. Similarly, though Enlightenment philosophes may reside in the popular imagination as helping to usher in the age of reason, Toscano is quick to remind us of Edmund Burke's accusation that their own "horrible fanaticism"—their application of atheistic and abstract philosophizing to social questions—was "a thousand times more dangerous than that inspired by religion" (quoted on xvii).

However, it is important to note that Toscano's main objective in this survey is not simply to suggest that the concept has been bankrupted by ambiguous and contradictory use over several centuries (yesterday's fanatic is today's arbiter of reason), nor to forward some weak version of cosmopolitanism to counter our predispositions to dismissing others under the name of fanaticism. Rather, Toscano argues that we need not so much resist claims of fanaticism as to understand the crucial role, perhaps the necessary one, of it as a force in political change and to in turn become better at finding ways direct its energies for strategic purposes. Thus, for instance, Toscano does not deny that American abolitionists were fanatics; rather, he emphasizes how their fanaticism emerged from an understanding of the weakness of deliberative politics on this issue and "was thus both a matter of passionate conviction and mediated strategy, combining the attractions of symbolism and affect with the instruments of power and calculation" (10).

Toscano's intervention here is perhaps best understood via his careful tracing of the legacies of Enlightenment thought on fanaticism. As Toscano writes, one can roughly discern two philosophical perspectives on the subject that emerged from debates over enthusiasm and fanaticism in key Enlightenment thinkers: one that positions it "as

the outside of reason, the persistent threat of pathological partisanship or clerical irrationality" and the other that takes "some unconditional and unyielding abstract passion as intrinsic to a universalizing rationality and emancipatory politics" (xvii). It is not hard to guess which of these two positions, which Toscano aligns roughly with the respective endowments of Voltaire's *Lumières* and the *Aufklärung* of Kant, has received the most support in contemporary populist political thought. Indeed, Toscano finds many contemporary representatives of the "bad" Enlightenment marking various corners of current political debate, notably those who participate in the West's long reliance on Islam as our default image of fanaticism and thus forward "the widespread belief that we are experiencing the repetition or continuation of that struggle between reason and unreason, freedom and subjection, knowledge and ignorance which was first played out in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe" (101).

Although Toscano finds similarly problematic invocations of fanaticism-as-dismissal in some contemporary critical theory (Sloterdijk's recent "psychopolitical" writings and Žižek's rather depressing take on Islam come under fire), he identifies the turn to religious ideas of redemption in the works of Derrida and Badiou as more salutary attempts "to evade the critiques of

universalism as fanaticism while not giving up an iota of the radicality demanded by a transformative, oppositional and emancipatory political thought” (245). Derrida’s effort in this regard in *Specters of Marx* (1993) is found lacking, however, largely due to his allergy toward the ontological and historical materialist dimensions of his own subject matter. Although, for Toscano, Badiou fares much better in this regard, his understanding of political commitment and its role in revolutionary changes seems to elide considerations of strategy and context. Or, as Toscano phrases it, “[A] certain passivity functions here as an antidote to the censures that inevitably greet a Promethean subjectivity that seeks to change the world on the basis of a truth it claims to possess” (246).

Thus, although he is broadly sympathetic to Badiou’s writings on ontology and commitment, Toscano’s handling of these topics in *Fanaticism* is, at least for this reader, much more patient and pragmatic. This may be because Toscano’s approach is in many ways a reversal of that taken by Badiou in regards to the historical dimensions of political change. As Toscano explains early in the text, the relationship between fanaticism and history is inherently paradoxical. On the one hand, the disruptive force of fanaticism is out of necessity tied to its “explicit refusal of history as a domain of gradualism and mediation” in

favor of an uncompromising devotion to abstract principles (xxi). On the other, however, it cannot have a disruptive effect without also relying on a conception of history as “a naturalized dimension of predictable combinations” to which it can be opposed. Badiou’s approach to this dilemma largely works toward abstracting the elements of radical change from its occurrences in recorded history: searching for a transhistorical formulation that captures the emergence of world-changing events within history. Toscano might be taken as working in the opposite direction, toward a historicizing of abstraction and placing a greater emphasis on precisely the pull or allure of abstraction and its role in the politics of various historical contexts. Importantly, this difference in approach saves Toscano from having to determine a method for sorting out “good” and “bad” instances of radical commitment that might seem to follow the same formulist pattern, and to instead focus on the possible “uses” of not only the “idea of fanaticism” but how more generalized force fields of enthusiasm, affective attachment, and commitment might be used in shaping the politics of the present.

In Toscano’s final analysis, then, our anxieties about fanaticism are themselves a symptom of a larger problem we have with accepting radical commitment to the abstract as a component of political

thought and as a motivator of political praxis. As he writes near the book's closing, "[A]ttempts to assert some abstractions (such as political equality) against others (such as monetary equivalence), require that we find ways of connecting a politics founded on the refusal of compromise with the openings or closures provided by contemporary capitalism" (251). Only by finding ways to work on and through the forces of fanaticism, to "tune" our own and others' devotions to various abstractions, can we hope to respond effectively to times of crisis wherein such commitments proliferate.

Determining precisely how such attachments occur and the underpinnings of abstraction itself within human cognition and sense-making is a major focus of Isabelle Stengers's *Cosmopolitics I*, the English translation of the first three books of a seven-volume series that has already been published in French. In this text, Stengers largely picks up from where her previous work, *The Invention of Modern Science*, left off.¹³ In the final chapter of that text, Stengers argued for a "return to the sophists" via a rereading of the sophist Protagoras's famous statement declaring that "man is the measure of all things"; contra its popular interpretation as advocating a certain necessary relativism in regards to our understanding of the world, Stengers suggested we might do better in considering the

immense responsibility projected by that position and our need to recognize the role of belief in scientific investigation and discovery. *Cosmopolitics I* also begins with an invocation of what Stengers calls "nonrelativist sophists," but she shifts ground somewhat in clarifying more specifically the distinction between what she calls "the politics constitutive of the sciences" as opposed to "a general politics of power." The former designates the identification of scientific invention via its separation from myth and opinion, what Stengers refers to as the "event constituted by the creation of a measurement." Such an event, Stengers reminds us, is different than its reduction as "an illustration of the right and general obligation to subject all things to measurement" (11). Framed more generally, Stengers's overarching concern is not so much to question the validity of any specific aspect of modern science as it is to ask after how such validation within science, which here might be only our most obvious category of thought systems that claim universality, often comes at the expense of discrediting claims and practices outside of itself.

Stengers has two primary approaches to this problem throughout *Cosmopolitics I*: a rethinking of the nature of scientific production (so that it might obtain an identity that is not reliant on the disqualification of the "nonscientific") and a relatively more novel attempt to

thematize the role of “symbiosis” in not only scientific practice but social life (specifically the accidental or strategic ways in which the interests of different actants intersect or complement each other). If the first of these maintains Stengers’s position as one of our most brilliant practitioners of science studies scholarship, the second is what gives an unusually broad reach to the politics of the book’s title and Stengers’s more general cosmopolitical, as opposed to cosmopolitan, approach. If cosmopolitanism presumes the possibility of a shared common world, Stengers proposes instead political strategies based on the manipulation or creation of opportunities for symbiosis between individuals and collectivities that do not rely on ideational consensus or the synthesis of disparate goals or beliefs.

These two objectives—a critique of the conceptual imperialism of modern science and a thematization of the politics of social symbiosis—might not seem to naturally complement each other, but one of the great accomplishments of Stengers’s work in *Cosmopolitics I* is to demonstrate how the same process of reconceiving science as an “ecology of practices” rather than an exclusively epistemological or metaphysical domain can also be leveraged to rethink the formalisms that limit our political imaginations. As with Toscano, Stengers’s approach might

be also best understood in contrast to another thinker who has many of the same objectives. Much like Bruno Latour, Stengers tends to emphasize the creative power of scientific discoveries—the ways in which the naming of a substance or recognition of the relationship between different properties have their own material consequences and in a sense concretely change our contemporary reality. Latour’s emphasis, however, has most often been on the ostensible epistemological novelty of this viewpoint. For instance, Latour has emphasized the “backward causation” of scientific discoveries, the ways in which, to use one of his most popular examples, although airborne germs can’t be said to have an identity prior to Pasteur’s work in 1864 made them “known” to humans, it is possible to say that, after 1864, “airborne germs were there all along.”¹⁴ Stengers, too, follows the novel logic of scientific “discoveries,” as well as the ways in which some more pivotal instance of the same give birth to entirely new fields that in turn not only “add” to reality, but shape the ways in which we are intended to order or understand reality “itself.” Thus, for instance, Stengers turns more than once to the discovery of the neutrino as a pivotal moment in the formation of a “revolutionary physics” in which contradictory observable phenomena can be justifiably discounted.

Stengers's more urgent concern, however, is the way in which such changes in what "counts" and what can be contested in science tend to become delocalized and imported into other domains, impacting what counts in society as a whole or crowding out other disciplines and less formal forms of cognition and abstraction. Stengers's stand against the becoming-generic of science, however, is no call for a prophylactic skepticism or general advocacy of relativism. In regards to the former, she continually identifies the need to "escape from a generalized polemic that puts every practice in a position of disqualifying and/or in danger of being disqualified" as the unique problem that guides her critique of modern science (58). The possibility of relativism or pleas for simple tolerance as viable alternatives are also concisely dismissed in a provocative aside in *Cosmopolitics I* in which Stengers wryly identifies capitalism as "the only truly tolerant and relativist undertaking that I know of": "It alone is capable of radically aligning disparate practices and value only to turn against those whose destruction would be of interest to it; for it is radically indifferent to whatever binds them and is itself bound by nothing" (74). (Anyone who might mistakenly think this association is meant to speak well of relativism need do no more than read the title of Stengers's more recent collaboration with Phillipe

Pignarre, *Capitalist Sorcery: Breaking the Spell*.¹⁵)

Rather, Stengers suggests that recognizing the material and processual nature of modern science might also lead us toward political strategies that require neither nihilism nor "the recognition of a more powerful interest before which divergent particular interests would have to bow down" (34). This, then, is perhaps the most succinct connection between Stengers's depiction of science as an "ecology of practices" and her forwarding of dynamic ecology as a political model. As Stengers writes, despite our tendencies to personalize and formalize ecology, it does not "understand consensus but, at most, symbiosis, in which every protagonist is interested in the success of the other for its own reasons" (35). Such a perspective, not despite but because of its depersonalization, may actually be a better model for crafting social change because it does not require us to "enlighten" oppositional groups toward our epistemological or ethical correctness, but instead gives us the burden of creating novel and strategic alliances that capitalize on the overlap of respective desires.

Despite their large differences in their ostensible subject matter, the same general strategy, and the concept of symbiosis as a model, is very much the driving force of Erik Olen Wright's *Envisioning Real Utopias*, a work that, like all of

the works reviewed in this essay, is profitably considered as an attempt to rethink the possibilities of critical theory given the challenges of the present. Wright, however, is by far the most systematic in his approach to this endeavor, and a great strength of his work in this text is to simultaneously place great faith in the power of “emancipatory social science” to make positive change in the world while at the same time insisting on pragmatic, some might even say modest, goals for it in the near future.

The general framework of *Envisioning Real Utopias* follows what Wright stipulates to be the three essential tasks of emancipatory social science of any era: “elaborating a systematic diagnosis and critique of the world as it exists; envisioning viable alternatives; and understanding the obstacles, possibilities, and dilemmas of transformation” (10). Wright gently suggests at many moments in the text that the first of these activities—critique itself—has traditionally received the highest priority and claimed the lion’s share of ink from critical theorists over the last half-century. Thus, while acknowledging the necessity of the diagnostic vector of “emancipatory” scholarship, as well as providing a lucid, concise example of the same in a chapter with the almost-charming title “What’s So Bad about Capitalism?” Wright’s fundamental focus is on the second of these three tasks:

the creation of alternative models of social and economic life. These are the “real utopias” of the book’s titles, case studies of “actually existing” socialist forms of cooperation, such as participatory budgeting practices in Porto Alegre and the cooperative governance structure of the Mondragón Corporation.

Wright’s turn to “real utopias” here is meant as a way to preserve many of the objectives of Marxist social theory while jettisoning any remaining teleological visions of the failure of capitalism and its replacement by collective ownership of the means of production. Instead, Wright draws our attention to the hybrid forms of socialism and capitalism that already exist within contemporary economies; subsequently he suggests that emancipatory scholars should switch their emphasis to designing what Wright calls a “socialist compass,” a metric for determining, first, what potential changes in the political economy will take us closer to our emancipatory goals and, second, which strategies are viable within the specific contexts of different countries and existing economic systems.

Wright’s careful attention to context leads him to suggest, for instance, that forwarding of a guaranteed basic income might ironically “be more sustainable in a society with a strong consumerist culture, since people in such a society are likely to have strong preferences

for discretionary income” (221). *Envisioning Real Utopias* is full of counterintuitive, but ultimately persuasive arguments such as these, most of which preserve an undoubted optimism about potential solutions to economic injustices but focus on incremental, short-term goals as starting points. At the same time, however, this tempered approach is likely to disappoint readers who, understandably, might have less patience about the pace of the proposed changes under review, as well as Wright’s more specific suggestion that some socialist goals are decidedly “off the table” given the political orientations of some countries and communities (147), or his insistence that, “in order to gain the virtues latent within a capitalist organization of economic structures,” some version of capitalism may be a necessary part of any sustainable economic system (162).

Similarly, many of Wright’s key examples—Mondragón, Porto Alegre—will already be familiar to readers of left-oriented sociology, and others might be found wanting. In the latter category, it is particularly hard to accept Wright’s contention that the open-author online encyclopedia *Wikipedia* demonstrates “a profoundly anti-capitalist way of producing and disseminating knowledge” and is based on the egalitarian principle “to each according to need, from each according to ability” (3). It is not so much that Wright is incorrect here—it

is certainly true that *Wikipedia* has emerged as a striking example of the productive power of unremunerated collective labor—but it seems a bit much to hold it up as “profoundly anti-capitalist,” particularly, as Wright reminds us many other times in *Envisioning Real Utopias*, as capitalism is too diverse and protean a system to be identified (and one might then also suggest, be opposed) in its “pure” form.

In the final analysis, however, what makes Wright’s book so provocative is not so much the examples he forwards as “viable alternatives,” as his unwavering insistence on viability itself as a criterion for emancipatory thought. Wright’s strongest statement on this score is in the final section of *Envisioning Real Utopias*, covering the third and final task of “transformation” that he assigns to emancipatory social science. In four brief but compelling chapters, Wright details the role of theories of structural change in political thought and three generic models of the same. Although Wright gives a fair hearing to the strengths of the first two, more traditional, forms—coded as the “ruptural” and the “interstitial”—both are eventually dismissed for, respectively, presuming they can “smash the state” as the locus of social power or for ignoring its importance altogether. Instead, Wright proposes “symbiotic transformation” as a guide for emancipatory programs, strategies that “seek to create the conditions

for *positive collaboration*" between groups with opposing interests (306).

As one might expect given Wright's large amount of previous research on class and the general (post-)Marxist bent of *Utopias*, two key "opposing interests" here are those of capitalists and those of the working class. Specifically, Wright proposes a particular kind of "class compromise" in which "the *associational power* of the working class and the *material interests* of capitalists" can be combined in actions that benefit both in the short term and lead to greater social equality in the long term (338–39). Although not entirely restricted to strategic overlaps of this type, Wright's general notion of symbiotic strategies relies on designing solutions to concrete social problems that generally increase the power of the working class in some way and thus take us *in the direction of* more egalitarian social arrangements even as they serve the immediate needs of an often unjust capitalist society. Coming at the end of the book, Wright's proposal includes a brief rereading of economic history to emphasize the ways in which such symbiosis has served progressive aims in the past and also gives us a lens for rereading the more contemporary examples of "real utopias" covered earlier in the book.

Wright's frequent use of the word "compromise" (class-based or otherwise) gives easy ammunition

to those who would dismiss his vision of emancipatory action as already "compromised," his approval of "hybrid" economics, baby-step socialism, and class symbiosis as corrupt from the start. However, it is precisely Wright's out-of-step relation to more militant egalitarian theories of the past, and the "revolutionary fetish" of current progressive thought as seen in the works of writers like Badiou and Žižek, that might make his work one of the more radical entries into contemporary critical theorizing. As already suggested in this review, Wright's work in this regard might be taken as only the most explicit statement of an undercurrent at work in all of the texts reviewed here, with his real utopias and symbiotic strategies only a more systematic articulation of the thinking behind Brown's diagnosis of the transitional state of contemporary social power, Toscano's recuperation of abstraction and fanaticism as necessary rather than abject components of contemporary politics, and Stengers's own suggestion of the *symbiotic* as a postcritical rejoinder to the impotence of relativism and the ubiquity of oppositional claims and interests. All find their power in a certain beleaguered acceptance that the traditional tools of leftist critical theory have been co-opted by the right, but also in a rededication to finding immanent modes of engaging the problems of contemporary politics despite the potential compromises it might

entail. Or, as Stengers phrases it, they are all joined in a “gamble that the present still provides substance for resistance, that it is populated by practices that remain vital even if none of them has escaped the generalized parasitism that implicated them all” (10).

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NOTES

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