

On Leaving Societies Mercedes Bunz (King's College London)

Cheerful Destructive Character: It's wonderful! Look at the mess you've made. You've destroyed the dialectic that has provided your capitalistic societies with orientation for quite a long time. Even the place of critique is up in the air – your Terra Critica friends describe it as 'the frictional mess of today's social' asking 'whose society does critique engage with today?'. The order-muppet¹ in you must hate this, girl.

Girl: And the chaos-muppet in you must love this all the more! However, I am not sure if our species is the one responsible for this mess—and I say this as a Western female haunted by the willingness to always blame myself first. I know that some like to blame post-structuralism or the left for pushing the agenda of 'relativism'.

CDC: At least someone still believes in the world-changing power of language?

G: Very funny. It seems more as if we have been sliding along our old familiar discourse onto a new monster without realising – as if we had walked on a Möbius strip. These seem to be 'changes of a deeper kind' (Hall, 248). Still, we cannot fully abdicate our responsibility. Some awful right-wing people pushed several Overton Windows very effectively deep into our Western societies. Ideas once wacky—such as a No-Deal-Brexit—have become part of the mainstream. This had been tried before, and in vain. This time, the windows stuck. New times!

CDC: It is exciting - the gravity of your political discourse seems finally to have shifted. You have become 'more segmented and 'pluralised'' (Hall, 251). The concept of 'majorities' has stopped being the core of your politics ... and you are not happy about that? It is not that your academic middle-class throne, on which you are comfortably sitting, is shaking, or is it?

G: You are probably right, although there are worse things happening than me not being able to buy a hipster-beard kneaded sourdough bread. The ground on which we stand is shaking, but not in a good way. Bhabha's characterisation is spot on, only that everything is enacted upside down:

'The time of liberation is (...) a time of cultural uncertainty, and, most crucially, of signifiatory or representational undecidability.' (Bhabha 19)

That is the case, but in our 'new times' the uncertainty is not liberating. Instead, it is being turned first and foremost against the oppressed.

¹ According to Muppet theory, every living being can be classified according to an oversimplifying metric: as an order or as a chaos muppet.
http://www.slate.com/articles/life/low_concept/2012/06/what_kind_of_muppet_are_you_chaos_or_order_.html?via=gdpr-consent

CDC: The right is clearly better in pulling the strings of your 'new times'. They simply fall back on their old nonsense: their belief in dominance and the survival of the fittest, whereby they place themselves at the top. Maybe there can be new times without new subjects?

G: This is serious! There is a war going on, whose operation had been described by Foucault:
'The war that is going on beneath order and peace, the war that undermines our society and divides it in a binary mode' (Foucault 59-60).

This war is effective: there are dead bodies everywhere we look. Bodies that hung themselves in UK's war against the poor as we withdrew support through fit-to-work tests or new welfare systems such as 'universal credit'. Bodies that drowned in the war against migrants in Italy and many other countries in Europe. Bodies that have been detained and tortured in the war against Muslims or Mexicans in the US, which also continues to be a society in which black lives do not matter much – more dead bodies. This war cleverly imitates the symptoms of a revolution using uncertainty to push our oppressed deeper in despair.

CDC: Oh, you are angry. Nice! So how radical are you willing to become? Do you now agree that Foucault (61-62) has been right, and that the Western society, an always-already binary construction, should not be defended? Will you follow Fred Moten (256) in considering that 'the political is simply the structuring of societies in dominance'? Are you ready to walk away from politics? If you cannot tear it down, maybe you should just leave.

G: I am considering that. The framework has certainly shifted. In old times, there was an ethical truth arising from the struggle for a minority. Our truth was not to be in the right, but to correct a wrong. Today, the struggle for a minority is not the struggle against a majority anymore. In a no-majority society with many divergent voices we cannot make the same argument. Still, there are wrongs everywhere. So, what are our new relations to the parts that do not form a whole anymore? Logically, we seem to be left with two possibilities. As a whole needs a truth, the most popular alternative is to turn from a moral to an emotional truth. Having been left by politics and its facts, we search for a truth effect somewhere else.

CDC: Do you need a truth? Interestingly, when your friend Derrida claimed 'we must have [il faut] truth' (Positions, 105), he did not stop there. He turned one more corner by asking: 'How can we do without it?' So, your other way would be that you leave, leave the whole and its rotten truth. C-words seem to be a thing of the past anyhow: collective, commune, community. Well, they were never my thing. Even less the bourgeois version, such as civil society and civilisation. Or a social body made up of social fabric – all those concepts are deeply linked to that of a nation. Moten is right, you do need to leave!

Girl: Maybe we have already been left instead? The national interests of today are more or less imitations. Can there be national interests without a majority? From Brexit to Trump's tariffs on China, Western leaders make 'their own people' suffer economically just because it is in the leadership's interest. This is what happens as this world spirals further in the direction described by Stuart Hall (250):

'... greater social fragmentation and pluralism, the weakening of older collective solidarities and block identities and the emergence of new identities, as well as the maximisation of individual choices through personal consumption...'

CDC: Consumption. Finally – bring on the things! You know I have a profound attraction to them. Have things not changed your societies more profoundly than politics? When reading Annie Ernaux, it is the things, 'the arrival of new things' (86), that seem to most deeply transform her social fabric: 'the vacuum-cleaner and the electric hair dryer, the raw and the flambé, steak tartare and au poivre, spices and ketchup, fish fingers and instant mash, frozen peas, hearts of palm, aftershave', 'bubble bath' and 'dog food'.

G: You mean, who needs a whole when there are things organising us?

CDC: Come on! Shopping platforms shape your contemporary Western subjectivities more than any state. I wish marketing would be taken more seriously – the 'theatrical element of commerce' (Benjamin, 43). Walter knew that, he described the department store as an early living space of the mass-collective – I like that point. In your century, commerce has taken the place of politics, who had inherited it from religion as the net on which we stand – or fall through. Your Foucauldian war beneath order and piece is a war of commerce, clearly. Brexit, China's tariffs and so on ...

G: The net on which we stand ... sooner or later someone had to describe the contemporary social fabric as a network; or is it the social body? I deeply mistrust that figure as a productive concept. Don't get me wrong, I do think technology plays a huge part in forming human entities, and you are right in pointing us to marketing platforms. But 'the network' is the wrong image to describe the contemporary form of the social.

CDC: How can you be so certain? Being an individual in a network has a destructive, collective potential – there is force in that constellation. Take for example Elin Ersson, the individual on board a plane in Sweden who has prevented the deportation of an Afghan asylum seeker from Sweden by refusing to sit down live streaming her actions [for 14.06 minutes on facebook](#) until the man was removed from that flight. I very much enjoyed that disruption.

G: That was a good moment. But overall, I am sceptical. If we dissolve the collective force in the individual, we are losing something.

CDC: You mean: you cannot save the climate by going vegan, it is corporate polluters who must be held accountable, as [my friends on reddit put it?](#) Individual actions are a propaganda to distract from much needed systemic change?

G: In neoliberal times, the collective and its contemporary form and force has become an under-researched topic. Our fault. We focussed too much on inclusion and exclusion to a group. In our new times, individuals do not want to be part of a group anymore.

CDC: I agree. Neoliberal times keep your species busy with being self-identical to their multiple selves all the time. Being part of a group undermines that.

G: Here we are talking about that sticky subject 'identity' again! We should really stop organising the collective force around identities. It seems we learned nothing from the problems of Marxism, which capitalism disarmed by withdrawing the worker as a subject. Why don't we seriously think connections through things and issues instead? Next time we meet, let's look into Jacques Lezra's 'On the Nature of Marx's Things' and read Noortje Marres² take on material participation and issues – maybe we can use those disparate collectives? But I've got to go now. Good talking to you.

CDC: Bye! But be prepared that I will persuade you to leave. It's exciting!

G: I know: we need a kind of strike that 'not so much causes as consummates' (Benjamin SW1, 246) – I can read. But this time I am ahead of you – I think we have already (been) left. Got to go!

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² Marres, N. (2012). *Material participation: technology, the environment and everyday publics*. Palgrave.