

## Pandemic suspension

Item Type	Journal article
Authors	Penzin, Alexey
Citation	Penzin, A. (2020) Pandemic suspension, Radical Philosophy, 2.08 (Autumn 2020), pp. 10-17.
Publisher	Radical Philosophy Group
Journal	Radical Philosophy
Download date	2026-05-18 21:30:01
License	<a href="https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/">https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/</a>
Link to Item	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/2436/623762">http://hdl.handle.net/2436/623762</a>

# Pandemic suspension

Alexei Penzin

The Lisbon earthquake of November 1755 was the most devastating natural disaster of the eighteenth century, and probably the first disaster on such a scale in modernity. It was an event that profoundly disturbed many Enlightenment philosophers.<sup>1</sup> Kant wrote three scientific studies that attempted to explain it from the standpoint of natural history, and some commentators have hypothesised that its reverberations can be detected in his famous elaboration of the aesthetic category of sublime.<sup>2</sup> Besides writing a poem about the earthquake, Voltaire employed it in his famous *Candide* as an example of a horrific and meaningless natural disaster that disproved Leibniz's optimistic theodicy of 'pre-established harmony', for the obvious reason that it would be impossible to incorporate into even the most sophisticated plot of divine providence.<sup>3</sup> Rousseau wrote a letter to Voltaire objecting to the latter's pessimism, and arguing, from the perspective of his general critique of civilisation, that the huge number of casualties in Lisbon was due to the density of populations in such big cities.<sup>4</sup>

These philosophical and theological controversies had immediate political consequences. The Portuguese Prime Minister sided with the naturalistic explanation of the event, so his policies included rebuilding Lisbon and the implementation of near 'war communism' measures, such as commandeering grain stocks and distributing them among the population to prevent a mass famine. Religious circles, predictably more concerned with the salvation of souls, opposed these policies, claiming the best measures were incessant prayers and fasting, and prophesying a second earthquake that would reveal, finally, God's convoluted providence and punish the sinners who doubted his will.<sup>5</sup>

Radical thinkers of the twentieth century retained a philosophical memory of the earthquake. Adorno briefly mentions the earthquake in a section on Auschwitz in

*Negative Dialectics* (1966), presenting it as a 'visible disaster of the first nature' that 'sufficed to cure Voltaire of the theodicy of Leibniz'.<sup>6</sup> Although Adorno purports to echo Voltaire, his argument that the disaster was 'insignificant in comparison with the second, social one [Auschwitz], which defies human imagination as it distils a real hell from human evil', rather intensifies and modernises Rousseau's argument that 'the sufferings nature imposes on us are less cruel than those we add on ourselves'.<sup>7</sup>

These examples demonstrate how the philosophers of the Enlightenment applied their 'signature' ideas and concepts to the Lisbon earthquake. They also indicate how philosophers 'capitalise' on events with this order of notoriety in their drive to symbolic 'primitive accumulation'. The same drive can be discerned amongst the philosophers who have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic – including Agamben, Nancy, Žižek, et al. However, this is more a case of 'first as tragedy, then as farce', to use Marx's famous dictum from the *Eighteenth Brumaire*. Due to the quick deflation of intellectual and critical commentary in the 24/7 flows of texts, images and data, it is difficult to recognise what specific philosophical assumptions have been shaken by the pandemic, and how successful the philosophers have been in their attempts to 'capitalise' (or perhaps, waste) their concepts, or to exert any influence on current politics. Is there a new pessimism about the viral dangers of globalisation, which now appears more than ever as an extension of Enlightenment progressivism and cosmopolitanism? Has the pandemic revealed the persistence of Promethean illusions of human dominance of the earth, recently promulgated through the notion of the Anthropocene?<sup>8</sup> Given the urgency of providing society-scale protective measures and the impossibility of doing so through egotistic interests of profit-making, should the role of the state

become greater, perhaps ascending to a new socialism, if not to say communism?<sup>9</sup> Or, *vice versa*, is this a new escalation of the 'biosecurity paradigm' enforced by the state, which threatens to destroy the last remnants of human dignity and decent life?<sup>10</sup>

Many controversies have arisen already in response to these hypotheses, and it is unlikely that they will be resolved until the whole situation has crystallised. However, if we cannot yet fully assess the 'objective' aspects of the pandemic, we can still criticise the subjective attitudes of the philosophers themselves. The sudden proliferation of philosophers' statements around the pandemic, claiming that the internal logic of their pre-existing concepts suddenly began to merge with the external logic of the new situation, lays bare a 'pre-established harmony' of the narcissistic mechanism of coincidences. In addition to the real virus that kills people, tragically accelerated by late capitalism's merciless greed and austerity, there is a comic mental fever of resurging philosophical narcissism, or the 'omnipotence of thoughts' described and ridiculed by Freud.<sup>11</sup>

How does one avoid catching *this* virus? Definitely not through self-humiliation, formal condemnations of anthropocentric arrogance and philosophical narcissism, or worshipping various nonhuman agents including the virus itself.<sup>12</sup> Rather, one has to take precautionary measures, as towards the real epidemic: physical distancing from the contagious idealism of stuffy philosophical caves and social solidarity.

## Ideal suspension

We do not know yet how capitalism will *end*, but we can already glimpse what its 'pause' or, better still, its temporary and partial *suspension* looks like. This knowledge has been generated after the global coronavirus outbreak and the lockdown that followed in different time zones and in many countries. Images of empty, melancholic streets and wild animals wandering around cities flooded social media. For a moment, they exposed not just an exaggerated and frightening collapse of the distinction between nature and culture, but presented us with the immaterial ruins of social life, now replaced with bizarre animal caricatures. These images epitomised the break in social life by exposing the silent and eerie space of streets and squares, designed especially to contain, facil-

itate and manage human traffic.<sup>13</sup> This break, pause and decrease in social life is particularly illuminating, since it was made more visible – and more problematic – by the incessant, continuous character of capitalism: the so-called '24/7'.<sup>14</sup>



At the everyday level, a short or longer break during a public session, meeting, class or process of manual work means a relief, which offers an opportunity to refresh and recover. Such a break is a microscopic parcel of overall social reproduction. It allows individuals to recover physical and mental energies, and re-enter the irreversible flow of everyday life and work engagements. Yet the pandemic lockdown has been very far from a 'comfort break'. On the contrary, it has been filled with enormous anxiety, panic and disorientation – at least over the first weeks and months of the outbreak, until the emergency became more routinised. Of course, the global pause in many social activities did not include 'key workers' who suffered drastic increases in their work, now associated with the dangers brought about by the virus.

From the specific theoretical angle developed in this article, I suggest that one should add the adjective 'ideal' to the experience of 'suspension' caused by the pandemic. This ideal suspension has neutralised, if only for a mo-

ment, the very sense of the normality and naturalness of capitalism, which has in fact proved to be a very *artificial* formation, whose many aspects can be temporarily ‘cancelled’ or at least put on pause. In mainstream ideological discourse, the critical attributes of artificiality and unnaturalness used to be applied only to the opposite of capitalism. We were told for decades that socialism, not to mention communism, ‘did not work’ and collapsed because it was artificial and unnatural for humans, who are driven by egotistic interests that can be ‘harmonised’ only through the market. This strange reversal of capitalism and communism continued at the level of policies for handling emergencies. In order to sustain the political-economic continuity of capitalism, neoliberal or neoconservative governments have been forced to undertake or at least promise the kinds of temporary measures that have always been associated with left politics: nationalisation of railways, suspensions of rent and mortgage payments and, in some cases, a form of basic income. In the momentary suspension of the smooth functioning of the ideological apparatuses of the media and culture industry, a previously suppressed sense of the profound normality of production and consumption ‘according to basic needs’, free from the *jouissances* of consumerism and mass entertainment, has flashed into view.<sup>15</sup>

## Masochism and insurrection

The effects of de-familiarisation caused by the event of suspension are well known in twentieth-century critical and philosophical thought. The Russian Formalist School discussed *ostranenie*, or de-familiarisation, as a key literary device that de-automatises (or suspends) our routinised perception of things and situations.<sup>16</sup> For Bertolt Brecht, who received and developed this idea in the 1930s, the *Verfremdungseffekt* (estrangement-effect) serves not only as a powerful artistic device, but also as a consciousness-raising technique that, instead of emphatic immersion into the entertaining spectacle, activates the critical attitude of the reader or spectator.<sup>17</sup> Taking these concepts as a starting point, one can argue that the pandemic suspension has produced a massive effect of de-familiarisation and, for a moment, exposed the artificial and contingent character of the capitalist rationality that is obsessively imposed on all aspects of society and individual life. As Elettra Stimili asks: ‘Without

the virus, how much longer would many unquestionable things – things suddenly suspended and, in the suspension, laid bare – have continued to be taken as necessary?’ Stimili produces an eloquent list of such ‘things’: ‘The globalised economy of invasive tourism, television contests, air traffic, budgetary limits, the spectacle of sports competitions, shopping malls, fitness rooms, mass gatherings, the comfort of office jobs, all the drunken sociability we knew; and, on the other side of the coin, the anguished metropolitan solitudes, the education not equal for all, the class, gender and race injustices, the exploitation, and the job insecurity.’<sup>18</sup>

In his *Coldness and Cruelty* (1967), Deleuze presents the figure of suspension as an operation that creates a realm of the *ideal* that sustains the unfolding of masochist practices. Deleuze writes that these practices ‘climb toward the Ideal’, also suggesting that they historically originate in some ‘idealistic initiation rites’. This produces an ‘idealistic neutralisation’ of real objects, by which they remain ‘suspended or neutralised in the ideal’.<sup>19</sup> Deleuze means here not only literal, physical suspensions, which shape various self-torture rituals, but also an arresting of the whole temporality and spatiality of these practices, noting: ‘Waiting and suspense are essential characteristics of the masochistic experience’.<sup>20</sup> Deleuze suggests that masochism can be conceived outside of the confines of psychoanalytic interpretation, although a theory of social suspension would need to develop these elements further, seeing them as modalities that can emerge not only on the basis of sexuality and desire, but also on the basis of diverse material infrastructures and events of individual or social existence.<sup>21</sup>

Bracketing, for a moment, the justified medical rationality of protective measures, one can argue that the temporary capitalism of pandemic cancellations and lockdowns acquires some traits of masochistic practices: an endless suspense, applied in this case not only to the individual, but also social bodies. The new rules and rituals, such as social distancing, resemble a masochistic ‘coldness’. Even wearing masks mimics the props of masochist ritual. The national ‘re-openings’ create a thrilling suspense in the anticipation of the new waves of pandemic. This reflects well the masochistic dynamics of pain and pleasure. While Deleuze criticised the simple complementarity of sadism and masochism, there is a complementarity in the oscillation between the sadistic

pole of the unrestrained social and economic activity, and the reactive masochistic clinging to protective suspensions. This signals, perhaps, a post-pandemic tendency towards masochistic capitalism: oscillating between the neoliberal economic rationality that constantly issues decrees about the necessity to re-open and to go on, and the consequent self-punishments of lockdowns and the coldness of distancing.<sup>22</sup>

In his monumental recent study of Sergei Eisenstein's life and work, the post-Soviet philosopher Valery Podoroga focuses on the figure of 'being-in-suspense' as a crucial modality of Eisenstein's autobiographical self-reflections, which drew heavily on his studies in psychoanalysis. Podoroga elaborates this figure through a theoretical framework of masochism, which draws on Deleuze among others (such as Theodor Reik).<sup>23</sup> Podoroga tends to downplay the political engagement of Eisenstein's works and emphasise instead a dynamic of often-violent suspensions. Indeed, the figure of suspension is vividly present in Eisenstein's cinema. Examples include the horse suspended by its bridles after falling from a bridge in *October* (1928), or the dead sailor hung on the ship ropes in *Battleship Potemkin* (1925). In *Strike* (1925), one of the key scenes shows the legs of the worker who had taken his life by hanging himself in the factory hall after a manager humiliated him.

Instead of emphasising only the 'masochistic' suspensions in Eisenstein's oeuvre, at the cost of his political engagement, I suggest it is possible to negotiate an encounter between 'objective' capitalist violence, workers' struggles (captured in the scenes at the factory and the strike rallies) and Eisenstein's political engagement.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the cinematic representation of the strike itself is also predicated on suspension, this time as a form of insurrectional political struggle that consists in the collective workers' decision to *suspend* the assembly line or any other work process. This indicates a form of suspension that is insurrectional, rather than merely masochistic.

Such a form of suspension is further elaborated in the recently discovered work of the Italian thinker Furio Jesi, *Spartakus*, dedicated to the Spartacist uprising in Germany in 1919. Jesi conceives of this uprising in terms of a 'suspension [*la sospensione*] of historical time and space'.<sup>25</sup> A sequence of insurrectional events suspend the flow of 'normal' or 'bourgeois' historical time and its pre-established territoriality, endowing the events with

a self-sufficiency and autonomy. Jesi considers various other kinds of events that generate such a suspension, including war, although it is not difficult to extend this to include general strikes or the current pandemic.

Watching Eisenstein's *Strike* against the current background of the pandemic rewards the viewer with intriguing parallels, such as the scenes in which, after the beginning of the strike, the animals (cats, ravens, foxes, etc.) start to invade and explore the abandoned factory spaces. These scenes are exemplary of Eisenstein's 'montage of attractions' aimed at rhetorical emphasis on the standstill of production that allows nature to reoccupy former spaces of incessant labour activity. Although such scenes present a rhetorical figure, they are also similar to those 'nature returns' images that flooded social media after the beginning of the national lockdowns. The obsessive and violent continuity of capitalist production encounters the pandemic suspension.

## Intermezzo

Some important elements for a theory of a social suspension under conditions of capitalism can be found in the work of Alfred Sohn-Rethel, one of the outstanding fellow-travellers of the Frankfurt School. These help to elucidate another register of suspension, related rather to the everyday, which in turn leads to the theoretical elaborations of Sohn-Rethel's later work. In his lesser known but remarkable collection, *Das Ideal des Kaputten* [The Ideal of the Broken-Down], published posthumously in 1991, Sohn-Rethel discusses various forms of everyday disruptions in the free, essayistic form of travel recollections, stories and anecdotes. The collection opens with a skilfully written essay about an enormous traffic jam in Naples in the 1920s, provoked by a stereotypically stubborn donkey that suddenly stood still, blocking all traffic through Via Chiaia. This suspension allows Sohn-Rethel to create a panoramic view of the social life of the city and its economics as a background for this minuscule episode from everyday life. In another essay he discusses 'Neapolitan technology', that is, the refunctioning of broken devices and machines: 'In this city mechanisms cannot function as civilisation's continuum [*Kontinuum*], the role for which they are predestined: Naples turns everything on its head.'<sup>26</sup> As we will see, the problem of the continuum maintained by machines and mechanisms

as the means of production within capitalist civilisation (or better, this specific form of barbarity) resonates with the late Sohn-Rethel's theory of 'advanced capitalism', formulated in his *Intellectual and Manual Labour*.

Sohn-Rethel's essays and stories in *Das Ideal des Kaputten* cover not only technological aspects of various interruptions and breaks, but also describe purely contingent and sometimes absurd or comic incidents of a very rare kind, based on an almost ideal or perfect combination of contingent factors. Although Sohn-Rethel never comments on the enigmatic title of his collection, 'Das Ideal' hints at this specific and significant modality of suspension. Still, these stories are also predicated on the intertwinement of technology and modern social life, such as in his essay about Dudley Zoo in Britain.<sup>27</sup> This story is dear to me as it mentions Wolverhampton and the Black Country, which I know intimately, passing them by on the train in my pre-pandemic then-regular commuting from London to the university where I teach. In the German original, Sohn-Rethel mentions the 'melancholischen' character of the Black Country – a claim that I completely endorse.<sup>28</sup>

In stark contrast to the Black Country's melancholic character, the story is short but explosive in its dynamics and humour. The family of Sohn-Rethel's friend, with three children, finally decides to make a trip to Dudley Zoo in their 'new red car'. After spending several hours in the zoo, they return to the gates where they parked and discover that their car has disappeared. Soon, zookeepers run up to them to explain what happened: around noon, a group of several elephants, guided by their keepers, came through the gates and one of them, probably with a circus past, noticed the shiny red car, and 'with full dignity' ('mit voller Würde'), as Sohn-Rethel adds, sat on the car's hood, seriously damaging it. The damaged but still functional car was then removed from the parking lot to escape the attention of curious crowds of visitors. The adventure continued on the way home in the crippled car. The family got stuck in a traffic jam and were approached by a policeman who asked why the car was damaged. 'The elephant sat on our hood', the father explained. Taken then to a police station for investigation after such an answer, he was suspected of being mad until the police called the Zoo to find out that his story was true.

Sohn-Rethel does not provide much commentary for this and several other short stories included in the collec-

tion, but their subversive humour speaks for itself. The automatic flow of the everyday is suspended though a sudden intervention made, characteristically, by animals, creating a surreal chain of episodes. (Besides the donkey and the elephant, rats feature in another story.) While in Eisenstein's *Strike* the animals emerge on the stage after the moment of suspension, in Sohn-Rethel's 'elephant story' the animal generates the disruption.



One can interpret this story in the spirit of the Frankfurt School as emphasising the resistance of colonised and exploited nature, the animals, which remain the only lively element in the cold, administrated world of late capitalism. While *Strike*, born in the epicentre of a victorious socialist revolution, represents a human-made political disruption of the production line, Sohn-Rethel's rebellious animals present a weak and displaced version of the same. The disruption of continuity shifts from production processes to forms of leisure and the everyday, human beings are replaced by the animals, and all this against the background of the creeping fascism that forced the German thinker to escape to Britain.

## Interrupting the capitalist continuum

For further insights into the current pandemic suspensions and their significance, one needs to establish a connection between the insurgent 'elephant in the room' and Sohn-Rethel's better-known late theoretical work. Some important observations on the questions of continuity and suspension of capitalist production can be discovered in his opus magnum, *Intellectual and Manual*

*Labour*, originally published in 1970. This book is commonly known for its first part, which delivers a provocative critique of Kant's epistemology as the scientific consciousness of a 'real abstraction' derived from the exchange of commodities. But the book is also remarkable for its theory of an advanced stage of capitalism formulated in its third part, entitled 'The Dual Economics of Advanced Capitalism'. According to Sohn-Rethel, at the stage of 'advanced capitalism', production takes the form of a continuous 'flow'.<sup>29</sup> Sohn-Rethel's discussion refers to several passages from Marx's *Grundrisse* that stress the continuity of capitalist production and the necessity of constant value-metamorphosis.<sup>30</sup> With this background, the stakes of *Das Ideal des Kaputten* and its dramatisations of sudden breaks and suspensions in social life can be seen in a different light. They are not just peculiar and elegant exercises in essayistic writing, with the exciting narratives of various suspensions of the everyday. They present a utopian or an 'ideal' counterpoint to one of the key theoretical issues of *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, that is, the monotonous continuity of capitalist production and its effects upon society.

The passages from Marx's *Grundrisse* quoted by Sohn-Rethel explain the necessity of continuity [*Kontinuität*] for capital. They deserve perhaps even more attention than they receive by Sohn-Rethel, and can be related to Marx's other mature works to make evident their theoretical systematicity. For instance, in the second volume of *Capital*, Marx briefly notes that 'continuity is the characteristic feature of capitalist production and is required by its technical basis even if it is not always completely attainable'.<sup>31</sup> By 'technical basis' Marx means the factory's machinery, which, ideally, should function without interruption in order not to ruin the value contained in the machines.

The notion of continuity is examined in several other passages from the *Grundrisse*.<sup>32</sup> Marx points out the importance of 'the continuity of production processes' in its capitalist mode and identifies its three aspects. The first two concern the production process and circulation of capital. Marx claims that the continuity of production belongs to the very 'concept of capital' and can be an 'externally compelling condition' in which the expansion of fixed capital (or machinery) plays a key role. For circulating capital, an interruption is only a loss of surplus value, whereas for fixed capital (machinery) an interruption des-

troys the 'original value itself'.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, continuity is specific to capitalist production, critically distinguishing it from the prior organisations of economic life. Marx's third aspect of continuity deals with the credit system. Its main function is to maintain the continuity of production against various contingencies by making funds available to production processes: 'suspension of this chance element by capital itself is *credit*'.<sup>34</sup>

This continuity became an essential aspect of contemporary capitalism in its 24/7 mode of operation: automated production lines, online shopping, communications, banking, media, the Internet, call centres, surveillance, and so on. An incessant and restless activity is the dominant paradigm, which functions as an empty form that is forcefully imposed on all possible human activities and interactions. It would not be an exaggeration to say that, for a brief moment, the COVID-19 pandemic has posed a threat to the very metamorphosis of value. While society has had to practice social distancing, as a suspension of the contagious social continuum, the capitalist state has been desperately introducing more and more new 'emergency measures' that have aimed at maintaining economic continuity at any price. The pandemic suspension – amplified by erratic neoliberal policies – has created an enormous panic not only because it poses a real and ongoing threat to millions of human lives, but also because it threatens the continuum of capitalism, which its guardians are desperately trying to maintain through massive restructuring, deployment of digital technologies and new modes of online work.

In this way, the global breaks in social life have created, at the levels noted here, an ideal but nonetheless significant suspension, which has de-familiarised the received naturalness of capitalism and exposed its obsessive artificiality. This has activated an entire social and political symptomology. It is this that my essay has attempted to interpret in terms of the 'masochistic' and insurrectional tendencies within the pandemic crisis. Nonetheless, the crucial question remains: how can we use the lessons of this crisis to turn the 'ideal suspension' into a real social transformation?

*Alexei Penzin is Reader in Art at the University of Wolverhampton and an Associate Research Fellow at the Institute of Philosophy, Moscow. He is the author of a forthcoming book on Sleep and Subjectivity in Capitalist Modernity.*

## Notes

1. As Susan Neiman claimed, 'The eighteenth century used the word *Lisbon* much as we use the word *Auschwitz* today'. See Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: an Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 1.
2. Gene Ray, 'Reading the Lisbon Earthquake: Adorno, Lyotard, and the Contemporary Sublime', *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 17:1 (2004), 7–11. In the text of the Third Critique Kant mentions 'earthquakes' only once, together with 'storms' and 'tempests', as an example of the 'dynamic sublime' in nature, but he does not refer explicitly to the Lisbon earthquake.
3. See 'The Lisbon Earthquake: Rousseau versus Voltaire', in Voltaire, *Candide and Related Texts*, trans. and ed. David Wootton (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000), 95–122.
4. See Voltaire, *Candide and Related Texts*, 110–111.
5. Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, 248–249.
6. Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1995), 361.
7. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 'Letter to Voltaire on Optimism' (1756), in Voltaire, *Candide and Related Texts*, 111.
8. As simply put in an article from the *Guardian*, 'The idea of the Anthropocene conjures notions of human omnipotence. But Covid-19 has revealed the astonishing fragility of our societies'. Richard Horton, 'Coronavirus is the greatest global science policy failure in a generation', *The Guardian*, 9 April 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentis-free/2020/apr/09/deadly-virus-britain-failed-prepare-mersars-ebola-coronavirus?>
9. See Slavoj Žižek's *Pandemic! Covid-19 Shakes the World* (New York and London: OR Books, 2020), for his thoughts about a 'reinvention of communism' after pandemics, as the only alternative to the new barbarity.
10. Giorgio Agamben, 'Biosecurity and Politics', *Medium*, 11 May 2020, <https://medium.com/@ddean3000/biosecurity-and-politics-giorgio-agamben-396f9ab3b6f4>. See also 'Coronavirus and Philosophers: M. Foucault, G. Agamben, J.L. Nancy, R. Esposito, S. Benvenuto, D. Dwivedi, S. Mohan, R. Ronchi, M. de Carolis', *The European Journal of Psychoanalysis*, March-April, 2020, <https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/coronavirus-and-philosophers/>.
11. Freud took as the name for this principle an expression used by one of his patients. See Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny' (1919), in *Standard Edition*, trans. James Strachey, Vol. 17 (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–1974), 240–241.
12. See, for example, a kind of ironic worshipping in the publications by 'The Society of the Friends of the Virus', organised by 16 Beaver Group, at [centreparrhesia.org](http://centreparrhesia.org).
13. A group of scientists recently registered a record-breaking 50% global reduction of anthropogenic seismic noise resulting from the pandemic. See Thomas Lecocq et al, 'Global quieting of high-frequency seismic noise due to COVID-19 pandemic lockdown measures', *Science*, 23 Jul 2020, doi: 10.1126/science.abd2438.
14. See Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London: Verso, 2013).
15. As Mark Fisher wrote, even 'tiny' and ephemeral events 'can tear a hole in the grey curtain of reaction which has marked the horizons of possibility under capitalist realism'. See Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009), 81.
16. Viktor Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique' in *Viktor Shklovsky: A Reader*, ed. and trans. Alexandra Berlina (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 73–96. 'Ostranenie' is not only a literary or artistic technique. As a detachment from the perceptive automatism of the everyday, it retains connections to social and political experience and can, in its turn, be used for their characterisation. Against the presentation of *ostranenie* as an apolitical modernist concept, many commentators have noted the links between the invention of this concept and Shklovsky's biographical and political experience, such as the revolution and his short emigration to Berlin. See, for example, Svetlana Boym, 'Estrangement as a Lifestyle: Shklovsky and Brodsky', in *Exile and Creativity*, ed. Susan Suleiman (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 241–63.
17. Bertolt Brecht, 'On Chinese Acting', trans. Eric Bentley, *The Tulane Drama Review* 6:1 (1961), 130–136.
18. See Elettra Stimili, 'Apocalyptic Time', *Political Theology* 21:5 (2020), 392.
19. See Gilles Deleuze, 'Coldness and Cruelty' in *Masochism* (NY: Zone Books, 1991), 21, 32.
20. *Ibid.*, 70.
21. Theodor Reik discusses a 'non-sexual, social masochism' in his *Masochism in Modern Man*, one of the classical studies of masochism that first drew attention to the 'factor of suspense'. See Theodor Reik, *Masochism and Modern Man*, trans. Margaret H. Beigel and Gertrud M. Kurth (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1941), 71.
22. About the masochist as a 'perfect subject of capitalism' from the perspective of Lacanian psychoanalysis, see also Samo Tomšič, *The Capitalist Unconscious: Marx and Lacan* (London and New York: Verso, 2015), 229.
23. See Valery Podoroga, *Vtoroi Ekran. Sergei Eizenshtein i kinematograf nasiliia* [The Second Screen: Sergei Eisenstein and the Cinema of Violence], Vol. 1 (Moscow: Sh. P. Breus, 2016), 211.
24. *Ibid.*, 128–174. Eisenstein's subjective obsession with images of violent suspensions originate, Podoroga suggests, in the events of his early psychobiography. Podoroga scrupulously analyses the autobiographic materials from Eisenstein's memoirs and also uses Eisenstein's own attempts at psychoanalytical interpretation of his childhood, presenting his analysis as a fulfillment of these endeavours. The details of Eisenstein's family dispositions included a heavily disciplinary atmosphere and the despotic omnipresence of his father. An analysis of the spatial arrangements of Eisenstein's family house and of many visual documents articulates some prototypes and devices that will populate the future 'second screen'. For example, Podoroga focuses on a method of photography, popular at the time of Eisenstein's childhood, that used invisible holders, which 'suspended' the figure of the child in an artificial pose, to create an 'ideal' image.
25. See Furio Jesi, *Spartakus: The Symbolism of the Revolt*, ed. Andrea Cavalletti, trans. Alberto Toscano (London, New York

and Calcutta: Seagull Press, 2014), 58. I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer from the RP editorial collective who drew my attention to this inspiring work.

26. This English translation is from a fragment of the essay translated by John Garvey and posted on February 15, 2018, entitled 'The Ideal of the Broken Down: On the Neapolitan Approach to Things Technical', at [hardcrackers.com/ideal-broken-neapolitan-approach-things-technical](http://hardcrackers.com/ideal-broken-neapolitan-approach-things-technical).

27. During the Second World War, Sohn-Rethel, unlike his colleagues from the Frankfurt School who moved to the US, preferred Britain. He spent 35 years there, from 1937 to 1972. According to an interview, 'he hardly ever came out of his room' (quoted in Jairus Banaji, 'Alfred Sohn-Rethel', at <http://www.historicalmaterialism.org/node/1183>). Two stories from *Das Ideal des Kaputten* reflect Sohn-Rethel's experience of this exile.

28. See Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Das Ideal des Kaputten*, ed. Bettina Wassman (Frickingen: Verlag Ulrich Seutter, 2009), 41.

29. Sohn-Rethel describes 'flow production' as follows: 'The entirety of a workshop or factory is integrated into one continuous

process in the service of the rule of speed. ... This continuity is now implemented by a machine, a conveyor belt or other transfer mechanism subjecting to the set speed the action of all the productive machinery and the human labour serving it'. Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1978), 161.

30. Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, 142–143.

31. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 2*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Penguin Classics, 1992), 182.

32. For a detailed discussion of the concept of continuity in Marx, see my chapter "Il faut continuer": Always-On Capitalism and Subjectivity', in *Politics of the Many: Contemporary Radical Thought and the Crisis of Agency*, eds. Rebecca Carson, Benjamin Halligan, Stefano Pippa and Alexei Penzin (London: Bloomsbury Academic, forthcoming 2021).

33. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin Classics, 1993), 719.

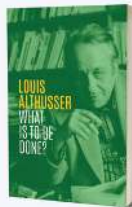
34. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 535.

# independent thinking from polity

## What is to be Done?

Louis Althusser

Lively, brilliant and engaged, this short text is wholly oriented towards one objective: to organise the working-class struggle. Althusser provides a sharp critique of Antonio Gramsci's writings and of Eurocommunism, which seduced various Marxists at the time. But this book is above all the opportunity for Althusser to state what he had not succeeded in articulating elsewhere: what concrete conditions would need to be satisfied before the revolution could take place. Left unfinished, it is published here for the first time.

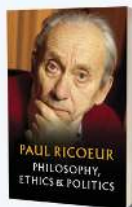


PB 978-1-5095-3861-4 | £12.99 | September 2020

## Philosophy, Ethics, and Politics

Paul Ricoeur

In this series of interviews and dialogues which took place between 1981 and 2003, Paul Ricoeur addresses some of the central questions of political philosophy and ethics: justice, violence, war, the environmental crisis, the question of evil, ethical and political action in the polis.



PB 978-1-5095-3451-7 | £16.99 | October 2020

## What Times Are We Living In?

*A Conversation with Eric Hazan*

Jacques Rancière

"Jacques Rancière's work is renowned, as he once put it, for 'leaving the noisy stage of political claims and doctrines and sinking into the depths of the social'. ... In this lively discussion with Eric Hazan, Rancière displays once again the power of his subtle form of social and philosophical analysis, illuminating some of the central questions of democracy, representation and political strategy that confront us today." **Peter Dews, Emeritus Professor, University of Essex**



PB 978-1-5095-3699-3 | £9.99 | October 2020

## Cryptocommunist

Mark Alizart

"A fascinating antidote to reductive takes on cryptocurrencies. Blockchains are more than just cryptolibertarianism and this book makes a provocative and wide-ranging case for just how important they might be." **Nick Srnicek, King's College London**



PB 978-1-5095-3858-4 | £9.99 | July 2020

Order your copy now:  
free phone 0800 243407 | [politybooks.com](http://politybooks.com)

@politybooks

[facebook.com/politybooks](https://facebook.com/politybooks)