



Adventures of the Symbolic

POST-MARXISM AND RADICAL DEMOCRACY

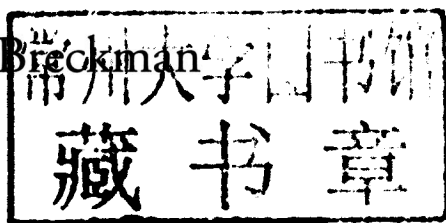
Warren Breckman



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Adventures of the Symbolic

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Foreword

Dick Howard

THE PARALLEL OF BRECKMAN'S TITLE and his critical analysis to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Adventures of the Dialectic*, which was published in 1955, is well taken. Merleau-Ponty was concerned with the fate of Marxism in the postwar climate. He sought to understand the reemergence of dialectical thought as an attempt to overcome the challenge to classical liberalism that Max Weber formulated as the opposition of an ethics of conviction and an ethics of responsibility. Dialectical Marxists, most prominently Georg Lukács, sought to go beyond the antinomies of liberalism by finding a synthesis incarnated by the proletariat; the working class was said to be both the subject of history and its product, a being that was both individual and yet total, one that incarnated the future in the present. The triumph of Leninism, then Stalinism, put an end to this revolutionary synthesis, and the Trotskyist opposition was not able to restore the historical hope. Merleau-Ponty concluded his account with a devastating critique of what he called Sartre's "ultra-bolshevism," which he considered a voluntarist attempt to "go beyond history . . . when Marx understood communism as the realization of history."

The parallel account in Breckman's *Adventures* is concerned with the fate of what he calls post-Marxism. Merleau-Ponty and Breckman differ, of course, in many ways; Breckman is a historian, not a philosopher; as he says at several points, rather than offer its own normative construction, his work "assesses" or "evaluates" a complex path, which he "narrates."

But if there is not an exact parallel there is, to use a term from the Romantics that Breckman stresses elsewhere, an analogy between the projects. Just as Merleau-Ponty began his story with an account of the constitution of his object of study, the dialectic, from the work of Max Weber, so Breckman begins his history with the constitution of its object, the *symbolic*. Breckman begins with the problem posed to the young (or “left”) Hegelians by the insistence of the late Schelling and his Romantic followers that the real is not only, or truly, the rational; how, then, is one to understand the irreducible otherness of the world to thought? This is territory that Breckman had covered from one perspective in *Marx, the Young Hegelians, and the Origins of Radical Social Theory*; he retraces in this new work, compactly, the process by which the Hegelian opposition, and finally Marx, built their theory on a *desymbolization*, the reduction of the transcendent to the immanent and the secularization of social relations. But Marx had no monopoly on radical social theory; in his second chapter Breckman underlines the place of another line of leftist theory whose first formulation he finds in the “romantic socialism” of Pierre Leroux. This alternate orientation sets the stage for the climb back to a *resymbolization* of radical thought whose avatars were the fathers of what came to be known as “French theory”: Lévi-Strauss, Althusser, and Lacan. Breckman interprets this process of resymbolization, which is often referred to as the “linguistic turn,” as an attempt to “rescue radical thought from Marxism” and its dialectical misadventures. While this claim is questionable in the case of Althusser’s structural Marxism, Breckman’s interpretation of the structuralist movement is suggestive.

These first two chapters are only the beginning of Breckman’s attempt to present “a more or less coherent narrative that has something like a beginning, a series of variations that rearticulate that first insight, and a conclusion that returns to that beginning in order to reaffirm its basic insights.” He then turns in the second section to the central chapters of the book, which treat first Cornelius Castoriadis, then Claude Lefort. The former comrades, ex-Trotskyists become Marx critics, bring front and center the problem of democracy. Broadly interpreted, resymbolization replaces the base/superstructure account with a vision of the social world as “constructed”; it replaces the determinism of historical materialism by a recognition of indetermination and stresses democracy rather than a state-centered, planned political world. But this changed perspective poses a new

question: what is the *foundation* of social relations? The search for the grounds of social relations and the source of social values points beyond the immanence of secular society toward the dimension of transcendence that had been the domain of theology before the avatars of modernity and Marxism challenged its credibility. The challenge of Schelling to Hegel's rationalism returns, now in the various forms of deconstruction, of which Breckman offers a coherent panorama that richly repays reading. But he goes on to point to the richness of the alternate paths proposed by Castoriadis and Lefort.

The fact that reason here recognizes its limits does not mean that it lapses into unreason; rather the idea of a society whose relations could be rationalized is replaced by the search for the grounds of what both Castoriadis and Lefort call "the political." Although they define it differently, as Breckman shows, their basic insight is that the political is a symbolic power that structures or institutes both society and social institutions. Their respective critiques of totalitarianism led them to challenge the Marxist reduction of the political to the social. For Castoriadis, the political depends on the interplay between what he calls the (social) "imaginaire" and the "radical imaginary," which creates the conditions for human and social autonomy. Autonomy, in its literal Greek sense of *autos* + *nomos*, means that the law is self-given; its only justification is the will of the participants, and this is just what is entailed by democracy. For Lefort, the modern concept of the rights of man—which should not be confused with classical liberal philosophy—becomes the foundation of a democratic politics that is radical because it can never overcome the difference between its symbolic foundation (the rights of man) and its socially bound reality. The result, says Breckman, is a "robust theory of the uncertainty and indeterminacy of the democratic condition," which leads Lefort to praise democracy "not [for] what it does, but [for] what it *causes to be done*" (ooof). Because the political transcends the society that it institutes, it can never be incarnated (by the proletariat, the party, or any social institution); it can only be represented because, in itself, it must always remain "an empty place." The same logic holds for democracy, the rule of the *demos*: because the people can never be incarnate in any institution, *all* institutions can claim to represent the people, and their competition (in the separation of powers) protects the rights and freedoms of democratic individuals.

The final section of *Adventures of the Symbolic* recalls Marx's famous aphorism in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*: the first time is tragedy, the second time is farce. Once again, Breckman retraces the movement from the symbolic to a desymbolization that opens the door to political voluntarism. The first phase of the development is found in Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Theory*, which reformulates proletarian dialectics into a theory that explicitly acknowledges the power of the symbolic as well as its debt to Lefort's theory of democracy. Laclau's subsequent explorations, and criticisms, of deconstructionist philosophy and of Lacanian psychoanalysis are shown to be directed by his and Mouffe's concern to understand how radical politics can find its place in a world whose institution is ultimately symbolic and in which no agent or actor comparable to the dialectical proletariat can—or should—be imagined. An early ally in this search was the young Slavoj Žižek, a dissident Slovene intellectual who had imbibed the heady culture of radical Paris. Breckman reconstructs their emerging disagreements, which became explicit in a jointly published volume (with Judith Butler), *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*. Agreement on the first two terms was marred by disagreement concerning the third. For Žižek, “universality” is, because of its abstraction, complicit with capitalist domination. On the contrary, his idiosyncratic interpretation of Hegel's idea of a concrete universal led Žižek increasingly to believe in the (perhaps fleeting) reality of something like the “revolution” that Merleau-Ponty had denounced, with biting irony, in *The Adventures of the Dialectic* as a “sublime point” that would put a (totalitarian) end to history. For his part, Laclau insisted that while political universality cannot be actualized in reality, it must nonetheless always be sought as a constituent element in the quest to create a hegemonic politics of social change. In this way, Laclau can be said to reformulate Lefort's concept of the political as a symbolic structure that can never be incarnated because its foundation is an empty space.

The second chapter of part 3 completes what Breckman calls the “narrative arc” of his book, setting the context and following Žižek's tumultuous evolution from the primacy of the symbolic to an unintended repetition of the movement that culminated in the Marxist desymbolization in part 1. Breckman's ability to punch through Žižek's verbal fireworks and tenuous interpretations, for example of Hegel or Lacan, lends coherence to what often seems arbitrary rhetorical spins. He does denounce as “dis-

turbing” some of Žižek’s bluster and his “inconsistent and at times deeply disturbing pronouncements,” but here as elsewhere the reader will come to appreciate the *historian* who makes the strands of the past cohere in a narrative. At the same time, the political thinker will recognize the way in which the guiding thread through this maze is suggested by the retrodevelopment from symbolic political socialism to reductionist Marxism that was dissected in part 1. For example, Žižek attempts to combine reductionism and voluntarism into what he (and Alain Badiou) calls a “positive vision” that he identifies now with “communism,” now with “Leninism,” and then again with the terrorist actions taken by self-defined leftist groups in Peru or Vietnam. In so doing, says Breckman, Žižek is trying to “fill in the hole,” to overcome the indeterminacy, and to secularize the transcendence of the political to the social. And that, after all, is just what the young Marx proposed to accomplish in his “On the Jewish Question” (1843), the missing link in his move away from Hegelianism and toward the discovery of the proletariat as the subject-object of history. From that point forward, Marx would interpret religious and ideological questions as the expression of social relations and soon would interpret political problems in terms of economic relations.

It is of course a broad step to lay responsibility on the flighty figure of Žižek, whose rhetoric could change tomorrow. But, if it changes, he would have a material explanation for the new position. The point is that his evolution testifies to the culmination, apparently real, of the adventures of the symbolic. With it comes the end of the hope of saving radicalism by resymbolizing Marxism. Breckman admits his frustration with this conclusion, for there remains much indeed to criticize about contemporary capitalism. But this is no reason to accept the surface plausibility of Žižek’s (or Badiou’s or others’) return to Marxism-Leninism; perhaps, ironizes Breckman, citing Žižek, miracles do happen, but don’t count on them, for the desymbolizing project is doomed to political failure. Breckman himself stands on the critical left; but his left is built on the democratic imperative. Yet democracy, he concludes sagely, is “not a solution; it is a problem, inseparably philosophical and political.” Breckman has no solution; that’s not his job. But his historical reconstruction of the modern history of political thought is innovative, refreshing, and a marvelous mirror through which we can see more clearly how we have come to be who we are and why we have the theorists that we have.

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