

INTRODUCTION

Intellectuals, Historical Realism and Counter-politics



[[I]ntellectual formations have lost their bindingness, because they have detached themselves from any possible relationship to social praxis and become ... objects of purely mental apprehension. They become cultural commodities exhibited in a secular pantheon in which contradictory entities – works that would like to strike each other dead – are given space side-by-side in a false pacification: Kant and Nietzsche, Bismarck and Marx ... (Adorno 1998: 141. Quoted in Brennan 2006: 196)¹

The title of this book takes some explaining – which I find annoying. I am not fond of titles that seem intentionally thought up to titillate through puzzlement. *War and Peace* didn't seem to me a misleading title for the novel, nor did *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* for that matter. Looking back I suppose *Pensées Sauvages* was a bit politically incorrect, but you had to forgive the author; it did after all capture in a nicely playful way what he was talking about. A book entitled *Intellectuals and Politics* would seem fairly straightforward, but why the 'counter-politics'? Wouldn't 'politics' be enough? And what about 'historical realism'? Why not 'historical materialism' or 'philosophical realism'?

What I find disconcerting is that my intention has been to avoid being misleading: to be sure that the title is quite precise in saying what this book is about. And yet the result comes off as pretentious. The fact is that the term intellectual has a vaguely distasteful flavour of exclusivity about it (something I will return to shortly) and placing 'counter' in front of 'politics' does seem to follow the vogue for the negative prefix: like 'post' which itself seemed to many a form of pretention as in 'I'm not talking about modernism but I'm not prepared to say exactly what comes after'. Or, 'I am talking about post-Marxism but by use of this term rather than non- or anti- I want to make clear that I walk the high ground. We do not need to dissociate ourselves from Marx or write anti-communist manifestos; we need

simply to bury those old bones and move on.’ Statements like these emanate of course out of the politics of intellectuals and, combined with the fact that intellectuals themselves take such statements so seriously, do much to explain why the term ‘intellectual’ seems almost synonymous with pretention.

Having worried over using terms that might not be immediately enlightening, and as a result risked giving my book the air of pretentiousness I wanted to avoid, I still ended up with this title – so I want to use this Introduction to explain why. I will start with some thoughts on intellectuals, then explain what I mean by historical realism, and just touch on the issue of counter-politics near the end, since this last is best discussed in the Conclusion.

Many of us, whether supposedly intellectuals or not, find ourselves frustrated by a sense of helplessness; not necessarily passivity but rather a feeling that the effectiveness of what we do seems to have little impact. The ability to assess the limits of the possible and hence help to give collective action the leverage that would make it effective praxis appears to be elusive today. But there is nothing unique about this. There might indeed have been moments in history when collective will found an eventful crack in the edifice of an apparently immovable history – say with the coming of the French Revolution or, perhaps less dramatically, in the labour movement in the global North whose pressures made possible the welfare state, or peasant struggles in the South without which there would have been no land reforms not to mention actual changed structures of entire societies. But these moments arose out of prior periods when it was not clear who would be the agents of change or who precisely they should direct their energies against. As Hobsbawm long ago noted, ‘successful revolutions are hardly ever planned in spite of the efforts to do so’, adding that if the Left have some work to do on what the future society might be, ‘that does not make it any the less desirable or necessary, or the case against the present one any less compelling’ (Hobsbawm [1978] 1984: 287, 291).

So if today it is by no means obvious where the seeds of collective will are to be found or through what means some leverage might be achieved, this does not reduce the need for intellectual intervention – rather it impels us to ask what the nature of that intervention might be. For it is not automatically apparent what needs to be taken into account for a useful assessment of the conditions of possibility for the successful intervention of collective will. The global scale of today’s social world? The environmental tipping point? The uneven placement of differing kinds of economic relations – from Export Production

Zones to Silicon Valley? The unchecked polarization of wealth and power? The remoteness of the state from our lives? These all seem to crowd in for attention. Nor is it possible to hold off one element with the hope that another can be studied in isolation. This alone surely must act as a challenge to people who do intellectual work. But just as societies have changed over the past half-century, so too have the nature and role of people making a profession of being intellectuals.

Intellectuals

In most of the courses, graduate and undergraduate, that I have taught over the past ten to fifteen years, I have devoted some time to a discussion of ‘the intellectual’: what kind of job that was, and how it positioned one vis-à-vis the people you were studying, or those you were teaching. I was especially interested in having a conversation about the books and articles they read as being peculiarly the products of intellectuals’ labour: the way they thought, the way they presented what they thought, the relative value of these kinds of products versus perhaps less ‘academic’ ones, and so on. Most of the time, those with whom I spoke were polite but indifferent. The undergraduates tended not to think they were themselves such people, or even that they were at least partly such people while still students. Most of them didn’t think of the university as putting them among such people – among teachers possibly, but not among ‘intellectuals’. Some thought questions about intellectuals were really only interesting to me in so far as perhaps, in a somewhat hubristic way, I thought I was one. And this latter idea – that it was self-flattering to identify oneself as an intellectual – both said something about what intellectuals are taken to be and also got in the way of the kind of dialogue I wanted to have. It spoke of social distinction and of essential difference.

The dialogue I wanted to have, naively as it turned out, was based on the premise that in the context of the university we were all for the moment ‘intellectuals’, spending time put aside for us to reflect critically on issues for which there was little time otherwise in a busy (or leisurely in some cases) day. And I wanted to discuss with people how that kind of practice might be the same or different from other kinds of practices in a given day or week; how for example it compared with the practice of a cabinet maker, beginning her day’s work, fitting up a router and assessing the material she left unfinished the day before. I wanted to ask, as well, if reflections on this issue of the cabinet maker would have some effect on cabinet makers, cabinetry

and perhaps broader questions of skill and work. In other words whether there was some relationship, positive or negative, between the kind of work being done by the ‘intellectuals’ in the classroom and the builders outside.

As will become obvious in what follows, perhaps one of my many mistakes was employing the generic word ‘intellectual’ to refer to a broad range of people who are not often boxed up in the same wrapping. Had I spoken only of ‘social anthropologists’ and ‘the people they study’, or of ‘scientists’ or ‘philosophers,’ perhaps even of ‘artists’, the conversation would have been clearer, easier.² But that is precisely what I did not want to do then, nor what I want to do now. Although I will perforce return to it, I want to take anthropologists away from their treatment as a special case. The question I am interested in is what kind of political leverage social analysts in general have. Were they to want to be part of collective praxis, what part would they play? Is there a distinct role for people called ‘intellectuals’, or were my student interlocutors onto something: that intellectual is just a fancy word for a job like any other?

If so, the impetus that had taken me out of my day job in my late twenties as an investment analyst and back into graduate school was mistaken. I had thought the move would increase the contribution I could make to a political project, and even my choice of anthropology was based on its association with working at the grass-roots level, making it an especially direct form of engagement (Smith 2011). In the reflections that follow however I want to avoid restricting the purview of the argument to those who Charlie Hale (2006a) calls ‘activist researchers’. Instead I want to think in terms of the *leverage* most forms of progressive intellectual work can have on a largely intractable social reality.³ The chapters that follow have all been framed in this way. I have tried to make quite clear in each case *why* I think the issue being discussed needs to be discussed; or put another way, how my purpose-at-hand has led me to a question and then shaped the way I have addressed that question. As with other kinds of work, so with intellectual work: the horizons of knowledge relevant to them are a result of their purpose-at-hand in the pursuit of a task.

Gramsci of course is especially associated with a kind of Left politics that insists on addressing precisely what role intellectuals might play in enhancing and giving direction to the praxis of ‘common people’.⁴ And yet for Gramsci, intellectual work was not to be confined exclusively to people with that ascription. Jokingly Gramsci remarked that ‘because it can happen that everyone at some

time fries a couple of eggs or sews up a tear in a jacket, we do not necessarily say that everyone is a cook or a tailor' (Gramsci 1971: 9), and the same applies to intellectual work. It is a kind of reflective activity that goes along with practical work: everybody does it all the time, at some times more and at some times less; it's 'the spontaneous philosophy which is proper to everybody' (ibid.: 323).

Evidently, for Gramsci the different modes of attention do matter. There *is* something about the distinction between practical work and a kind of activity of reflecting which is critical intellectual work. And this is my starting point. The issue has to do with the forms of attention associated with particular kinds of task, what Schutz (1971) called the different 'purposes-at-hand' as we shift from one kind of task to another. Carpenters don't only need to know about cabinet making, they also need to know where to place their fingers on the router. This practical knowledge, or knowledge of practice, is the difference between having five fingers and losing one. A sure way to find the router carving away at your finger, and not at the emerging shaped recess in the wood, is to start reflecting on the nature of tree growth in the Amazon jungle. The issue has no practical relevance for the job at hand. If one spends quite a bit of one's working time with lathes, routers, planes and such like, there may be little time during the working day to reflect on Amazonian bio-diversity, even though it might have implications for the long-term prospects of the job. So responsible carpenters might divide up their knowledge along lines of relevance contoured by narrower or broader projects. All of this is practical knowledge of course, though some may be more properly termed 'knowledge of practice' and some a broader kind of information which could be called 'intellectual knowledge'.

Intellectuals likewise derive forms of attention from the pattern that emerges from their various purposes-at-hand as they go about the tasks of their work. But the fact that reflective intellectual knowledge *is* practical for this task means that they give value to their work by reversing the importance of situated knowledge. True as with the carpenter, so here too; attending to the practical work of reflecting on a research issue the intellectual cannot afford to be distracted. But the supposed distraction takes the opposite form. The *intellectual* value of the practice derives from the degree to which it appears to be undistorted by prejudicial (lit: pre-judging) factors – practical matters like who is paying for their work, or what the immediate impact of the knowledge it produces might be. In Bachelard's words, 'the world in which one thinks is not the world in which one lives' (quoted in Bourdieu 2000: 51). We know this to be untrue (and here I mean we *all*

know, both intellectuals and everybody else), but it is a misrecognition that we must retain – what Bourdieu calls the fallacy of ‘scholastic epistemocentrism’ (ibid.). There is nothing especially radical or new in this discovery of the peculiar social setting of knowledge production. Roseberry, for example, spoke of it in terms of ‘academic enclosure’ (Roseberry 2002). But the training needed to acquire the necessary skills here does not rely simply on the enhancement of reflective techniques and communicative skills in a general sense for the study of different moments of reality (even if reality is sometimes cast as the sublime): for science the material world, for art the acuity of insight, for social analysis ‘the immanent tendencies of the social world’ (Bourdieu 2000: 5), and so on. These may be what are found in the rule book but not the rules you need to know to achieve a certain goal, and we can assume that the goals are not the same for all intellectuals. They are all in search of the best leverage for making their ideas effective but the ends they serve will vary.

Because I don’t entirely reject this rather Bourdieu-ian way of thinking about what intellectuals are and what they do, I see the challenge to be how people who concern themselves with the ‘critical’ study of social reality might make their contribution to ‘praxis’. How do they address the immovable object of conditions and the irresistible force of the possible – not just the parameters of people’s agency, but the especially acute kind of agency that can shift the very structure itself: praxis – a term to which I will return later. And then, engaged as they are in exploring the possibility for praxis of others, how might they understand what constitutes the praxis of the intellectuals themselves? Not just the practices they perform in their everyday work, or simply the agency necessary to make their mark in their careers, but the kind of contribution their praxis can make to comprehend so as to change the limits of the possible? ‘The existence of a concrete relationship with a set of people (defined as public, class, group, sex or whatever) forms part of [the] self definition [of critical theories of domination]’ notes Luc Boltanski; ‘[t]heir aim is to *render reality unacceptable*’ (Boltanski 2011: 4–5. Italics in original).

Such a project creates precisely the opposite relationship between intellectuals and the practical work of other ‘sets of people’ to what Gramsci called ‘traditional intellectuals’, and we can learn quite a lot from what he says about them. His particular concern was with the role intellectuals played in allying the coercive resources of the state to a broad array of integrative functions (organization, education, culture, and so on) to produce a more or less lasting hegemonic

field. This involved the use of formal culture and the various sites of its production, but it also involved intellectuals' participation in the sites of practical sense. One feature of what he called traditional intellectuals – those aligned to older dominant blocs – was the way in which they drew upon what Ernst Bloch called 'non-synchronous' sentiments, both in terms of the formal culture of Catholicism, older forms of schooling, literature and so on, and at the level of what he called the common sense of the past. The overall effect was to give people tools for rendering the practical world coherent in the way I have discussed above and, as a result, giving pertinence to an older kind of collective subject with its attendant institutions and forms of organization (see Chapter 5).

This can be seen at the level of popular discourse, folklore, forms of respect and so on, but it also plumbs deeper by authorizing sets of social relations: the landlord–tenant and patron–client relations of course, but also the hierarchical relation between the traditional intellectual and his passive flock. It is easy to note that such intellectuals preached a certain gospel because of the supposed interests of their paymasters but, apart from being a rather crude way of thinking about the relationship between intellectual production and its social setting, this tends to obscure the degree to which it was the vision of the world, the language, the keywords that had the effect of producing a certain kind of culture that then made older relations taken for granted. It was not just a question of the dominant ideas of the dominant bloc being transmitted through a brain-washing formal culture. Far more importantly it was the way in which intellectuals then threaded their way through daily life to endorse the common sense that then fuelled Bourdieu's 'causal probability'. As Bourdieu notes, jokes, addages, old wives' tales and so on are all means of transmitting the probabilities of lives lived by a certain class to their practical ways of setting about the tasks of their livelihoods.

This suggests that the ability of the intellectual committed by contrast to rendering such a reality unacceptable by enhancing the critical intervention of individual and collective subjects is greatly dependent upon the work to be done on what Gramsci would call organic links. One of these has to do with the assessing of the opportunities and limitations thrown up by the current conjuncture – what I encapsulate in this book by the phrase 'the conditions of possibility' (Braudel 1992; Bourdieu 1990a). The other has to do with the organization of popular mobilization and discussion of strategy for effective praxis. The first, a focus on vertical linkages, serves to tie emergent collective projects to 'the immanent tendencies of the

social world' in Bourdieu's phrasing. 'One way in which Gramsci conceptualized the character of any given political event, social relation, social group, etc, was in terms of whether or not it was organically linked to that which was fundamental, in other words the basic economic structure of society' (Crehan 2002: 23; Smith 2004a, 2006). This of course means intellectual work assessing the nature of the current conjuncture and the conveying of that assessment to people with less access and time to do such work.

The second serves to enhance the connectivities among people both through formal culture – education and other forms of cultural production – and, with a focus on horizontal ties, working to make links across different people's practical sense as each tackles the concerns of their differing tasks. This kind of work, by all involved, takes place across a threshold because it involves a perpetual assessment of how the specific balance between intellectual reflection and practical work is embodied in multiple sets of people. In so far as everybody is an intellectual at some moments in their day or their life, so there is always this balance to be gauged. It is surely across just these thresholds that there is room for a fruitful dialogic conversation that would help to build bridges between one situation experienced in a micro-setting and over a limited temporal scale to other similar experiences, hence one role for the intellectual seeking to make organic connections – that is, an organic intellectual.

Much of the sensitivity intellectuals have now developed to perform in this way derive at least in part from the work that has been done in the areas gathered under the broad rubric of cultural studies. But, especially in anthropology, this has tended to be at the cost of critical analysis of the objective relations that arise out of the principles for reproduction on which our societies rest. So it is not enough to celebrate the wisdom of local knowledges or to disparage the imperialist purposes of universal rationality while inserting oneself among people faced with the pressing concerns of daily life. To this we need to add the special leverage gained from an intellectual's objective assessments, (a) of the potential for the formation of collective subjects over the long term (i.e. issues of appropriate organization for popular mobilization); and (b) of the possibilities for the achievement of their goals through praxis (see Chapter 4).

Both Bourdieu and Williams were provoked by the absolute necessity of exploring the difficult terrain between an intellectual moment and a practical moment: 'embodied practices' for Bourdieu, 'changes of presence' for Williams. They saw the fruitfulness of the terrain but also the tensions and difficulties that arose from traversing

it. Both insisted that there *is* some kind of distinction between the two. Bourdieu, for example, notes how statistical probability has a reciprocal relationship with grounded practical sense, the success of practical moves producing the statistics that form the ground that make a move practical as opposed to impractical. ‘The causality of the probable’, he called it. And both *Homo Academicus* (Bourdieu 1988) and *Weight of the World* (Bourdieu 1999) can be seen as studies of what happens when disjunctures arise between the practices arising from assessments of probability and the actuality of probability. For Bourdieu this meant that precisely the fruitfulness of the intellectual enterprise lay in taking advantage of these two forms of attention. Intellectuals must not forget, ‘what I know perfectly well ... but only in *the practical mode*, namely that they do not at all have the project of understanding and explaining which is mine as researcher’ (Bourdieu 2003: 288. Italics his).

In my view, Bourdieu is arguing against a prevalent anthropological bias by suggesting that we can, indeed we must, step back from our desire to experience ‘the natives’ point-of-view’ and instead (or in addition?) set that point of view in its material conditions of possibility. In this sense we are not measured as better anthropologists because we return home understanding better how the natives think, but precisely by taking advantage of the fact that we can take an intellectual perspective distinct from theirs. The difference between ourselves and the other means that there are limits to how we understand their practical sense, but there are advantages to be gained from the distinction: not between ‘them’ and ‘us’ but between practical sense and intellectual reflection.

Not surprisingly for Bourdieu the sociologist, the arrow – of probability – points forwards. For Williams the arrow of time points backwards. ‘Practical consciousness is what is actually lived, and not only what it is thought is being lived’ (Williams 1977: 130–31). The methodological issue that worried him is not Bourdieu’s. It was rather that when social analysts name elements of the world that are most acutely experienced when lived at *that* moment in the present, they lose the substantive quality of present experience: as though the word we use is like the fetishized commodity that obscures the actual practices that it represents.

The mistake as so often is in taking terms of analysis as terms of substance ... All the known complexities, the experienced tensions, shifts and uncertainties, the intricate forms of unevenness and confusion are against the terms of [this] reduction and soon, by extension, against social analysis itself. (Williams 1997: 129–30)

Obviously we are seeing very different configurations of what I am glossing as practical sense here. But what matters is that the two authors are trying to stretch beyond a kind of settled, perhaps slightly self confident, conceptual armoury in social and cultural studies. Each of them is challenged by the limits intellectuals have in recording and interpreting the way people engage with the practicality of life. The result in each case is to produce a fruitful reflection on a threshold that arises when a student of social and cultural practices both uses the practices of their own kind of work and discovers the disturbance that results. Rather than settling the disturbance it might be possible to use it as a way of getting at how this troubled kind of enquiry has useful political value.

For I think a kind of perspectival positionality is important here. What I try to show in this book is that when the purpose at hand begins from the perspective of a philosophy of praxis, that is to say from a motivation to enhance the leverage of radical democratic interventions in history, then the forming of the intellectual problem takes a particular shape. Certain questions are given high priority while others are reduced. This is not a dogmatic or rigid position. Time and again we see social analysts, from Marx to Gramsci to Foucault, when faced with a recalcitrant social world, reshaping the form their critique takes. So the possibility of praxis requires continuous assessments of the leverage gained from manoeuvres within this threshold arena.

Historical Realism

Although there is a major bias toward anthropology in this book I quite intentionally avoid restricting what I say to people in that profession. Rather I see the anthropological stance as a useful entry point for interrogating a broader array of critical social analysts. For example, there is a sense in which, often without realizing it, anthropologists began with a suspicious glance at the kind society they came from (e.g. Levi-Strauss 1973). From its beginnings anthropology's characterizing of most of its objects of study in contradistinction to modernity, capitalism, urbanism and so on, almost became its line of distinction from the other social 'sciences'. Its peculiar techniques and reportage – condensed in subsequent generations as the *doing* of 'fieldwork' and the *writing* of 'ethnography' – attained their special characteristics, such as they were, from the need to probe the cryptic mysteries of the social relations, practices and beliefs

supposedly qualitatively different from the world that produced the anthropologists themselves. Yet today, unlike the period when the distinct disciplines of social analysis arose at the end of the nineteenth century, we live in a kind of global society in which capitalism is (or capitalisms are) geographically pervasive. Even the spheres of intimacy and affect, like the family or friendship, seem from day to day to bend ever more under the weight of capital's fierce demands.

The mysteries awaiting discovery now therefore appear to be those of capitalism itself – how it works, what it does to us, what we do with it and so on. And this is so not just for those long associated with this kind of society – entrepreneurs and workers – but the vast array of people who find themselves at the beginning of the twenty-first century caught one way or the other in its tentacles, be they slum dwellers in Mumbai or illegal immigrants in Milan. It is almost as though the challenge of demystifying the remotely placed unfamiliar has been reversed; tools need to be found to demystify the shape-shifting placelessness of the here and now. This, in turn, means that the praxis of intellectuals, especially those familiar with the use of fieldwork and ethnography, are perpetually called into question. Let me suggest some of the ways these questions might arise.

The first has to do with the scale at which we do our work: the size of the space of the social world we see to be our appropriate ground of work and also its temporal span and its particularity as opposed to its generality. Ever since I first saw it when I was about fourteen I have always been fascinated by *The Third Man*: by its location on the boundary – geographically of course, between East and West, but also between the dubious Harry (Orson Wells) who makes things happen and the upstanding Holly (Joseph Cotton) who can't seem to make anything happen at all, least of all get Alida Valli to fall for him. As a boarding-school wimp I was annoyed by my sympathy for Holly and secretly but deeply in love with Harry. Anybody who has seen the film can't forget the scene in which Harry takes his old school pal, Holly, now confused and disillusioned with his one-time hero, up on the giant wheel. As the cage rises in the air, Holly asks his friend the crook how he can stomach what he does, the deaths he is responsible for. By the time Harry replies they are high above Vienna looking down at the people who look now like nothing but dots. Harry, annoyed by the question, threateningly throws open the cage door and forces Holly to look down: 'What difference would it make if a few of those dots stopped moving', he asks. Then the wheel descends and they are back on the ground, two coated and hatted men in the close setting of a street corner. 'In Italy, for thirty years under

the Borgias, they had warfare, terror, murder and bloodshed', says Harry, 'but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, and the Renaissance. In Switzerland they had brotherly love, they had five hundred years of democracy and peace, and what did they produce? The cuckoo clock.'

The wrap-up is what we all remember and it impressed me the more because it was Wells himself – Harry, of course – who wrote the lines, as Graham Greene later recorded. But the move from the ground up to the perspective on high and then down to the street again, that is what I want to convey here. It's the way of the film as a whole too of course. Greene has the micro drama of Holly, like the anthropologist perpetually and anxiously in search of his 'subject', Harry, who is seen in momentary fragments and whose real character eludes Holly until Harry is finally killed off and Holly can return home still puzzled but at least a little wiser. But taken out of its larger setting of the emerging Cold War, the story of a couple of ex-school buddies wouldn't amount to a hill of beans as Bogey famously put it.

Starting on the ground, steadily rising up in the cage to get a wider – though less 'human' – perspective, only to return slowly back to the street corner, this is what historical ethnography can do I think. Too often I hear my colleagues assuming, almost without question, that the task of anthropology begins and ends with the intimate world of 'ethnography'. 'It's what we do', I am told. Why? Apart from the fact that it's not even true – ethnographic fieldwork played a miniscule role in the contributions of some of the anthropologists I most admire – surely the task is to come to grips with historical reality, through whatever methods that requires.

It could I suppose be argued in the spirit of the age that there is room for variety: some do one thing and some another. But two things need to be said about this. In anthropology there isn't a very balanced distribution between the study of the intimate spaces of what is taken to be ethnography and what might be called a more global kind of project of the kind we saw for example with *Sweetness and Power* (Mintz 1986) or *Europe and the People without History* (Wolf 1982), and we see currently in the work of people like Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller (2002) and Jonathan and Kajsja Friedman (2008a, 2008b). I am not making the case for *just* anthropology on some grand kind of scale. We would all acknowledge that monopolization of one scale without reference to another is absurd. But training in most of the anthropology departments that I know is directed a great deal more at the intricacies involved in occupying the same spaces as the people being studied than in addressing the issue of how historical

forces expand and contract those spaces and engineer widely distinct kinds of articulations between and among them. I am told that there simply isn't time for it all – for either the period of training or for the period of research. And I understand this, at least as an initial problem. But this doesn't quite explain the continued celebration of the microscopic among my older colleagues; thirty or forty years at the job doesn't seem an especially restricted time period. Perhaps broadening our horizons would broaden our minds.

I am inclined anyway to insist on attention to articulations between different spheres of social interaction; articulations whose reciprocal causalities are a function of specific historical conjunctures – what Don Kalb calls 'critical junctions' (Kalb and Tak 2005: 1–27; Kalb 2005). The pertinence of one scale of interaction and how it articulates with another will vary from one time and place to another, as I note especially in Chapter 2. But this will also vary, depending on what level of social reality we are referring to. And this raises the second issue: is there a certain level of social reality that has become especially privileged in anthropology? Perhaps we shouldn't speak of articulation between social relations and practices on the one hand and interpretations and structures of feeling on the other. After all, disentangling the one from the other can do more harm than good to our understanding of the real world. But the extent to which anthropology has become so deeply committed to the interpretation of experience means that anthropologists only have something to say about this expressive level (and increasingly even the inexpressible level), whatever scale we speak of.

The expression 'political economy' in the context of anthropology was initially supposed to counter this kind of culturalist fixation. It was used in the sixties, in North America at least, to distinguish a certain approach simultaneously from the vulgar materialism of cultural ecology on the one hand and from Geertzian cultural anthropology on the other. It has had an odd and unruly upbringing since its entry into the family. Not the least of its difficulties was the fact that its early usage was the result of self-censorship on the part of those in the United States who were inclined towards a greater influence from Marx than from Durkheim and Weber as mediated by Talcott Parsons, who anyway had consigned anthropology to the study of culture alone (Roseberry 1996, 2002). Two problems arose from use of this code. One was the loss of clarity in the use of concepts and the difficulty in sorting out the ill match between historical materialism and the prevailing notions of socio/cultural totality prevailing at the time (Roseberry 1978; Wolf 1978; Mintz 1978). Another was that it lumped under the unspoken Marxisant

banner anthropologists with wildly different explanatory tools – from newly enlightened ex-cultural materialists and social evolutionists to anthropologists especially interested in Marxist historiography.⁵

These were early days. Political economy really meant Marxism and Marxism really meant materialism, whatever that might mean. And we can imagine that it could mean quite a lot of different things if we think of Marvin Harris's crude functionalism on the one hand and those influenced by Althusser and/or world system theory on the other. But the trouble was that Marx, especially as interpreted by 'Western Marxists' (Jay 1984; Anderson 1976), was as much a phenomenologist as he was a materialist, as useful for the hermeneutic sciences as the social sciences. And meanwhile the very success of the hitherto disguised U.S. Marxists had given Marxism a huge caché in the academy – as well as the debates enlivened by the almost endless years of U.S. military defeats in South East Asia of course. The result was a boom in Left cultural studies engaged in a vast array of Marxist approaches (see Grossman and Nelson 1988). Meanwhile across the Atlantic, two figures, one associated with the history of the working class (Thompson 1968) and the other with the history of the novel (Williams 1973), were used to add purchase to the explanatory and interpretive value of culture by understanding it in profoundly historical terms. So the two features of 'political economy' – its distinction from cultural determinism and its concern with historical ethnography – were now echoed in fields beyond anthropology.

As we approach the present therefore, two apparently mutually contradictory problems with use of the term 'political economy' for describing a particular approach or school of thought in anthropology arise. One is the association of the term with its early suspicion of cultural determinism. This has resulted in use of the term in anthropology generally (i.e. well beyond the U.S.) as a form of denigration: an anthropologist hopelessly incompetent in the study of culture's niceties. In response some have been persuaded to add a descriptor, hence: 'cultural political economy' (or even 'political economy of culture'). The second works against this. Given its continuing association in some vague way with the Left, many anthropologists feel that making some allusion to themselves as political economists shows evidence of progressive scholarship – this despite only a vague familiarity with historical materialism and a deep and abiding disgust for economics in any form.

While there are occasions throughout this book when I use it, there are then good reasons, at least in the anglophone world, *not* to use the term. My use of the term 'historical realism' however is not

only to distance myself from these confusions. I also think there is something to be said for the term in itself. It serves to emphasize the fact that society and culture, whether at the level of the field site or at the level of the world system, can only be studied historically. And it also serves to clarify my belief in the relative weight of historical reality over the constructedness of history. In the pages that follow it will become abundantly clear that I am fascinated by the way people think about history. But I think that, in their preoccupation with this important issue, writers in anthropology and cultural studies have tended to downplay the extent to which people's concern with history has to do precisely with their recognition of its gold standard in reality. One of the most mistakenly cited books in the early years of my career was Hobsbawm and Ranger's (1983) *The Invention of Tradition*. It was almost always cited to suggest that there was a sleight of hand involved. There was tradition and then there was 'invented' tradition. I don't know Terence Ranger, but I doubt very much if Eric Hobsbawm would be comfortable with this kind of radical distinction. Of course there is a sense in which much of tradition and much of history depends in some way on invention, on construction on narrative form and so on – and this should not be downplayed. But failure to come to terms with the materiality of the past can leave you very bruised and battered as you make your way across a town – across a rural landscape too, come to that. It is this reality that I refuse to downplay or give up on.

But there is another inclination I want to highlight by use of this expression about history's awful – or perhaps the better word today would be awesome – reality. Although the advocates of contingency would be horrified to be associated with such an expression, we are back again with the idea of history as 'one damned thing after another'. The problem is not with contingency as such – no cyclist gets to work in the morning without taking it into account. The problem is with the 'all'; or at least 'all that really matters' (is contingent). Given the state of finance capital and indeed capitalism more generally over the past few years, bankers would love intellectuals to assure the world that it was all contingent. *But it wasn't!* Except in quoted dialogue this is the only time I will use that punctuation mark. But it really is needed here, especially because of the culturist bias in so much anthropology today, not to mention critical analysis more generally. It didn't happen (just) because of traders' wet dreams. It didn't even happen (just) because of the duplicity in the top ranks of Lehman Bros, Goldman Sachs or Bear Stearns – though a pretty good case could be made for their responsibility. The major reason it happened

was because of the way in which the society we live in reproduces itself or, to put it more precisely, because of the way in which a dominant class bloc intervened in the logic of capital reproduction to ensure the perpetuation of their class position.

It is true that the interconnectedness of the issues makes it tempting for the intellectual equipped with any one skill set to retreat into the secure arena and collegial atmosphere of his or her own discipline, pleading for the limits of their own naivety. Anthropologists, cultural theorists, cultural historians, discourse theorists, political scientists and old Uncle Tom Cobley and all, may each have their own special 'expertise', their training. But this odd combination of timidity and hubris calls into question precisely what the responsibility of intellectuals as experts is. Mushroom pickers need to know which ones are poisonous. People who teach them, but only tell them about the ones that taste good and bad, are irresponsible. People could get sick – some could even die. Social and cultural analysts who justify their positions as intellectuals and who feel that position is one of responsibility and still yet insist that they are better to stick with what they (like to) know may be a bit like the mushroom pickers' gourmand teacher. Making a living out of teaching students about desire among rag pickers, or the humour of pastoralists, while feeling that it is not within one's mandate to understand the fundamentals of the society in which we all live ... well that seems to me a bit like forgetting to tell people about the mushrooms that make them die. I have recently been told that scholarship in anthropology is best advanced by 'making original arguments in the area in which you are most qualified', rather than straying off into the territory of 'economic and political processes involving the state', in which, not being properly trained ourselves, we simply repeat the findings of others (Gupta 2010: 179). This seems to me to make the issue of intellectual responsibility a little too precious, driven perhaps more by the concerns of professionalization that have become so central to graduate student training than by responsibilities coming from beyond the academic enclosure. As Raymond Williams said with some heat during an interview, 'Well, if you tell me that question goes outside your discipline, then bring me somebody whose discipline will cover it, or bloody well get outside the discipline and answer it yourself' (Williams 1989a: 157).

Whether working in anthropology, cultural studies, political philosophy or what have you, we do have to bring the greater picture right into our own concerns, from the beginning when we start to formulate our questions and then returning again and again to reformulate those questions. What we will find as we explore

the complexities of capital's reproduction and transformation will be neither entirely the outcome of some kind of iron logic but nor will it be fruitful to give up the game and call everything contingent. Seeking to expose the logic by which different kinds of capital are reproduced doesn't pre-empt taking into account a wide variety of contingencies. Indeed the word only has meaning in reference to what is not contingent. One part of the job is disentangling contingent moments from moments that emerge out of the logic of expanded or concentrated reproduction. Another job is understanding how this process is steered – through planning, management, risk avoidance, coercion, terror and so on – and knowing who is on the bridge doing the steering. This brings us to questions of critique and of politics.

Critique and Counter-politics

It is of course tempting to argue that global capital is so big and so complex that it's not really worth trying to determine if some people have a greater influence on the rudder than others. And if this seems a little unsatisfactory one can always turn away and simply blame 'the state' for the whole mess. And it is quite possible, indeed likely, that the risk strategies of finance capital and the scenario planning of dominant states are so wildly overdetermined that nobody has control over everything (did they ever?). But from one cluster of forces to another, from one complex of supply chains to another, from one regional combine to another, there *are* people together on the ship's bridge – identifiable class fractions seeking through alliances to control fields of force so as to ensure the expansion or reproduction of surplus production and extraction. There are ways we can speak of this. We can speak in spatial metaphors (Smith and Katz 1993) such as economic society and political society seeking to discover the particular interlacing of say production, finance and extractive capital in a given setting, as well as the institutions through which policy is made, possibly by the state and its various appendages and/or suprastate formations. We may be able to identify classes that arise in one arena and the alliances they need in another to ensure their position through the reproductive cycle and so on. It is quite obvious that, even beginning with such simple thought experiments as these, we arrive at a point where a whole variety of social, political, cultural and religious forms of power come into play in the Gramscian hegemonic sense, in the more Foucaultian cellular sense or the Deleuzian rhizomic sense. These in turn give rise

to multiple conjunctural contingencies. But these multiple forms of power are not to be found floating off across the city, each on its own magic carpet.

The task of political economy 'as critique' is to expose the immanent properties embedded in the reproductive and transformative features inherent in the different relations of capital (see Chapter 2), and to thread these through the constraints and contingencies of politics as expressed in those multiple forms of power. To get at this I find it useful to use the term 'politics' in this book in a number of ways – not all of them consistent. While meanings of the word are almost infinite, four sometimes overlapping usages are worth noting here. One is the rather general usage as you might find in a comment like, 'I used to be quite political but over the last few years I've lost interest in politics'. Here politics is used to mean some form of participation in the formal political institutions of the society in question, voting in periodic elections, debating the platforms of the established political parties and investing in the belief that shifts in personnel – Obama versus Romney for example – or in the priorities of one party over another are important. This is the first and most obvious usage.

It is no doubt connected to the second, but it is not quite what is meant by some writers when they speak of the end of the political. Two slightly different things are being alluded to here – one somewhat more Foucaultian, the other more Marxian. In the first case what is being alluded to is the way in which social issues hitherto understood to be a matter of politics and perhaps to be addressed differently according to political allegiance are now rendered in technical terms and become problems amenable only to discussion and solution by experts (Dean 1999; Mitchell 2002). Such people may either be employed by those in political office or may themselves be holders of political office. Mario Monti, the prime minister of Italy for two years recently, is literally such a person, having been appointed in his capacity as a financial expert. But the argument goes further. It is that all social issues are now rendered in technical terms to the point where a cadre of professional, though elected, politicians take on the role of expert over and above the role of democratic representative. The more Marxian reading associates the absence of politics with the absence in public discourse of reference to the ineluctable class element and hence inevitably *conflictual* character of contemporary societies (Wang Hui 2006; Zizek 2011). While each treats the absence of politics in a distinct way they both understand the absence in terms of a deficit in democratic sovereignty and this provides a frequent provocation in the chapters that follow.

Quite often in this book I make use of a third meaning of the word political by referring to 'political society'. This can be an awkward term if seen as a compartment alongside 'economic society' and 'civil society' in which exclusive functions are assigned to one arena or another. I do not use the terms in this way. Instead I use the term to refer to state-like moments in a social formation, though they may not in fact be undertaken by the sovereign state. The European Union would be one such example. But we need not be speaking of an actual fully formed institution. Political society refers to the political controls necessary for the reproduction of a given economic system. These are frequently the apparatuses of the state in a quite extensive sense – that is state organs and also private institutions and apparently 'non-governmental' organizations. But to avoid assuming that all these features take the form of state apparatuses, I use the term 'political society'.

The final meaning of politics I want to speak of motivates the particular shape this book takes. It can be summed up in the expression 'the philosophy of praxis'. Two historical forces become the focus of attention: the immanent features inherent to capitalist society and the counterforces that can be mustered against those features. So I make a distinction between criticism in this regard and critique. The former can take a critical stance towards prevailing society, finding it wanting for example in terms of inequality or injustice, and from the package of criticisms thus gathered a package of solutions might be suggested. Critique however refers to an attempt to understand the immanent features of a social phenomenon so as to find within those features their own negation. The assumption here is that social relations through time produce elements that effectively aid in their reproduction but also through the same cycle produce counterforces which find political expression in praxis.⁶ These kinds of politics then emerge along two interconnected fronts. One is a kind of politics that intervenes in and against the dominant features of the society of capital by negotiating within its own terms.⁷ I refer to this throughout the text as a politics of negotiation. Another kind of intervention denies the legitimacy and authority of the society of capital and hence also a kind of politics that can be negotiated in that society's terms. I refer to this as counter-politics.

As I have said for the expression 'political society', so here too: I am not speaking of compartments into which one or another actual political intervention can be assigned. Instead I find it useful to begin the exercise of radical intellectual enquiry into current society by asking how praxis might be enhanced. And I understand the end point

of that praxis to be a rejection of the society of capital, i.e. counter-politics; but along the way are the multiple forms of negotiated politics. It is my proposal that it is by focusing on the potentialities that can arise from the threshold between a politics of absolute refusal and a politics of suspicious negotiation that intellectuals might make a contribution to historical praxis.

This position is certainly influenced by Rancière's use of the term 'counter-politics' (Rancière 1999; Deranty 2003); but unlike his, my position is far more strongly embedded in a critique of political economy and does not identify counter-politics so strongly with voice and with the notion of *la politique du tort* (Rancière 1999, 2004, 2005). At various places through the following text I identify three elements which I believe to be the necessary foci of intellectual enquiry concerned with praxis. I refer to these as: the conditions of possibility, popular mobilization, and strategic action (sometimes I refer to this as leverage). The chapters that follow can be seen as triangulations of these three concerns, some referring to one or two of them, some to all three. Their points of reference are quite obvious I am sure. By conditions of possibility I mean the need for intellectuals to make a contribution to praxis by assessing the structural and conjunctural conditions that limit or set possibilities for praxis. Popular mobilization refers to organizational issues as well as matters having to do with the relationship between individual and collective subjectivity, while by strategic action I mean the need to assess the leverage that can be achieved through a particular political strategy. Rather than expand on these matters here I will rely on the various chapters to flesh out their pertinence, and will return to them in the Conclusion.

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The book is divided into three parts. The bulk of the chapters, those in Part II, fall into the category of historical ethnography. It could be said that each is tethered to a spot whose scale is usually associated with ethnography, that is to say a temporal scale embraced by short- and long-term fieldwork and a spatial scale that finds the enquirer living and working among the people being studied. But in fact I see these chapters as essays – attempts – to query what scale and the contemporary articulation of scales might imply for the way we do ethnography. Not surprisingly along the temporal scale I find myself in conversation with historians, while along the

spatial scale geographers have been useful guides. Because these are ethnographic kinds of social enquiry, place becomes both a constant presence and a troubling puzzle. Because I tend to enter the problem I am trying to address as one which has to do with the limits and possibilities of praxis, so place and politics get threaded into one another. As will be seen this is not a comfortable cloth to wear, but I still think that – globalization and the supposed society of flows notwithstanding – ‘place-ness’ is an aspect both of material reality and of intercommunicative subjectivity that we cannot easily dispense with.

Wrapped around these chapters are two others (plus a Conclusion) that would not conventionally be seen in terms of historical ethnography. The first of these, in Part I, is an especially long and necessarily abstract chapter. Readers familiar with *Capital* or who have read much more comprehensive introductions or guides might wish to skip this chapter, or perhaps confine their reading to the final section on Finance.⁸ But I would defend its importance in this book on two grounds. The first has to do with my sense that many people in anthropology, cultural studies and political philosophy understand themselves to be speaking in some way about capitalism, sometimes to the point of simply naturalizing what that implies, but they do not understand capitalism. And I think it is important that we should be quite clear about what that kind of society is. The second reason is that it is from the baseline of this way of thinking about the society that we live in that I start all my enquiries. So it is as though I am providing the reader with what in later chapters I take for granted, what for me goes without saying. So this second reason points to a cautionary note. Chapter 2 is not so much an authoritative account of the sociology of capitalism to be endorsed by all who work in the Marxian tradition. Rather it is simply – or perhaps not so simply – the tool kit I carry into the field.

The bulk of Part III is taken up with a chapter in which I seek to assess the conditions of possibility in the current conjuncture. As a result the scale at which the enquiry is set differs from the ethnographic chapters, and I freely admit that the assertions as a result are more provocative than sensitive to historical and geographical particularities. The purpose of this chapter conforms most closely to the epigram by Sebastiano Timpanaro that opens this book, ‘to fulfil a provisional function of critical stimulus’. Yet I believe that some of the provocations, rather than leading to empty spaces devoid of evidence or guidance, do in fact lead back to possible re-explorations of the ethnographic chapters. Set in the past as they are, they are about

history and, as Gramsci remarks to his son, as such they are about living people.

By calling this part ‘Politics’ Edge’ I have wanted to call up the various invocations of that word, ‘edge’: something beyond the centre, perhaps that darkened and dangerous place on the edge of town; the edge that cuts; and the irritant captured in the word ‘edgy’. These senses all emerge by the end of Chapter 6. I take up questions of the edge in the Conclusion, or rather of two edges. I am interested in why, on occasions throughout the writing of this book, I have found myself drawn to the notion of ‘threshold’. Perhaps it is that refusal to give up on place while even so being pushed out of one place and not yet arriving in another that explains it. Perhaps it is an awareness of the strength and comfort that comes with securing oneself in a place, a comfort zone, if not among friends then at least among people, things and ideas with which one has become familiar. Movement across the threshold formed by two edges (perhaps more) of ideas and positions that have a clarity of their own but a troubling discomfort as we cross between them – this seems a useful non-place for both intellectuals and counter-politics to be.

Notes

1. Adorno wrote this in the 1950s. It bears comparison with these remarks made by Aijaz Ahmad in the 1990s: ‘there has grown, because of equal allegiance to irreconcilable pressures, that same kind of eclecticism among the politically engaged theorists as among the more technician, conservative ones; it is not uncommon to find, say, Gramsci and Matthew Arnold being cited in favour of the same theoretical position, as if the vastly different political allegiances of these two figures were quite immaterial’ (Aijaz Ahmad 1994: 71).
2. There are a number of overlapping terms here, each of which produces its own effect: intelligencia, intellectual, academic, scholar, expert, and so on. There is even an extension towards the party functionary and the bureaucratic policy wonk in one direction and towards the artist in another – Zola being perhaps an early example of the engaged artist in the setting of the Drefus affair. I don’t want to lose these connections entirely (as I think Gramsci also did not), but ‘intellectual’ covers the most ground in what I discuss below.
3. I find this idea of *leverage* useful and expand on it further at various points throughout the book. I have no doubt that there are monastic kinds of scholars whose sole concerns are the niceties of scholarship for its own sake, but I don’t think most of us are of this kind. I think most of us want our work to have some kind of leverage; this may be confined to enhancing one’s status within a certain set of colleagues but mostly it is somewhat more than that. What that ‘more’ actually embraces will obviously vary, but I do want to extend this desire for leverage beyond those who are branded ‘political’ or even ‘radical’ by their colleagues. It seems important to recognize that the pursuit of leverage is not confined to the self-consciously politically active intellectual.

4. I am quite aware of Deleuze and Foucault's (1980) dismissal of the role of the intellectual, but I would agree with Radhakrishnan's assessment that, 'In the guise of retiring the "universal intellectual", Foucault retires the entire cadre of the intellectual and the many typologies that comprise that cadre. Of course, we are left with the specific intellectual, but this intellectual is "always already" dispossessed of macropolitical intentions' (Radhakrishnan 1996: 40).
5. In his review of three generations of 'anthropological political economy' in the United States, Bill Roseberry suggests that 'political economy has had two different but related meanings' (2002: 61): the one referring to the study of capitalism in its various regional and historical manifestations, and the other to 'explicit use of Marxian perspectives within anthropology. The second ... offers a particular theoretical approach to the substantive questions juggled by the first', and notes that the generation of the Sixties 'stands as the political economy generation *par excellence*' (ibid.). He then notes a drifting away from the centrality of capitalism and class for writers still frequently claiming allegiance to political economy. I take my intellectual history on this topic from Bill's various reflections (see also Roseberry 1997), but I think the word 'explicitly' is misleading (as he himself notes elsewhere [1978]. See also Vincent 1990). Many radical anthropologists of the 1960s were unfamiliar with the work of Marx, and this was frequently out of choice rather than neglect. Despite the cultural capital to be gained in that, and in the next two decades from citations of Continental Marxists especially, many professional anthropologists were still aware that the paranoid atmosphere of the previous period might return (and they were right). 'Marxism without guarantees' probably captures well the sentiments of those who preferred to stand on the sidelines cheering cautiously, and genuflecting at the right moments, but ready in due course to move on, less for intellectual than for professional reasons. For a discussion of anthropological political economy outside the United States, see Narotzky 2002.
6. My use of 'praxis' here is quite close to Rancière's use of *la politique*: 'Politics exists when the natural order of domination is interrupted by the institution of a part of those who have no part. This institution is the whole of politics as a specific form of connection' (Rancière 1999: 11). My usage does not conform perfectly to Rancière's way of understanding politics, as I note below. By 'praxis' I mean the ability of people as collective subjects to become a force in history, not merely the objects of other people's history.
7. I use the expression 'society of capital' here to avoid confusion. A more usual term would be simply 'capitalism' or 'capitalist society', but there are occasions in the text where I argue that capitalist society includes social relations and associated values and ideas that may not themselves be capitalist. So capitalist society may exhibit and provide opportunities for politics expressed in terms other than those of capital. The term 'society of capital' refers to a society whose reproduction serves the purpose of reproducing capital in its various forms (see, for example, Sanyal 2007).
8. Four books which complement one another in this regard are Harvey (2010) which takes us carefully through Volume I by helping us to grapple with Marx's argument rather than simplifying it as I do here; Balibar (1995) which is a wonderful critical engagement with the way Marx thought; I.I. Rubin ([1928] 1973) which is a mind-blowing engagement with what he calls 'commodity-capitalism'; and Harman (2009), which begins with helpful remarks on Marx's work but takes us further, dealing with finance in the last sections of the book.