

### **Editors' Note**

This number marks the inauguration of the second series of *Mediations*, the journal of the Marxist Literary Group. *Mediations* has circulated in various forms and formats since the early 1970s, and is now distributed free on the web. At a time when, as one of this issue's contributors has remarked elsewhere, the near closure of the global economic system has paradoxically led to renewed attention to a Marxist discourse that had, to some, ever since — well, pick your date — seemed obsolete and in desperate need of rethinking, or at least had seemed ripe for scavenging by other discourses, this is a particularly opportune moment to be returning *Mediations* to circulation.

This second series of *Mediations*, published twice yearly, is in fact two series running in parallel. The Spring issues are peer reviewed and open submission. The Fall issues, like this one, consist of dossiers of material, usually in translation, on non-U.S. themes of interest. This year's dossier collects material from Brazil; more specifically, from a nucleus of Marxist thinkers in various disciplines (philosophy, history, literary theory, sociology, theater) who can claim São Paulo as their intellectual home. The core of their work is the relationship between broadly cultural phenomena and economic history; most particularly, the history that produces Brazil (but of course, not only Brazil, far from it) as a peripheral economy within several mutations of the modern capitalist system. Of paramount importance to each of these thinkers is the differential functioning of capitalist relations of production across geographical divisions of labor. In other words, it is never a matter of using the history of capitalism to collapse differences among regions or countries; but neither is it a matter of fetishizing such differences as having a substantial existence outside the history of capitalism. In other words, it is a question of studying the differential effects produced by a single process. The lessons drawn and insights gained are various and

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profound: not only for an understanding of contemporary capitalism and contemporary society in general, but for the specific aspects of contemporary capitalism to which the first-world critic, even the first-world critic on the Left, is often blind.

We begin with the philosopher and Hegel scholar Paulo Arantes's "Panic Twice in the City," written in the aftermath of the events of May 2006, when São Paulo was shut down by attacks originating in a series of prison revolts. Mainstream North American reporting of the episode was typically sensationalist, but it does not appear to have been notably worse than its Brazilian counterpart. Arantes uncovers the meaning of the event by a surprising, but in retrospect necessary juxtaposition, placing it alongside a general strike that paralyzed São Paulo in 1917. Far from representing chaos, the disruption of the social order is in each case structured. The 1917 episode, though it initially presents the appearance, at least to the privileged classes, of mere bedlam, is quickly recognized by all sides as obeying a classical binary class logic, and the two sides wind up quite literally at the bargaining table. The logic of the 2006 episode, which springs into relief in comparison with the older one, is quite different, and offers insights into what class analysis can mean under conditions of deindustrialization and of the privatization of such basic public goods as order itself, as well as into the psychological and political effects, reaching far beyond Brazil or the third world more generally, of the functionalization of terror, itself only possible in its current form after the privatization of futurity.

From there we move to two essays by the great Brazilian literary critic Roberto Schwarz. Best known in the U.S. for his writings on Brazilian literature and particularly on Machado de Assis, Schwarz is here writing on European rather than Brazilian material. However, both contributions, the first obliquely and the second explicitly, find new meaning in these texts by exploring their insertion into a Brazilian context. The first article, from early in Schwarz's career, is a brilliant reading of Kafka's "Worries of a Family Man," a text that fascinated Adorno and Benjamin, neither of whom ventured to offer anything so definite as an interpretation. Schwarz, while making use of these and other earlier analyses — think of Benjamin's application to Kafka of the Brechtian notion of the gestic, which is mobilized quite differently here — boldly steps in and, to use a terminology that Deleuze would invent for Kafka a decade later, names the assemblage — class society — in which the narrative machine called "Odradek" can take flight. Schwarz's text is itself an allegory — the clue is the reference to "white men," which gives the reading a context foreign to Kafka's own — but that more particular allegory is made via an immanent interpretation of Kafka's text, so that the latter, once viewed through the lens of everyday life on the periphery of

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capitalism, ultimately comes to embody, in gestic form, an anxiety peculiar to property relations under capitalism.

The second essay, from a recent collection (of which Milton Ohata provides a critical summary and review in this issue), concerns the reception in Brazil of Brechtian epic theater. It begins from a question that is all the more scandalous since it comes from the Portuguese translator of *Saint Joan of the Stockyards* and *Galileo*: What if Brecht no longer has any relevance whatsoever? Schwarz searches carefully for an historical justification for Brechtian practice, beginning from an initial contradiction in Brecht's method through a series of ambiguities suffered by Brechtian or quasi-Brechtian practice in Brazil, from the modernizations of the 1950s to the present day. But as Schwarz takes us simultaneously through the political and economic history of contemporary Brazil and possible permutations of the Brechtian problematic, contradictions — or is it a single contradiction, assuming multiple forms? — keep reappearing. Despite his evident sympathy for Brecht and the Brechtian, Schwarz's tour takes us everywhere but out of the deadlock. But a new question arises. In spite of everything, *St. Joan* speaks to the present. We know this, the actors know this, the audience knows this. How is it possible? Schwarz turns from Brecht the theorist of his own practice to Brecht the playwright to reveal the brutal, almost obscene parody that lies buried at the heart of *St. Joan*, a parody which reaches into the deepest pores of the dialogue and exposes an attitude proper to capitalist competition — call it cleverness-unto-death — that speaks as much to the still-looming global liquidity crisis and the threat of environmental ruin as it does to the stock market crash of Brecht's own day.

An indispensable theorist of epic theater herself, Iná Camargo Costa reports on the theory and practice of contemporary independent theater groups in São Paulo. Her contribution provides a sense of the richness of this scene, at the same time as it outlines some of the limitations of the assumptions that underlie it. The undergirding theme of the essay is that of theater as a response to barbarism. The logic of barbarism in this essay makes explicit reference to the German political economist Robert Kurz, who describes a kind of crisis, originating with the increasing structural redundancy of human labor power, which has the potential for permanence, or at least permanence within capitalism. Its effects are felt first in the "developing" world, but cannot be contained there forever. That is, "barbarism" names not a punctual crisis with a beginning and an end, but rather the emergent condition of capitalism itself. Barbarism is clearly cognate with terror in the Arantes essay, and crisis in the Schwarz (who, in fact, introduced Kurz into the Brazilian conversation), but it also has a specific meaning which can best be understood when Costa juxtaposes it with the older, Benjaminian thesis on

culture and barbarism. For Benjamin, barbarism was the secret underside of culture. For Costa, on the contrary, barbarism is the manifest condition of contemporary social life, and mainstream culture — including “alternative” and “cult” attractions within it — is a kind of boot camp for surviving it. Under these conditions, the decision to make art — and, not necessarily by choice, art that doesn't sell — seems either self-indulgent or mad. The only possible choice, it seems, is to make art that speaks directly to barbarism itself. The second half of the essay is concerned with the practice of criticism. What is the critical mode that would best make this new theater intelligible?

Changing modes, we turn to the sociologist Francisco de Oliveira's analysis of contemporary politics in Brazil. Oliveira's contribution is, of necessity, thick with detail (and acronyms) concerning the recent history of Brazilian political and economic institutions, but this surface difficulty is worth overcoming. Oliveira's task is to understand the meaning, both for Brazilian politics and for Left strategy in the neoliberal era more generally, of the presidency of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. Lula's presidency was initially understood in the U.S. as well as in Brazil as part of a wave of Left victories that swept Latin America in the first years of this century. The reality has been different. Oliveira describes Lula — possibly the only human being to maintain cordial personal relations with both Hugo Chávez and George W. Bush — as the “man without qualities,” an empty signifier that was initially able to appeal to various constituencies at a moment when, partly due to the ascendancy of a financial sector structurally in conflict with industrial capital, no class fraction stood a plausible chance of constructing a hegemonic position. The framing device of the essay, but also its lesson, is the peculiarity of the Russian revolution, which was famously double, with Lenin's “crossing of the Rubicon” representing a charismatic decision in a moment of indeterminacy. Nor, famously, was the Russian revolution a phenomenon of the fully industrialized center, but rather of the underdeveloped periphery. The beginning of this century, on the deindustrializing periphery of contemporary capitalism, was characterized by a similar moment of indeterminacy. With hegemony impossible, what were Lula and his party to do with the power they had acquired? For Oliveira, Lula crosses the Rubicon in the wrong direction, for reasons which are both matters of decision and of much larger national, regional, and global political and economic processes.

Finally, we turn to the historian Luiz Felipe de Alencastro. Based on research that forms the foundation of his recent book on the Brazilian slave trade (also reviewed by Milton Ohata in this issue), Alencastro undertakes a wholesale re-ordering of the time and space that constitutes what we think of

as the history of Brazil. Here it is mutations in the mode of production — in the case of colonial Brazil, in the slave economy — that produce both the spatial connections and temporal disjunctions that comprise the pre-history of Brazil. Rio de Janeiro is thus “closer” to Luanda than it is to parts of modern-day Brazil which were excluded from the slave-economy circuit. The truth of Brazil, we might say, is Angola: since Brazil is in fact constituted by the African slave trade — Alencastro insists that until the middle of the 19th century Brazil experiences only a single, three-century economic cycle, that of the slave trade — the history of Angola is more integral to the history of Brazil than is the history of much of Brazil itself. In a fascinating postscript to Ohata's review of *O Trato dos viventes*, Alencastro includes a decades-old review that foreshadows the work presented here. There the key date in Brazilian history is asserted to be not that of the Brazilianization of the Portuguese empire (1808), the declaration of independence (1822), or the establishment of the Republic (1889). Rather, the decisive date is 1850, when the slave trade is finally outlawed in Brazil. Only at that moment is the Brazilian territory transformed from a node in the colonial system, umbilically joined to zones of slave reproduction in Africa and the tribute-taking metropolitan centers of Portugal or England, to what it is today, a condition which is itself currently under mutation but which centrally concerns all of the writers included here: a peripheral economy dependent on the industrialized center.

This issue is largely the work of those of us with substantial knowledge of Portuguese: Nicholas Brown, Maria Elisa Cevasco, Neil Larsen, Silvia López, and Emilio Sauri. While initial translations were produced by individuals, the final drafts have passed under five sets of eyes, and so while credit quite properly goes to individual translators, any errors are collective responsibilities. Under these conditions it is impossible to speak of any particular philosophy of translation. Let us just say that while translation has tended to flatten out the differences among the very different styles represented by our contributors, we have tried to retain some impression of their distinct voices. It is nearly impossible to convey in translation the distinction between, say, the long sentence in Roberto Schwarz's essays — where grammatical subordination acts as a brake on the fury behind the ideas, a kind of discipline, not unlike that of the dialectic itself, imposed upon the explosive material of contradiction — and the long sentences of Paulo Arantes, whose angular subordinations serve on the contrary to expose contradiction in its rawness and to give the prose its deliberately jagged edge. But we have done our best.

Nicholas Brown, for the *Mediations* editors