*Modern Intellectual History*, 13, 3 (2016), pp. 831–840 
doi:10.1017/S1479244314000705

# UNTIMELY HESITATIONS*

KNOX PEDEN
School of Philosophy, Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University
E-mail: knox.peden@anu.edu.au

Warren Breckman, *Adventures of the Symbolic: Post-Marxism and Radical Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013)

Intellectual historians owe Nietzsche a debt for many things, not least for lending the quality of "untimeliness" a positive connotation. In the late 1990s, when Marxism was arguably at its nadir as an intellectual program, much less a political one, Warren Breckman published an insightful study of Marx's early thought and its genesis out of a series of disputes with the Young Hegelians concerning the state and its ambiguous relationship with theological conceptions of authority. The untimeliness of Breckman's intervention had much to recommend it. Taking his distance from the pallbearers, Breckman showed that a historical inquiry into the Marxist enterprise increased rather than diminished its contemporary relevance. In the wake of the eastern bloc's collapse, "civil society" had become the order of the day. Breckman showed that, far from being an innocuous panacea to the terror of state power, the concept had its own contested political history, one that Marx grappled with in ways whose resonance has only grown in the decade since Breckman's first book appeared.[1]

Today books on Marxism seem to have regained their timeliness, which makes it all the more striking to find the virtues of the untimely again at the forefront of Breckman's work in *Adventures of the Symbolic: Post-Marxism and Radical Democracy*. A variety of factors have contributed to the resurgence of Marxism's fortunes, chief among them the financial collapse of 2008 and the effort to render its consequences historically and politically intelligible. Crisis talk tends to precipitate new political energies and capitalize on extant ones in equal measure, and the current period is no exception. Within certain sectors of political thought and the humanities more generally, one has long felt a growing fatigue with the

* Research for this review essay was supported by the Australian Research Council (DE140101770).

1 Warren Breckman, *Marx, the Young Hegelians, and the Origins of Radical Social Theory* (Cambridge, 1999).

cynicism of a so-called postmodern condition and a cultural politics focused on dispersed identities. The renewal of Marxist energies suits the present as a result of this confluence—an economic situation that has given a new lease to analyses of capital that take a broadly Marxian cast and a renascent radicalism in which political transformation is no longer a maligned concept. Naturally, this renewal has already brokered skepticism, pending the inevitable backlash. Rejoinders to the "millennial Marxists" share their enthusiasm for the abstraction required to understand political economy in its contemporary manifestations, but they demur from an approach that hews too closely to Marxism as a theoretical canon. Marxism's spectacular bankruptcy as a state ideology colors these responses as well.[2]

*Adventures of the Symbolic* is more than a response to the vicissitudes of Marxist enthusiasm, however. It is the product of a deeply felt and rigorous engagement with a tradition of political and philosophical thought that has both the Marxist canon and the Marxist experience at its center. The two terms of the book's subtitle—"Post-Marxism" and "Radical Democracy"—respectively name Breckman's historical object and theoretical agenda. Like the actors of post-Marxism who play leading roles in his narrative, Breckman's attitude toward the Marxist tradition is grounded in an ambivalence whose indulgence in the acerbic never stoops to the sardonic. The Marxist tradition is too valuable a resource to be jettisoned in the quest for emancipatory forms of social struggle and political engagement, but nor should it be accorded any apologia for its errors.

Conceived before 2008, Breckman's new volume deepens and expands a line of inquiry of his earlier work. Subtitled "Dethroning the Self," Breckman's first book succeeded in dethroning Marx, which is to say it restored historical complexity and nuance to an intellectual project that had become sclerotic after a century of abuse from epigones and detractors alike.[3] Deprived of his kingly status, Marx was one modern thinker among others, albeit one who continues to repay reading.

---

[2] For a brief overview of recent Marxist writings, in which a sense of generational recovery is made explicit, see Benjamin Kunkel, *Utopia or Bust* (London, 2014). The rise of David Harvey's popularity might be taken as exemplary of the renewal of interest in Marxist political economy. See, e.g., David Harvey, *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism* (Oxford, 2014). The enthusiastic reception of Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA, 2014), in spring 2014 plays a role in this phenomenon, despite its author's putative indifference to Marxism. For a critical assessment, and the coinage of "millennial Marxists," see Timothy Shenk, "What Was Socialism?", *The Nation*, 5 May 2014, 27–37.

[3] It should go without saying that Breckman was not the first to approach Marx in this way. Compare, for example, the entire tradition of Western Marxism. The particular value of Breckman's study was the breadth of his textual and contextual engagement with the Young Hegelian firmament of Marx's early thought.

Yet if the first volume gave us a Marx without Marxism, Breckman's new book entreats us to something like Marxism without Marx. The book is essentially void of any substantive engagement with Marx's critique of political economy, on Breckman's part or on that of the thinkers he covers. And if one considers the scientific analysis of capital to be essential to Marx's project (however generously or pejoratively one wants to conceive the term "scientific"), then the Marxism in this book is indeed one without Marx. But of course the subject of the book is not Marxism, but "post-Marxism." The ambiguity of this appellation never receives extended treatment in *Adventures of the Symbolic*, but perhaps this is because it is an ambiguity that forms the crux of the inquiry itself. Although Breckman's effort takes the form of an intellectual-historical narrative, his analysis is effectively coextensive with an effort to develop a conception of radical political engagement devoted to principles of emancipation and equality that nevertheless remains immune to the authoritarian impulses that have marred Marxism's history. In his pursuit of this theoretical end, Breckman widens the scope of his perspective considerably. While the book is nominally about a series of post-Marxist thinkers—from Cornelius Castoriadis to Slavoj Žižek (although Louis Althusser and Jean Baudrillard garner brief attention as well)—it seeks to tether the concerns of these thinkers to an alternative genealogy of radical critique rooted in nineteenth-century Romanticism.

The tie that binds these temporally disparate instances is the conceptual fulcrum of Breckman's account: the symbolic. Eluding easy definition, the symbolic is suffused with an ineradicable ambiguity, be it as a category of analysis or as a figure of aesthetic experience. As Breckman presents it in an early discussion of the Romantic setting,

> the symbol is simultaneously a figure that concentrates *and* disperses meaning; it is a powerful figure, not just one sign among others, but one that has the paradoxical power both to present or body forth *and* to accentuate the gap between the sign and the signified. (34, original emphasis)

In a later discussion of Heinrich Heine, Breckman reiterates the point: "The symbol's possibility as an expressive and communicative form rested in turn on a further tension, between the *impossibility* of full presence of meaning and the overabundance of meaning in relation to the form of expression" (65, original emphasis). The symbolic is "too polyvalent" and its uses have been "too diverse" to allow for a singular definition of its use and purpose (12). In this, it is emblematic—not to say symbolic—of the foundational ethic of radical democracy that Breckman's study seeks to promote. Generative of difference, resistant to closure, anti-foundationalism finds an expansive brief in *Adventures of the Symbolic*.

Breckman is explicit about the dialectical cast of his account in the book's introduction, where he promises to deliver 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" (8). Often dialectical presentation draws its effectiveness from the power of the twist ending, a return to the origin that implicates us in the telling and provokes us to see things anew. But Breckman gives away the ghost at the outset, and his very explicitness is what gives his work not only its ethical power, but also its cogency and integrity as a work of intellectual history. In other words, Breckman is explicitly, that is to say *decidedly*, ambivalent about Marxism as an intellectual system with a history and, quite possibly, a future.[4] This ambivalence suffuses his discrete analyses as well. In a story ultimately without heroes or villains, the protagonists are subjected to searching criticism while the antagonists receive a hearing whose fairness rivals that of their acolytes. Here Castoriadis and Žižek are the main cases in point.

This ambivalence is not without its frustrations. Breckman seems keenly aware of the ambition of his generalizations (NB his narrative promises to be "more or less coherent"), and the result is a fair amount of hedging to make the concepts hang together in the way Breckman wants them to. Central to his elevation of the symbolic as a master concept for his account is its power to unite a post-structuralist moment with a nineteenth-century Romantic one. Clearly the link between post-structuralism and Romanticism is well established and uncontroversial.[5] But Breckman wants the symbolic to do more work in this regard. He frames the limitations of structuralism in precisely these terms. Too static in its formulation, "The structuralist understanding of the symbolic is incapable of conceiving forms of critical thought and action that could disrupt hegemonic ideological forms, as structuralism takes them to be constitutive of our subjectivity itself" (12). Structuralism locks itself in a particularly vicious hermeneutic circle by making the symbolic order at once determinant of our experience and the condition of possibility for our analysis of that experience.

---

4 See Breckman's discussion of John Milbank's radical orthodoxy, where he breaks the fourth wall to make his point: "Indeed, one of the questions that lurks behind our investigation of the post-Marxist adventure of the symbolic is whether a secular politics can recapture a vital sense of complexity and ambiguity without lapsing into the explicit or covert theological view that Milbank believes exercises a monopoly over these qualities. More precisely, I am concerned with the survival of complexity and ambiguity within the modern emancipatory project, not just as obstacles that will be overcome but also as irreducible—and even enabling—conditions for the attempt to create meaning" (54–55).

5 The link is essential to one of the canonical works of post-structuralism: Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. Phillip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (Albany, NY, 1988).

The insertion of non-identity into the symbol, epitome of Romantic poetics and the imperative of deconstruction in a nutshell, allows for the programmatic openness and polyvalence that form the basis of truly radical democracy for Breckman.

The parity here is not just between post-structuralism and Romanticism, however; it also serves to link structuralism to the overly scientistic or indeed positivist mode of critique and social science that eclipsed Romanticism in the first place. It is this conceptual genealogy and historical analogy that warrants Breckman's early chapters on the Romantic tendencies of the Young Hegelians and the underappreciated thought of Marx's rival Pierre Leroux.[6] The first chapter revisits the terrain of Breckman's earlier work in order to show the ways in which thinkers like Bruno Bauer, Ludwig Feuerbach, and David Friedrich Strauss struggled to achieve a "desymbolization" of thought that would arrive at concrete forms of worldly understanding. But of course the lesson of this history is that desymbolization was no easy task, as the symbol was an essential, mediating element of any mode of understanding *tout court*. Feuerbach's experience was paramount in this regard as he "passed from the religious symbolic to the real to a reinvocation of the symbolic as an irreducible dimension of naturalism" (51). In other words, symbols were no longer a barrier to one's encounter with the "real" but the medium of it. This ambiguity was central to the Romantic socialism of Pierre Leroux, for whom "the symbol embodies a meaning but remains indeterminate precisely because the meaning itself is unmasterable" (66). An ardent believer in a transcendental deity, Leroux insisted on the unrepresentable nature of political being in a manner analogous to that in which the *corpus mysticum* of Christ is an avatar of meaning that instantiates a gap more than it closes one (68). Anticipating Marcel Gauchet's work, Leroux saw the transcendental horizon of meaning formed by this inscrutability as a kind of guarantor for a space of social discord and free dispute. Marx, for his part, regarded Leroux's mode of the symbolic as a mode of obfuscation. Any critique worth its salt must be able to present the material genesis of symbols, which is precisely what *Capital* would set out to do.

The chapter on Leroux and Marx is the most incongruous in Breckman's book because it is burdened with getting us from the ambivalent Romanticism of post-Hegelianism to the ambivalent Marxism of postwar France in one fell swoop. Indeed, after the analysis of Marx's struggle with the symbolic, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Althusser, and Baudrillard are subjected to even more cursory assessments

[6] Cf. Dalia Nassar, *The Romantic Absolute: Being and Knowing in Early German Romantic Philosophy, 1795–1804* (Chicago, 2013), which, though focused on an earlier period, likewise challenges Hegelian hegemony via a fresh examination of Romanticism's contribution to philosophy.

that aim to show that, when it comes to the symbolic, one must either accept the indeterminacy of its at once material and ideal status, as Merleau-Ponty was wont to do, or instead witness the stagnation of one's intellectual project in a dogmatic affirmation of the symbolic as an ineradicable and subjugating force, as with Althusser and Baudrillard.

The opening chapters of *Adventures of the Symbolic* are slightly erratic, alternating between the panoramic sweep and the revealing detail. Breckman's analysis settles in to a more measured pace when it alights on Cornelius Castoriadis and his underappreciated project, which was shaped by his experiences of communist politics in postwar France as well as his native Greece. This chapter and the next, on Claude Lefort and Marcel Gauchet, form the heart of the book and the site of Breckman's most extensive theoretical elaboration of his central concerns. The main virtue of Castoriadis's work was twofold. In addition to pulling Marxist approaches to society away from the authoritarianism of the party form, he also sought to pull Lacanian psychoanalysis away from its obsessive and arguably conservative focus on *lack*, covered over by imaginary mystifications, toward a reconsidering of the "social imaginary" as a site of plenitude and creative affirmation. Unlike Deleuze and Guattari, however, who retooled the concept of desire in productive ways that nevertheless retained a sense of impersonality, Castoriadis remained committed to "autonomy" as a viable, if not the supreme, goal of political thought and activism. His work maintained itself in an apparently endless equivocation between the individual and the communal on this score. "Politics," Breckman writes, "like the individual psyche, is part of a world that is obscure and unmasterable, yet capable of elucidation" (134). This commitment to the rational, explicatory elements of political theory remained essential to Castoriadis's project. Despite the ostensible brief for post-Marxism, Breckman's chapter seems to focus more on Castoriadis's efforts to generate a properly conceived post-structuralism, with Lévi-Strauss and Lacan proving to be his main interlocutors.

The engagement with Marxism is more pronounced in Breckman's assessment of Lefort and his student Gauchet. Like Marx, Lefort's effort to think a properly secular concept of politics takes as its point of departure an extensive engagement with religion. For Lefort, the profound lesson of religious experience and the history of religion that political philosophy ignores to its peril is the notion that the institution of society—that is to say, the experience of communality—does not have a self-transparent act of foundation at its source. Whatever Castoriadis's hopes to the contrary, society is constitutively heteronomous, open to, and in fact constituted in the relation to, its "other." After the collapse of religious orders, this other can be either a spatial outside or a temporal future. In any event, autonomy is an inoperative goal, and the disasters of modern politics, in Lefort's view, are consequent on an effort to occupy or obscure the empty place that lies

at the heart of modern democratic experience. Lefort's break with voluntarism, vestiges of which remained in Castoriadis's project, is unequivocal, given that "the collapse of theological representations of the world symbolically encouraged the emergence of a misleading representation of society as a sui generis creation of human will" (165).

Part of the power of Lefort's thought comes from the way in which it yields a philosophical history of modernity to rival the Marxist account, one in which the heteronomies of religious experience, however secularized, will continue to play an operative role. Marcel Gauchet will develop this line of thought in an even more explicit way, developing a political philosophy that seems more akin to a "counter-Marxism" than to a "post-Marxism." "The history of the disenchantment of the world," Breckman suggests, referencing Gauchet's most famous work, "served Gauchet as a vehicle for expressing a generation's disenchantment with its former political commitments" (174).[7] And yet, in his increasing focus on the importance of institutions and their symbolic efficacy, "there is no mistaking that Gauchet's emphasis lies on the legitimizing function of symbolic form and not on the transformative possibilities of collective activism" (179–80). The analysis here is deft. The contrast between Lefort and Gauchet is one that inheres in the symbolic itself. Where Lefort locates spaces for creative activism in the interstices of symbolic fracture, Gauchet sees the weight of institutions that bridle us as being for the better, especially in the way that it forestalls the transformative elements of symbolic projection that were dear to the Romantic sensibility.

The focus on the interstitial and the heteronomous reasserts itself in Breckman's approving take on Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985), in which Marxism finally unmoors itself from any prescriptive notions of truth in favor of a vision of the social field as ontologically riven by antagonistic positions. Again, the equivocal status of the symbolic shows itself. For, just as Laclau and Mouffe affirm its enabling quality, Slavoj Žižek begins to reassert its "subjectivizing" role in his dialogue with their work. In his earlier writings this takes the form of an ideologically interpellated subjectivity familiar from Althusserianism.[8] But what troubles Breckman the most, it seems, is the way that Žižek will come to make a virtue of the subjectivizing tendencies of the "big Other." Breckman breaks through the thicket of Žižekian jest to pursue an analysis that gives his work its theoretical due. But a relatively recent joke of Žižek's makes the point well:

---

7 See Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*, trans. Oscar Burge (Princeton, 1999).

8 Cf. Louis Althusser's famous essay on the subject, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," reprinted in Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (London, 2014), 232–72.

For decades, a classic joke has been circulating among Lacanians to exemplify the key role of the Other's knowledge: a man who believes himself to be a kernel of grain is taken to a mental institution where the doctors do their best to convince him that he is not a kernel of grain but a man; however, when he is cured (convinced that he is not a kernel of grain but a man) and allowed to leave the hospital, he immediately comes back, trembling and very scared—there is a chicken outside the door, and he is afraid it will eat him. "My dear fellow," says his doctor, "you know very well that you are not a kernel of grain but a man." "Of course I know," replies the patient, "but does the chicken?"[9]

The point of Žižek's joke is to identify the inescapable power of the symbolic as the "big Other" in which our subjectivity is constituted. The problem, however, is that Žižek is on record for noting that if we cannot get rid of the chicken, maybe we just need a different chicken.[10] We need a new, better "big Other." This disposition might broker a new form of association, but Breckman would likely see this as further evidence of Žižek's tendency toward authoritarianism, regarding the symbolic less as an enabling than as a determinant condition engineered by whoever the "master" happens to be in a given political setting.

With his discussion of Žižek, Breckman's account splinters into the present. Jacques Derrida, who has hovered as a ghostly presence throughout the book, resurfaces, and Judith Butler's debate with Laclau and Žižek in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* is addressed.[11] The contemporary references proliferate in the Epilogue, in which the ideas of Alain Badiou and Jacques Rancière receive brief attention, and Breckman returns to reconsider his verdict on Marxism. Here the equivocations multiply until they coalesce in a resounding affirmation of democracy as "the regime of ambivalence and ambiguity par excellence" (286). "The radical democrat," Breckman writes, "recognizes the absence of any ultimate democratic legitimacy at the same time as she affirms the permanent search for legitimacy" (286). Consistent to the end, this affirmation of indeterminacy is drawn from an indeterminacy that Breckman's own account has made clear at a relatively high level of ontological abstraction. Virtually absent for the bulk of his narrative, political economy as the cornerstone of Marxist thinking returns in the Epilogue and with it the unstable relation between the "social" and the "political" in Marxist thought.

---

9 Slavoj Žižek, *Žižek's Jokes (Did You Hear the One about Hegel and Negation?)* (Cambridge, MA, 2014), 67.

10 See, e.g., his lecture at Powell's City of Books in Portland, 9 Sept. 2008: "Maybe We Just Need a Different Chicken . . . : Politeness and Civility in the Function of Contemporary Ideology," online at www.youtube.com/watch?v=u1Kb4JZGpA0, last accessed September 2014.

11 Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (London, 2000).

If the main current of Marxism "strongly embraced a desymbolizing impulse, epistemological realism, and economistic materialism," then the virtue of the post-Marxism under review in Breckman's account lay in its recognition that the "symbolic offered a way to rethink the social space as contingent and open, irreducible to an anterior or prior instance of foundation beyond representation" (268). In line with "the more ambivalent and ambiguous sensibility of leftist theorists chastened by the history of the twentieth-century socialist experience," the symbolic "furnished the lever switching left-wing theory from a preoccupation with the logic of the social to an exploration of the logic of the political" (268). And yet, as Breckman will note several pages later, "The real problem [with post-Marxist antifoundationalism] has rested in the inclination, as the hold of a foundational logic of the social weakened, to accentuate contingency and indeterminacy while ignoring constraints" (272). Breckman regards these constraints in terms that are historical and ontological in equal measure, culled mainly from Lefort's project. But arguably in this instance—which, to be clear, is the present instance—the desire for epistemology and categorical analysis, precisely those elements of theoretical engagement that can identify restraints in a more concrete and practicable way, has reemerged in an insistent fashion. Political economy reasserts itself, then, only to be submitted to an ontological register that has been the main thread of the preceding account. The perils of presentist engagement slightly inflect Breckman's concluding passages, as his invocations of Zuccotti Park ring more historical than he likely intended. In other words, the upshot of Marxism today lies less in the forms of associational activism it countenances in an existential way than in the grids of intelligibility that it seems still to provide for a rudderless present.[12]

The virtue of Breckman's assessment of post-Marxism lies in the way it ultimately refuses a temptation that accompanies his account. The indeterminacy of the symbolic—its salutary power as the sign itself of ambivalence—is grounded

[12] There is also a certain temporal discrepancy in Breckman's endorsement of "the 'politics of ambivalence or ambiguity' that Fredric Jameson believes is called for in our age" (286). On the one hand, the invocation of Jameson suggests a stepping back from the "post-Marxist" paradigm, given that Jameson has rarely expressed anything better than bemused skepticism for the concept. On the other hand, and more to the point, Breckman cites the phrase from Jameson's 2009 volume *Valences of the Dialectic*. The chapter, however, is a straight reprint of a 1993 article published in *Polygraph*, titled (ironically enough) "Actually Existing Marxism." Granted, Jameson saw fit to include the essay unaltered. But given Jameson's commitment to the situated reading—"Always historicize!" as *The Political Unconscious* famously put it—the "politics of ambivalence or ambiguity" called for in this essay would seem to belong to a previous valence of the dialectic. Finally, as he notes parenthetically, he proffers ambivalence or ambiguity "assuming the word 'dialectical' is still unfashionable," a more tenuous assumption today.

in Romanticism. By contrast, Marxist "scientism" is generally derided, if not deemed responsible for the political travesties conducted in Marx's name. But rather than affirm a Romantic, quasi-religious sensibility against a pernicious Enlightenment rationalism, Breckman opts for a mode of historical inquiry and theoretical engagement that allows the instability of this opposition to emerge organically, as it were, from the analysis itself. Now, this organic emergence of indeterminacy in the Marxist tradition certainly seems to be a point in favor of the Romantic view, one which has the potential to bristle readers less inclined to view structuralism as a dead letter too beholden to a recalcitrant rationalism. Indeed, the broad sweep of Breckman's genealogical maneuvers seems virtually designed to provoke caveats, and the variety of incommensurable purposes to which Lacan's name is put by Breckman's protagonists yields new pathos to the notion of the floating signifier. But to quibble with the details is to risk being distracted from the lesson in ambiguity inscribed not only in the book's core, but on its cover. The image, culled from Dieter Roth's *Literaturwurst* (1969), is of a clipped sausage bearing as an inscription the injunction to "search after a new world." But the nature of the cut is ambiguous and undecidable, an image at once of castration and circumcision—prohibition and induction. This lesson is too often forgotten, but it is a central one of Breckman's contribution to intellectual history, and to the intellectual history of Marxism in particular: that ambivalence, far from being an impediment to rigor, is a consequence of it.