

Anselm Jappe: Politics Without Politics

This article was originally published Nov 5, 2014 in [The Brooklyn Rail](#).



STUDENTS, USING TRASH CAN LIDS AS SHIELDS, MARCHING IN PARIS, FRANCE IN MAY 1968.
MARC RIBOUD.

At first, the “primacy of politics” was a pet notion of Hitler’s jurist, Carl Schmitt. But for some time now the “radical” left has hitched its wagon to a “return of the political” in which “politics” *per se* is looked on as the polar opposite of the “market.” Must it be taken then as an article of faith that opposition to capitalism, or to its contemporary excesses, goes via what is commonly called politics? It is clear that nothing would have changed if Ségolène Royal, the 2007 French Socialist Party candidate for president, had been elected instead of rightist Nicolas Sarkozy. But even if the Trotskyists, who have taken over from the social democrats turned liberals, were to share power in France, they would not exactly rock the world to its foundations. In Germany, the “Party of Democratic Socialism” takes part in regional government; in Italy, *Rifondazione Comunista* had cabinet posts; even the Italian *Centri sociali*, often considered the cutting edge of dissent, send a few deputy mayors to city hall. Everywhere, these representatives of the “radical” left end up supporting neoliberal policies. Therefore, should “truly” radical parties be formed that would never sink into the

same quagmire? Or are the reasons for these “betrayals” structural? Does every involvement in politics inevitably lead to surrender to the market and its laws, regardless of any subjective intentions to the contrary?

It would therefore make sense to ask a basic question: what is meant by the term “politics”? The whole topic is home to a confusion similar to the one that bedevils “labor” and its critique. Criticising labor makes no sense at all if it is identified with productive activity as such, which is undoubtedly a fact of life present in every human society. But everything changes if by labor we understand what this word actually denotes in capitalist society: the self-referential expenditure of mere labor power regardless of its content. Thought of in this way, labor is an historical phenomenon that exists only in capitalist society and that can be criticized and eventually abolished. Indeed, the “labor” that all the actors on the political stage, left, right, and center, want to save is labor as understood in this narrow sense. Likewise, the concept of “politics” must be clearly defined. If it is identified with collective action, with the conscious intervention of men in society, with “love of the world” (Arendt), it is obvious that it enjoys unanimous support and that a “critique of politics” could only be understood as mere indifference to the world. But those who regularly advocate a “return to politics” have a much more specific idea of what “politics” is: the politics whose alleged disappearance causes them such serious withdrawal symptoms. The ritual evocation of “politics” as the only possible way to change the world is the core concept of today’s “left,” from the Bourdieusian sociologists to *Multitude*, from ATTAC to the “radical” electoral left. Despite their explicit intention to create a “completely different” politics, they still lapse into “realism” and the “lesser evil,” take part in elections, comment on referendums, discuss the possible evolution of the Socialist Party, seek to make alliances and seal some “historic compromise” or other. Faced with this desire to “play the game”—and almost always as a “representative” of some “interest”—movements and moments of radical opposition that embraced “anti-politics” should be recalled: from the historical anarchists to the artistic avant-gardes, from certain movements in the global South, such as *Critica Radical* in Fortaleza, Brazil, to the wildcat strike of May ’68 in France and the continuous state of insubordination in Italian factories during the 1970s. This “anti-politics” is just as far removed from the refusal of conscious intervention as “anti-art,” the rejection of art by Dadaists, Surrealists, or Situationists which was not a rejection of artistic means but, on the contrary, was conceived as the only way to remain faithful to the original intentions of art.

But can anyone seriously believe that politics is the social sphere that might allow limits to be placed on the market? Or that politics is “democratic” by nature and opposed to the capitalist economic world, where the survival of the fittest is the rule?

Modern capitalist society, based on the commodity and universal competition, requires a body that takes care of those public structures without which it could not exist. This body is the state, and politics, in the modern (and narrow) sense of the term, is the struggle to

assume control over the state. But this sphere of politics is not external or an alternative to the sphere of the commodity economy. On the contrary, it is structurally dependent on it. In the political arena, the object of contention is the distribution of the fruits of the commodity system—the workers' movement has essentially played this role—but not its actual existence. The visible proof: nothing is possible in politics that has not been previously "funded" by commodity production, and whenever the latter goes off the rails, politics becomes a clash between armed gangs. This kind of "politics" is a secondary regulatory mechanism within the fetishistic and unconscious commodity system. It is not a "neutral" body or a victory that opposition movements snatched from the capitalist bourgeoisie. Indeed, the bourgeoisie is not necessarily hostile to the state or the public sphere; that all depends on the historical moment.

Contemporary advocates of "politics" distort the original goal of "action" because they reduce it to mere tinkering with a machine which has come to be accepted as such. Today, "action" must face situations that are far too serious to be confronted with the out-dated means of politics. The new arena is that of a real anthropological transformation, which is both the result of over two centuries of capitalism and, in the course of the last few decades, of its increasingly visible programmed self-destruction. This regression is leading to *barbarisation*. Given the increasing frequency of incidents—such as the one involving teenagers who laughed as they used a camera phone to film a dead female classmate of theirs who had just been run over by a bus so that they could later upload the video to YouTube—it is somewhat inadequate to resort to unemployment, the casualization of labor, or the shortcomings of our schools as an explanation. Rather, we are witnessing a generalized, albeit inconsistent, "anthropological regression" which appears to be the product of a deep-seated collective mental disorder, of a narcissistic psychosis bequeathed by commodity fetishism and the relation it imposes on the way individuals interact with the world. No one can honestly offer any effective short-term remedies in the face of this crisis of civilization. Indeed, precisely because the situation is so serious, the circumstances call on us to do something, anything, right now, on the grounds that there is zero time for discussion and that *praxis* is better than theory. In this age of financial and molecular capitalism, Fordist-era forms of opposition will simply not do.

A precondition for reviving the prospect for action is to break clearly and definitively away from all "politics" in the institutional sense. Today, the only possible form of "politics" is radical separation from the world of politics and its institutions of representation and delegation, in order to invent and replace it with new forms of direct intervention. In this context, it seems pointless to confer with anyone who still wishes to cast their *vote*. Those who, almost 140 years after the introduction of universal suffrage, still flock to the ballot box, only deserve the words proclaimed by Octave Mirbeau in 1888,¹ or Albert Libertad in 1906.² The conquest of the universal franchise was one of the great battles of the historic left. The right-wing voter, however, is not such a fool: sometimes he gets the little he

expects from his candidates, even when it is not in the official platform of his party (for example, toleration of tax evasion and violations of labor laws). His representatives do not betray him too much; and the voter who only votes for the candidate who is going to hire their relative or obtain vast subsidies for the farmers in his district is, after all, the most rational voter. The left-wing voter is much more stupid: although he has never obtained what he has voted for, he persists. He has obtained neither great change nor scraps. He lets himself be lulled by mere promises. That is why those who voted for Berlusconi in Italy were by no means fools: they were not just seduced by television networks, as his opponents would have everyone believe. They obtained limited, but very real, benefits from their government (and above all from its *laissez-faire* policies). But to vote again for the left after their time in government—and on this score one can only side with Mirbeau—smacks of the pathological.

The rejection of “politics” thus conceived is not the product of a mannered taste for extremism. Faced with a threatening anthropological regression, to appeal to parliament is like trying to quell a hurricane with a religious procession. The only “realistic” proposals—in the sense that they could effectively change the course of events—are of the following kind: the immediate abolition, starting tomorrow, of all television. Is there a party in the world, however, that would dare to embrace such a proposal? What measures have been adopted during the last few decades that could really slow down the advance of barbarism? It will be said that a few small steps are better than nothing. But where have such steps actually been taken? Thirty years ago, those most undaunted laid down proposals for one television-free day a week. Today, there are hundreds of television channels for the asking. If nothing has managed to stop this continuous degeneration, it means that the goals and methods were wrong and that a complete rethink is required. And it is self-evident that this cannot be done by keeping the public sweet or by appearing on television.

There are some examples of anti-political action: the “volunteer wreckers of genetically modified crops,” especially those who operate at night, thus reviving the tradition of sabotage rather than resorting to media stunts, or actions seeking to put surveillance and biometric recognition equipment out of action. The residents of Val di Susa in the Italian Alps could be cited in this respect. On various occasions they have blocked the construction of a high-speed train line in their mountains. This prevalence of “defensive” struggles does not necessarily imply the absence of a broader perspective. On the contrary, these struggles against the worst “nuisances” help to keep such a perspective open. Against the dehumanization engineered by the commodity, which threatens to put a stop once and for all to any alternative, at the very least the *possibility* of future emancipation needs to be safeguarded. This may allow for new fronts and new alliances to be created. There are issues, such as the expropriation of individuals from their own biological reproduction, publicized under the rubric of “artificial fertilization techniques,” where the positions of the modernist left are so fully consonant with the delusions of technological omnipotence

entertained by contemporary capitalism that even the Pope's stance seems to acquire an air of rationality. The opposite of barbarism is humanization. This concept is real enough, but hard to define. A feasible "policy" nowadays would be defense of the minor victories that have been historically achieved on the road to humanization, and opposition to their abolition. Contemporary capitalism is not just the economic injustice that still lies at the heart of debate, and its list of misdeeds is not even complete with the environmental disasters it causes. It is also a dismantling—a "deconstruction"—of the symbolic and psychological foundations of human culture, which is especially evident in the process of dematerialization that electronic media have brought about. With regard to this aspect of the problem, it is of no importance whether it is Sarkozy or Royal, Besancenot or Le Pen whose face appears on the small screen.

Practice still needs to be reinvented without surrendering to the demand to "do something and do it quick," which always leads to a rerun of things that were already tried and found wanting. The real problem is general isolation—one that is above all mental—within the fetishistic forms of existence affecting the alleged adversaries as well as the supporters of the commodity system.³ The struggle to break with these forms that are anchored in everyone's minds, to strip money and the commodity, competition and labor, the state and "development," progress and growth of their innocent air, relies on those "theoretical struggles" situated beyond the fixed opposition between "theory" and "*praxis*." Why should the analysis of the logic of the commodity or patriarchy be dubbed "merely" theory, whereas any strike for higher pay or any demonstration by students protesting because the university is not doing enough to prepare them for the world of work is labelled "*praxis*" or "politics"?

Thought and feeling precede men's action, and the way they act derives from what they think and feel. Changing the way men think and feel is already a form of action, of *praxis*. Once there is a clear idea, at least among a minority, of what the goals of an action are, things can rapidly unfold. May 1968 comes readily to mind in this regard, seemingly appearing out of the blue but in fact silently prepared by lucid minorities. On the other hand, we have often seen—and never more so than in the Russian Revolution—even the best opportunities for action lead in the absence of a clear theoretical grounding. Such clarification does not necessarily take place in books and conferences but must be present in people's minds. Rather than identify politics with the public institutions of commodity society, it could be identified with *praxis* in general. But this *praxis* must not be opposed to theory in some abstract way. The theory under discussion here is not the servant of *praxis*, nor its preparation, but an integral part of it. Fetishism is not a set of false representations; it is the entirety of forms—such as money—in which life *really* unfolds within a capitalist society. Every step forward in theoretical understanding, as well as its spread, is therefore in itself a practical act.

Naturally, the story does not end there. Future forms of *praxis* will no doubt be somewhat diverse and will also involve defensive struggles at the level of material reproduction (such as struggles against the casualization of labor and against the destruction of the Welfare State). While there is a need to break with “policies” that only offer to defend the commodification of the social categories constituted by fetishistic logic itself along the lines of say, “purchasing power,” it is nonetheless necessary to prevent capitalist development from destroying the basis of survival for large sectors of the population and generating new forms of poverty, which are often due more to exclusion than exploitation. Indeed, to be exploited these days has become almost a privilege compared to the fate of the masses of those who have been declared “superfluous to requirements” because they “are unprofitable” (i.e. they cannot be used profitably in commodity production). The reactions of the “superfluous,” however, take many different forms and may themselves tend towards barbarism. Victimhood is no guarantee of moral integrity. One fact is thus overriding all the others: the behavior of individuals in response to the vicissitudes of life within capitalism is not the mechanical result of their “social situation,” their “interests,” or their geographical, ethnic, or religious background, nor of their gender or sexual orientation. Nobody’s response to the collapse of capitalism into barbarism can be predicted. This is not because of the supposedly generalized “individualization” that sociologists are crowing over non-stop so as to sidestep all mention of the increasing standardization that it conceals. But the dividing lines are no longer created by capitalist development. Just as barbarism can arise anywhere, in Finnish high schools and African shantytowns, among yuppies and ghetto kids, among high-tech soldiers and unarmed rebels, so too can resistance to barbarism and the impulse for social emancipation arise anywhere (although with infinitely greater difficulty!), even where one would least expect it. While no single social *category* has squared with the forecasts of those who sought an agent of social emancipation, opposition to the inhuman conditions of life under capitalism is nevertheless always re-emerging. This landscape teeming with false friends and unexpected aid constitutes the present necessarily ill-defined terrain on which all “political recomposition” must now take place.

NOTES

1. “One thing fairly fills me with surprise. In fact, I’d even say that it leaves me dumbfounded, and that’s at the scientific moment in which I write, after countless experiences and daily scandals, there can still exist in our dear France [...] one voter, one single voter—that irrational, inorganic, hallucinatory animal—who agrees to take time out from his affairs, his dreams, and his pleasures in order to vote in favor of someone or something. If we think about it for just one instant, is this surprising phenomenon not one fit to upset the subtlest philosophies and confound reason? Where

is the Balzac who can give us the physiology of the modern elector, or the Charcot who will explain the anatomy and mentality of this incurable lunatic? ... He voted yesterday, he'll vote tomorrow, and he will always vote. Sheep go to the slaughter; they say nothing and expect nothing. But at least they don't vote for the butcher who will kill them and the bourgeois who will eat them. More bovine than cattle, more sheep-like than sheep, the elector names his butcher and chooses his bourgeois. He has fought revolutions in order to enjoy this right. ... So, my good man, go home and strike against universal suffrage" (Originally published in *Le Figaro*, November 28, 1888, and republished in Octave Mirbeau, *La Grève des électeurs* [The Electors' Strike] (Montreuil-sous-Bois: L'Insomniaque, 2007). This English translation available online at:

www.marxists.org/subject/anarchism/mirbeau/voters-strike. One hundred years after this call for a "voters strike," it is still possible, and necessary, to repeat the same arguments. Were it to be published now with a few name changes, anyone would think the text from which these lines are excerpted had been written today and not in the early days of the Third Republic. After more than a century, electors are clearly none the wiser, which, admittedly, does not amount to a very heartening state of affairs.

2. "The elector is the criminal ... The elector, the voter is you, the one accepting the status quo, the one whose support for the ballot-box sanctions all its misery, whose activity underwrites the enslavement it perpetrates ... You are a danger to we free men, we anarchists. In the danger you pose you are no different from tyrants, from the masters you choose, name, support, feed, protect with your bayonets, defend with your brute force, extol with your ignorance, legalise with your ballot papers and foist upon us by your idiocy ... If command-hungry and platitudinous candidates kowtow to your paper autocracy, if you get carried away by the incense and promises showered on you by those who have always betrayed, deceived and sold you off, it is because you are just like them ... Go on, vote! Trust your representatives, believe in your deputies, but stop complaining. You yourself have donned the yokes you bear, just as you commit the crimes whose consequences you suffer. You are master and criminal and yet ironically slave and victim too." Albert Libertad, *Le Culte de la charogne: Anarchisme, un état de révolution permanente (1897-1908)* [The Carrion Cult: Anarchism, A State of Permanent Revolution (1897-1908)] (Marseilles: Agone, 2006).
3. On the other hand, one of the new realities that anti-capitalist *praxis* must confront today is the blurring of borders between supporters and enemies of the system and in the dissemination of fragments of critical thought among numerous individuals who simultaneously participate fully in the ordinary business of this world: they read Marcuse and work in advertising, they manage businesses and donate money to the Zapatistas, they declare themselves anarchists and forge careers as administrators, etc. The need to live does not, however, imply a willingness to be played for a fool. A veritable "mithridatism" designed to arrest any awareness that might disrupt an individual life may be discerned here.

Anselm Jappe

Born in Germany in 1962, ANSELM JAPPE is one of the key proponents of “the critique of value” school in France today. He is the author of several major works of critical theory, including *Guy Debord* (University of California Press, 1999), *Les Aventures de la marchandise: pour une nouvelle critique de la valeur* (Denoël, 2003), *Crédit à mort* (2011) and, with Robert Kurz, *Les Habits neufs de l’empire* (Lignes, 2004). He currently lectures in both art history and sociology in universities across France and Italy. “Politics Without Politics” is an excerpt from a forthcoming translation of *Crédit à mort* by Alastair Hemmens, John McHale, and Mike DeSocio.