

# The Mole and the Locomotive

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*'Well said, old mole. Canst work I'th'earth so fast?  
A worthy pioner.'* (Shakespeare, Hamlet I:5).

Our old friend is short-sighted. He is a haemophiliac as well. Doubly infirm and doubly fragile. And yet, patiently, obstinately, from tunnel to passage, he cheerfully continues his mole's progress towards his next invasion.

The nineteenth century experienced history as an arrow pointing in the direction of progress. The Destiny of the ancients and divine Providence bowed down before the prosaic activity of a modern human species, which produced and reproduced the conditions of its own improbable existence. This sharpened sense of historical development was born of a long, slow movement of secularisation. Heavenly miracles were lost among earthly contingencies. Rather than illuminated by the past, the future now offered justification for the present. Events no longer seemed miraculous. Where before they had been sacred, now they were profane.

The railway, the steamship, the telegraph all contributed to a feeling that history was speeding up and that distances were getting shorter, as if humanity had built up enough speed to break free. It was the era of revolutions.

There was the revolution in transport and travel: in scarcely a quarter of a century, between 1850 and 1875, the great railway companies, the Reuter's agency and the Cook agency all emerged. The rotary press multiplied circulation figures. From now on it would be possible to travel around the world in eighty days. That hero of modernity, the explorer, heralded the air-conditioned exoticism of the tour operators.

There was the revolution in materials: with the triumph of the railway came the reign of coal, of glass and of steel, of crystal palaces and metallic cathedrals. High-speed transport, architectural transformations, the engineering of public health, altered the face of the city and transformed its relation to the suburbs.

There was a revolution in knowledge: the theory of evolution and developments in geology changed the place of man in natural history. The first murmurings of ecology explored the subtle metabolic interaction between society and its environment. Thermodynamics opened up new perspectives in energy control. The blossoming of statistics furnished calculating reason with an instrument for quantification and measurement.

There was a revolution in production: the "age of capital" saw the furious circulation of investments and commodities, their accelerated turnover, the great universal exhibitions, mass production, and the beginnings of mass consumption with the opening of the first department stores. It was also a time of frenzy on the stock exchange, of speculation in real estate, of fortunes quickly made and

equally quickly lost, of scandals, of affairs, of crashing bankruptcies, the time of the Pereires, the Saccards, the Rothschilds and the Boucicauts. And it was the era of empires and colonial divisions, when armies carved up territories and continents.

There was a revolution in working practices and social relations: mechanised industry usurped the workshop. The modern proletariat of the factories and the cities took over from the artisan class of tailors, joiners, cobblers, weavers. From 1851 to 1873, this growth in capitalist globalisation gave birth to a new workers' movement, which gained notoriety in 1864 with the creation of the International Working Men's Association.

This prodigious quarter of a century also saw the industrialisation of the arms trade, foreshadowing the "slaughter industry" and total war. It was the era of the social crime, "which does not seem like murder, because there is no murderer to be seen, because the victim's death appears natural, but which is no less a murder." [1] Between Edgar Allan Poe and Arthur Conan Doyle, the appearance of detective fiction, the development of rational modes of enquiry, and the scientific refinement of detection methods sum up the mindset of this period with its urban "mysteries": the loot passes from one hand to another, and all trace of the guilty party is lost in the anonymity of the crowd.

The railway was the perfect symbol and emblem of this rush towards technology and profit. Launched into a conquest of the future along the tracks of progress, these revolutions appeared to be the roaring locomotives of history!

The last quarter of the twentieth century offers a number of analogies with the third quarter of the nineteenth century, albeit on a completely different scale. Telecommunications, satellites and the internet are the contemporary equivalents of the telegraph and the railway. New sources of energy, biotechnologies and transformations in working practices are revolutionising production in their turn. Industrial manufacturing techniques increasingly make consumption a mass phenomenon. The development of credit and of mass marketing lubricates the circulation of capital. The result is a new gold rush (in the field of computers), a fusion of the upper echelons of the state with the financial elites, and relentless speculation with all its attendant Mafia scandals and spectacular bankruptcies.

The new era of capitalist globalisation is seeing the commodification of the world and a generalised fetishism. The time has come for a seismic overturning of national and international boundaries, for new forces of imperial domination which are armed right up to the stars. Yet the dream of this twilight era has already ceased to be one of infinite progress and great historical promises. Condemned to go round in circles on the wheel of fortune, our social imagination withdraws from history and, from Kubrick to Spielberg, escapes into space. The weight of defeats and disasters reduces every event to a dusty powder of minor news items, of sound bites which are skipped over just as soon as they are received, of ephemeral fashions and of faddish anecdotes.

This world in decline, prey to the inconsolable desolation of a faithless religiosity, of a commercialised spirituality, of an individualism without individuality, prey to the standardisation of differences and to the formatting of opinions, no longer enjoys either "magnificent sunrises" or triumphant dawns. It's as if the catastrophes and disappointments of the past century have exhausted all sense of history and destroyed any experience of the event, leaving only the mirages of a pulverised present.

This eclipse of the future imperils tradition, which is now seized by the conformism of remembrance commemorations. The past, notes Paul Ricœur in *La Mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, is no longer recounted so as to set us a task, but rather so as to institute a "piety of memory," a devout remembrance and a conventional notion of right-thinking. [2] This fetishism of memory claims to steer away from collective amnesia an era condemned to the snapshots of an eternal present.

Detached from any creative perspective, critical recollection turns to tired-out ritual. It loses the "unfailing consciousness of everything which has not come to pass." [3] The postmodern labyrinth is thus unaware of "the dark crossroads" where "the dead return, bringing new announcements." History, which is no longer "pushed towards the status of legend," no longer appears to be "illuminated by an internal light," contained "in the wealth of witnesses who look forward to the Revolution and the Apocalypse." [4] It crumbles into a dust of images or into the scattered pieces of a puzzle which no longer fits together.

The train of progress has been derailed. In the saga of the railway, sinister cattle trucks have eclipsed the iron horse. Already for Walter Benjamin, revolution was no longer comparable to a race won by an invincible machine, but rather to an alarm signal, fired so as to interrupt its mad race towards catastrophe.

That said, just as the reed outlives the oak, so the mole prevails over the locomotive. Though he looks tired, our old friend is still digging away. The eclipse of the event has not put an end to the hidden work of resistance which discreetly, when everything seems asleep, prepares the way for new rebellions. Just as the Victorian era's "growth without development" gave rise to the First International, just as the muted social war exploded in the uprising of the Communards, so too are new contradictions brewing in the great transformations of the present time.

However limited they might seem, the marginal conspiracies and plots active at any given moment are also fermenting the great rages of days to come. They herald new outpourings. They are the place of that "hard-fought advance" Ernst Bloch speaks of, "a peregrination, a ramble, full of tragic disturbances, seething, blistered with fissures, explosions, isolated engagements." [5] It is a stubborn advance made up of irreconcilable resistances, well-directed ramblings along tunnels which seem to lead nowhere and yet which open up into daylight, into an astonishing, blinding light.

Thus the underground heresies of the Flagellants, the Dolcinians and other Beguines paved the way for the likes of Thomas Münzer (1490-1525) to appear with his "apocalyptic propaganda calling for action," before his execution sealed the lasting alliance between the reformed priest and the country squire. After the egalitarian revolt of the Levellers, the great fear of the propertied classes cemented the puritan holy alliance between the bourgeoisie and aristocracy of England. After the creative upheaval of the French Revolution came Thermidor's period of restoration. After the great hope of the October Revolution followed the time of bureaucratic reaction, with all its trials and purges, its falsifications and forgeries, its disconcerting lies.

This recurrence of Thermidor has always bolted the door of possibility whenever it has been opened just a fraction. However, its "dull peace with the world" has never quite made its way to the obstinate mole, who is forever born anew from his own failures. It took no more than thirty years for the flames of 1830 or 1848 to rekindle the embers kept glowing by various hidden groups. It took only a few years for Jacobin radicalism to resurface, laden with new concerns, with the Luddites, and then with the Chartist movement of the English working class. [6] Less than twenty years after the bloody suppression of the Commune and the exile of its survivors, the socialist movement was already being born again, as if a timeless message had spread from generation to generation down a long line of conspiratorial whispers.

Whether they be failed or betrayed, revolutions are not easily wiped from the memory of the oppressed. They are prolonged within latent forms of dissidence, spectral presences, invasive absences, in the molecular constitution of a plebeian public space, with its networks and passwords, its nocturnal assignations and its thundering explosions. "One might imagine," warned an astute observer after the collapse of Chartism, "that all is peaceful, that all is motionless; but it is when all is calm that the seed comes up, that republicans and socialists advance their ideas in people's

minds.” [7]

When resignation and melancholy follow the ecstasy of the event, as when love’s excitement dulls under the force of habit, it becomes absolutely essential “not to adjust yourself to the moments of fatigue.” We should never underestimate the power, not of that daily fatigue which leads to the sleep of the just, but of the great historical weariness at having spent too long “rubbing history against the grain.” Such was the weariness of Moses when he stopped on the threshold of Canaan to “sleep the sleep of the earth.” The weariness of Saint-Just, walled up in the silence of his last night alive. Or the weariness of Blanqui, flirting with madness in his dungeon at Taureau. Such too was the heavy fatigue which fell, in August 1917, upon the shoulders of the young Peruvian publicist José Carlos Mariategui: “We wake up ill from monotony and ennui. And we experience the immense desolation of not hearing the echo of the least event that might liven up our minds and make our typewriters rattle. Languor slips into things and into souls. Nothing remains but yawning, despondency and weariness. We are living through a time of clandestine murmurings and furtive jokes.” [8] A few months later, this avid chronicler of resurrectional events came to find them at first hand in the old world of Europe, then in the throes of war and revolutions.

In reactionary times, obstinate progress becomes “a long, slow movement, itself patient, of impatience,” a slow, intractable impatience, stubbornly at odds with the order that then reigned in Berlin, and that was soon to swoop down upon Barcelona, Djakarta or Santiago: “Order reigns in Berlin, proclaim the triumphal bourgeois press, those officers of the victorious troops, in whose honour Berlin’s petty bourgeoisie waves its handkerchiefs and shouts hurrah. Who here is not reminded of the hounds of order in Paris, and of the bourgeoisie’s bacchanalian feast on the corpses of the Communards? ‘Order reigns in Warsaw! Order reigns in Paris! Order reigns in Berlin!’ So it is that the proclamations made by the guardians of order spread from one centre to another of the global historic struggle.” [9]

Then there begins the time, not for a passing reduction of speed, but for “inevitable revolutionary slowness,” for maturation and ripening, for an urgent patience, which is the opposite of fatigue and habit: the effort to persevere and continue without growing accustomed or getting used to things, without settling into habit or routine, by continually astonishing oneself, in pursuit of “this desirable unknown” [10] which always slips away.

*“At what moment in time could truth return to life? And why should it return to life?”* wondered Benjamin Fondane in the very heart of darkness. [11]

When? Nobody knows. The only certainty is that truth remains *“in the rift between the real and the legal.”* [12]

For whom? There are no designated heirs, no natural descendents, just a legacy in search of authors, waiting for those who will be able to carry it further. This legacy is promised to those who, as E. P. Thompson puts it, will manage to save the vanquished from “the enormous condescension of posterity.” For “heritage is not a possession, something valuable that you receive and then put in the bank.” It is “an active, selective affirmation, which can sometimes be reanimated and reaffirmed, more often by illegitimate heirs than by legitimate ones.” [13]

The event is “always on the move,” but “there must be some days of thunder and lightning” if the vicious circle of fetishism and domination is to be broken. The morning after a defeat can easily lead to an overwhelming feeling that things must forever begin again from scratch, or that everything is suspended in an “eternalised present.” When the universe seems to repeat itself without end, to keep on marking time, nevertheless the “chapter of changes” remains open to hope. Even when we are on the point of believing that nothing more is possible, even when we despair of escaping from the relentless order of things, we never cease to set the possibility of what might be against the

poverty of what actually is. For “nobody can easily accept the shame of no longer wanting to be free.” [14]

After twenty years of liberal counter-reform and restoration, the market-based order now seems inescapable. The eternal present no longer appears to have any future, and absolute capitalism no longer any outside. We are confined to the prosaic management of a fatalistic order, reduced to an infinite fragmentation of identities and communities, condemned to renounce all programmes and plans. An insidious rhetoric of resignation is used left, right and centre to justify spectacular U-turns and shameful defections, regrets and repentances.

And yet! A radical critique of the existing order braces itself against the tide, inspired by new ways of thinking resistance and events. In the vicious spiral of defeats, those engaged in defensive resistance sometimes harbour doubts about the counter-attack which is so long in coming; the hope of a liberating event then falls away from everyday acts of resistance, retreats from the profane to the sacred, and ossifies in the expectation of an improbable miracle. When the present drifts without past or future, and when “the spirit withdraws from a given era, it leaves a collective frenzy and a spiritually charged madness in the world.” [15]

When it loses the thread of earthly resistance against the order of things, the desire to change the world risks turning into an act of faith and the will of the heavens. Then comes the tedious procession of smooth-talking potion sellers and charlatans, fire-eaters and tooth-pullers, pickpockets and cut-throats, relic-sellers and fortune-tellers, *New Age* visionaries and half-believers. This is what happened after 1848, when the *quarante-huitards* of *A Sentimental Education* turned to commerce or looked to their careers. This is what happened after 1905, when disappointed militants became “seekers after God.” This is what happened after May 1968, when certain faint-hearted prophets took it into their heads to play at angels, having played too much at monsters. In such situations, religious revivals and kitsch mythology are supposed to fill the gap left by the disappointment of great hopes.

Against renunciation and its endless justifications, those involved in the politics of resistance and events never give up looking for the reasons behind each loss of reason. But the disjunction of a fidelity to events with no historical determination from a resistance with no horizon of expectation is doubly burdened with impotence.

In a sense, resistance can take on an infinite variety of forms, from a concrete critique of existing reality to an abstract utopia with no historical roots, from an active messianism to a contemplative expectation of a Messiah who never comes, from an ethical politics to a depoliticised ethics, from prophecies seeking to avert danger to predictions claiming to penetrate the secrets of the future.

As for events whose political conditions seem evasive and compromised, it is all too tempting to treat them as moments of pure contingency with no relation to necessity, or as the miraculous invasion of repressed possibilities.

Thermidorian times, as everyone knows, see a hardening of hearts and a weakening of stomachs. In such circumstances, many people find nothing to oppose to the assumption that everything is likely to turn out for the worst, other than their willingness to settle for the lesser of the evils on offer; when this happens, the “flabby fiends” [*les monstres mous*] congratulate each other, share a wink and pat each other on the back. Then the outgoing Tartuffe, “the old Tartuffe, the classical Tartuffe, the clerical Tartuffe,” takes the “second Tartuffe, the Tartuffe of the modern world, the second-hand Tartuffe, the humanitarian Tartuffe, at any rate the other Tartuffe” [16] by the hand. This alliance of “two Tartuffe cousins” can last for a very long time, with “the one carrying the other, one fighting the other, one supporting the other, one feeding the other.”

The veneration of victors and victories goes hand in hand with compassion towards the victims, so long as the latter stick to their role as suffering victims, so long as they are not seduced by the idea of becoming actors in their own version of history.

However, even in the worst droughts and most arid places there is always a stream - perhaps barely a trickle - which heralds surprising resurgences. Again, we must always distinguish between the rebellious messianism which will not give in, and the humiliated millennialism which looks instead towards the great beyond. We must always distinguish between the vanquished and the broken, between "victorious defeats" and unalleviated collapse. We must avoid confusing the consolations of utopia with forms of resistance that perpetuate an "illegal tradition" and pass on a "secret conviction."

There are always new beginnings, moments of revival or renewal. In the dark times of change and transition, worldly and spiritual ambitions, reasons and passions, combine to form an explosive mixture. Attempts to safeguard the old are mixed up with the first stammerings of the new. Even in the most sombre moments, the tradition on the rise is never far behind the tradition in decline. There is never any end to the secret composition of the uninterrupted poem of "probable impossibilities."

This obstinate hope is not to be confused with the smug confidence of the believer, or with the "sad passion" driven out by Spinoza. On the contrary, it endures as the virtue of "surmounted despair." For "to be ready to place hope in whatever does not deceive," you must first have despaired of your own illusions. Disillusioned, disabused, hope then becomes "the essential and diametrical opposite of habit and softening." Such hope is obliged constantly to "break with habit," constantly to dismantle "the mechanisms of habit," and to launch new beginnings everywhere, "just as habit everywhere introduces endings and deaths." [17]

To break with habit is to retain the ability to astonish yourself. It is to allow yourself to be surprised.

These untimely invasions, during which the contingency of events cuts a path through insufficient yet necessary historical conditions, make a breach in the unchanging order of structures and of things.

Crisis? What crisis is there today? There is a historical crisis, a crisis in civilisation, a stretched and prolonged crisis which drags on and on. Our ill-fitting world is bursting at the seams. As H.G. Wells predicted, the rift between our culture and our inventions has not stopped growing, opening up at the very heart of technology and knowledge a disturbing gap between fragmented rationalities and a global irrationality, between political reason and technical madness.

Does this crisis contain the seeds of a new civilisation? It is just as pregnant with unseen barbarities. Which will prevail? Barbarity has taken the lead by a good few lengths. It is becoming more difficult than ever to separate destruction and construction, the death throes of the old and the birth pangs of the new, "for barbarity has never before had such powerful means at its disposal to exploit the disappointments and hopes of a humanity which has doubts about itself and about its future." [18] We fumble our way through this unsettled twilight, somewhere between dusk and dawn.

Is it a simple crisis of development? Or indeed, rather than a sort of discontent within civilisation, is it a sorrow that gives rise to "myths which make the earth shake with their enormous feet"? If a new civilisation is to prevail, the old one must not be entirely lost, abandoned or scorned. Not only must it be defended, but it must also be ceaselessly reinvented.

The stubborn old mole will survive the dashing locomotive. His furry, round form prevails over the

metallic coldness of the machine, his diligent good nature over the rhythmic clanking of the wheels, his patient smile over the sniggering steel. He comes and goes, between tunnels and craters, between burrows and breakouts, between the darkness of the underground and the light of the sun, between politics and history. He makes his hole. He erodes and he undermines. He prepares the coming crisis.

The mole is a profane Messiah.

The Messiah is a mole, short-sighted and obstinate.

The crisis is a molehill which suddenly opens out.

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*"People turn to soothsayers when they no longer have prophets"* (Chateaubriand).

François Furet concludes *The Passing of an Illusion* with a melancholy verdict. "The democratic individual, living at the end of the twentieth century, can only watch as the divinely sanctioned order of history trembles to the core." To a vague anticipation of danger is added "the scandal of a closed future," and "we find ourselves condemned to live in the world in which we live." [19] Capital seems to have become the permanent horizon for the rest of time.

There will no more afterwards, no more elsewhere.

Death of the event.

End of story.

End of history.

*Unhappily ever after.*

But in fact there is always conflict and contradiction, there is always discontent in the midst of civilisation and crisis in the midst of culture. There are always those refuse servitude and resist injustice.

From Seattle to Nice, from Millau to Porto Alegre, from Bangkok to Prague, from the organisation of the unemployed to the mobilisation of women, a strange geopolitics is taking shape, and we don't yet which events will follow in its wake.

The old mole burrows on.

Hegel draws our attention to that "silent and secret" revolution which always precedes the development of a new way of thinking. Through the unreasonable detours of history, the cunning claws of the mole dig their own path of Reason. The mole is in no rush. He has "no need to hurry." He needs "long periods of time," and he has "all the time he needs." [20] If the mole takes a backward step, it's not in order to hibernate but to bore through another opening. His twistings and turnings allow him to find the place where he can break out. The mole never disappears, he only heads underground.

Negri and Hardt say that the metaphor of the mole is a figure of modernity, they say that he has been surpassed by postmodernity. "We've come to suspect that the old mole is dead": his digging gives way to the "infinite undulations of the snake" and other reptilian struggles.[21] But such a verdict smacks of that chronological illusion whereby postmodernity is supposed follow on after a modernity that has since been consigned to the museum of ancient history. For the mole is ambivalent. He is both modern and postmodern. He bustles discreetly about in his "subterranean rhizomes," only to burst thunderously forth from the craters he makes.

On the pretext of giving up on history's metanarratives, the philosophical discourse of postmodernity

lends itself to mystics and mystagogues: when a society runs out of prophets it turns to soothsayers instead. This is the way it goes, in periods of reaction and restoration. After the massacres of June 1848 and the 18<sup>th</sup> Brumaire of the younger Napoleon, the socialist movement was likewise seized by "Christolatry." "Look at these offspring of Voltaire," wrote one former Commune, "these former scourges of the church, now huddled together around a table, hands clasped in pious union, waiting hour upon hour for it to rise up and lift one of its legs. Religion in all its forms is once again the order of the day, and has become so very 'distinguished.' France has gone mad!" [22]

Pierre Bourdieu was right to distinguish mystical affirmation or divination from the conditional, preventive and performative stance of prophecy. "Just as the priest is part and parcel of the ordinary order of things, so too is the prophet the man of crisis, of situations in which the established order crumbles and the future as a whole is thrown into question." [23]

The prophet is not a priest. Or a saint.  
Still less a soothsayer.

To ward off disaster, it's not enough to resist for the sake of resistance, it's not enough to wager on the possibility of a redemptive event. We must seek both to understand the logic of history and to be ready for the surprise of the event. We must remain open to the contingency of the latter without losing the thread of the former. Such is precisely the challenge of political action. For history doesn't proceed in a vacuum, and when things take a turn for the better this never happens in an empty stretch of time, but always "in time that is infinitely full, filled with struggles." [24]

And with events.

The mole prepares the way of their coming. With a measured impatience. With an urgent patience.  
For the mole is a prophetic animal.

## Notes

1. Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (Moscow and London, Progress Publishers/Lawrence & Wishart: 1973) 121 (translation modified).
2. Paul Ricœur, *La Mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* (Paris: Seuil, 2000).
3. Ernst Bloch, *Thomas Münzer* (Paris: UGE, 1975).
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. See Edward P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* [1963] (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1980).
7. Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor: A Cyclopaedia of the Condition and Earnings of Those That Will Work, Those That Cannot Work, and Those That Will Not Work*, 4 vols. [1861-1862] (New York: A.M. Kelley, 1967).
8. José Carlos Mariategui, in *El Tiempo* (Lima) 16 August 1917.
9. Rosa Luxemburg, "Order reigns in Berlin" (written on 14 January 1919, several days before her murder by the Freikorps despatched by a social democrat Minister of the Interior).
10. Dionys Mascolo, *Le Communisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1953).



11. Benjamin Fondane, *L'Écrivain devant la révolution* (Paris: Paris-Méditerranée, 1997).
- 12.
13. Jacques Derrida with Marc Guillaume and Jean-Pierre Vincent, *Marx en jeu* (Paris: Descartes et Cie, 1997).
14. Michel Surya, *Portrait de l'intellectuel en animal de compagnie* (Tours: Farrago, 2000) 11; see also Surya, *De l'argent* (Paris: Payot, 2000) 122.
15. Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* [1936] (London: Routledge, 1960) 192-196, quoted in E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* 419.
16. Charles Péguy, *Clio* (Paris: Gallimard, 1931) 99.
17. Charles Péguy, *Note conjointe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1942) 123.
18. Georges Bernanos, *La Liberté pour quoi faire?* [1953] (Paris: Gallimard, 1995).
19. François Furet, *The Passing of an Illusion. The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century*, trans. Deborah Furet (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).
- 20.
21. Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000) 57.
22. Gustave Lefrançais, *Souvenirs d'un révolutionnaire* (Paris: La Tête de feuille, 1971) 191.
23. Pierre Bourdieu, "Genèse et structure du champ religieux," *Revue française de sociologie* 12 (1971) 331.
24. Hegel, *Leçons sur l'histoire de la philosophie* (Paris: Folio Essais, 1990).