

## Introduction: A Return to the Bad Old Times

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## Fabio Akcelrud DURÃO and Fernando URUETA,

### Introduction: A Return to the Bad Old Times

The process of editing an academic journal in the Humanities is a nonlinear, complex one. The trigger is a pregnant idea or insight, an invitation for other scholars to think about a new topic deserving consideration. The next step (not an easy one) is convincing an editor of the viability of the project, persuading her that it does represent a contribution to the field in which the journal is inserted. After the call is circulated, the submissions start to pour in and the issue editors, aided by reviewers, must gauge the texts received in relation to the idea proposed. This represents the most interesting part of the work, for if the initial insight is narrowly adhered to, very few articles would be approved, whereas if to broad a scope of concerns is accepted, the regulating idea becomes eventually disfigured. In most cases, however, and this was ours, the contributions both displace and enrich the imagined conception in such a way that the issue editors not only judge, but also learn. We learned three things as we edited this issue.

Our motivation in proposing the theme of "a return to the bad old times" was to articulate a concrete and empirical political phenomenon to a conceptual framework. It seemed to us that the rebirth of the extreme Right in the US, Brazil, Hungary, the Philippines, India and elsewhere should force us to recuperate a concept long forgotten, namely that of *regression*. Indeed, our intellectual climate in the last thirty years or so has been one in which the critique of the ideology of progress, not only due to Walter Benjamin, has become commonplace; nonetheless, this propensity to debunk false promises for the future occurs without any consideration of how the past could react to changes in the present. If the future seems to be closing now, that is because the present, in its supposed schizophrenic fragmentation à la Jameson, has reduced the sense of time to the isolated instant. Making regression visible is not only a way to break with the tyranny of the present as the repetition of the ever-the-same, but also of revitalizing dialectical thought. The way regression was handled as an interpretative instrument by the Frankfurt School was not by contrasting a decayed present to a glorious past; instead, for Adorno, Benjamin, Marcuse and Horkheimer regressive elements were intrinsically connected to, even awakened by, the appearance of the new.<sup>1</sup>

The first thing we learned editing this issue of *CLCWeb* is that the reversion of the advanced into the archaic could itself be submitted to different temporal layers. The movement demonstrated in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, famously expressed as "[m]yth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology" (xviii), represents just the most extreme and overarching case. Regression may be methodologically suppler and more restricted, pointing not necessarily to the original phase of the formation of civilization or the constitution of the psyche, but rather to more local and restricted phenomena, even though the larger framework must never disappear from sight. It is thus productive, for instance, to think of the current dismantling of the Welfare State or the waning of Third World developmentalism as a return to early, savage capitalism and to colonialism respectively. The second thing we discovered was that regression, besides being a verifiable phenomenon, might also work in the interpretative process as concrete critical gesture; in this sense, it could be mobilized almost as an antidote whenever something is announced as the totally new. In a world in which commodities may only survive by proclaiming their incessant novelty, and in which academic work seems ever closer to industrial cultural production, the emphasis on regression in this issue of *CLC-Web* proposes may be a step forward for distinguishing what would be in fact something other.

All the contributions to this issue deal with the emergence of new phenomena, but depict or imply different forms of regression. Tauan Tinti offers a timely case study, a detailed description of the *Sistema Brasileiro de Televisão* network in Brazil, a typical case of an object that evades serious critical scrutiny beyond statistical discussions of data, simply because it appears unworthy, too insignificant. With a light-hearted tone, no doubt a stylistic weapon of self-defence, Tinti investigates what in the past would be termed a degraded state of culture. The nucleus of the analysis resides in the combination of television as a modern, technically developed medium full of semiotic possibilities and the idiocy of the shows. It is not the case here that stupidity would be linked to cognitive insufficiency of part of the

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Hullot-Kentor explains this logic in several of his excellent commentaries to Adorno; here are two passages, as an illustration: "the new concept of regression that Adorno developed was the idea of the emergence, at moments of crisis, of primitive conflicts that were never resolved in the first place—conflicts that civilization itself harbors and that it manufactures and heightens by its own logic" ("A New Type"); "The central focus of Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno's philosophy is a critique of the primitive from the perspective of the primitive as the single possibility of what might be other than primitive" ("Metric" 721).

population, due to illiteracy or what have you, even less is it a matter of the presence of a pre-modern stratum to be found in Brazilian society, in other contexts a productive starting point; rather, idiocy is produced by a particular configuration of the TV as a medium. Technical advance in the production and circulation of images takes place here inextricably connected to experiential regression.

William Díaz's article is part of a larger project of a glossary of current academic terms and rhetorical strategies, which, enjoying great currency in our discussions on the university, reveal a structured betrayal of what once was considered the essence of intellectual work. According to Díaz, the success of expressions such as "entrepreneurship," "excellence" or "learning to learn" would result not only from the wide penetration of management lingo in the field of public policies, but also in connection with the real subsumption of scientific research and academic life in general to a neoliberal worldview. The glossary's aim, however, is not to examine sociologically the effects of these changes in a now old language as neoliberalism encroaches into the university, but instead of illuminating and challenging not only how the jargon related to the "economy of knowledge" circulates nowadays in public discourse, but also how this pseudoacademic lingua franca builds obstacles to genuine intellectual practice.

Suman Gupta's contribution also deals with the expansion of a neoliberal logic to areas so far relatively protected from the imperative to generate profit. It explores the case of the Big Issue in England, a so-called "social enterprise," a hybrid kind of venture that tries at the same time to pass as an institution aiming at social improvement and to yield revenue to investors. A key point Gupta focuses on is the attention legislators and members of the business community devote, often working closely with each other, to matters of language. As in Díaz's article, one can see here how attempts to introduce a new mindset are more easily carried out with significant, albeit apparently harmless, modifications in terminology. The effectiveness of this new language derives from the fact that it presents itself as common sense and consequently as unquestionable (Gupta's favorite expression for this process is "massaging into existence"). Regression also appears in a similar sense as in Díaz's text; in charities, the insertion of a profit logic as a precondition for their *raison d'être*, summons the whole semantic field of the "deserving poor", so characteristic of XIX century mentality, which typically abandoned the non-deserving.

From the economy of knowledge and of charity, we move to politics. Yuri Brunello revisits Gramsci's thought in the context of the reemergence of international populism. Gramsci's ironic actuality lies not only in the critical potential of such categories as "passive revolution" or "progressive restoration" for the understanding of such phenomena as Trumpism or Italian sovereignty, but also in the fact that the latter uses Gramsci's work to present itself as an alternative that would transcend the antagonisms between the Left and the Right, thus uniting both camps in a single communitarian and anti-globalist struggle for the recuperation national and popular values. The appeal to Gramscian categories, as Brunello demonstrates, is only possible by reducing Gramsci's thought to his early writings and by deflecting his anti-capitalism, for sovereignty under the appearance of attacking capitalism in fact just rejects the financialization of the economy in order to be able to advocate good old capitalist industrialism.

Our issue closes with two texts on literature. Yuan Xue interprets *Er ist wieder da* (Look Who's Back), by Timur Vermes in an almost literal sense of a return to the bad old times. In the novel, Hitler comes back to the Berlin of 2011; the ensuing story threads the thin line between satire and warning. As Xue explains, "portraying Hitler as 'human' rather than 'monster' forces readers to face Nazism as perpetrated by humans, but it could have the unintended consequence of not only humanizing but also 'normalizing' Hitler's views, as readers can 'laugh not merely *at* Hitler, but also *with* him." The possibility of readers identifying with the character Hitler in the novel, then, becomes a thermometer for a social situation that may be getting dangerously close, before our very eyes, to the political conditions of the 30s, which allowed for the rise authoritarianism in Germany and Itaçy. Xue's discussion of *Er ist wieder da* in the context of the conflict between multiculturalism and *Leitkultur*, the primacy of a leading culture over others in a country, provides an appropriate stage for accompanying the possibilities for such a return.

André Cechinel, finally, reflects on what might be called the reparative turn as a sign of deep transformations in the critical understanding of what literature is. His intent is to study "a gradual discredit or disuse of the idea of 'intransitivity,' 'uselessness' or 'negativity' of literature – traits often understood as radical and political throughout the 20th century – in the name of a growing 'ethical-reparative' pragmatism according to which literary artifacts should directly affect reality, drawing us closer to 'other' beings (humans, animals, nature, etc.), teaching us to live better and to have self-confidence, presenting us with the past silenced by the winners of official history, in short, 'doing what is good.'" The reparative perspective in literary studies can easily be placed alongside other new calls for change, such as post-critique and an plethora of [insert adjective] readings, such as distant reading,

surface reading, paranoid reading etc. In common, they all have a disinvestment in literary form as the artwork's principle of self-legislation and a resulting weakening of literature's autonomous space, however precarious and ideological it might have been. In all these theoretical articulations one can witness subjectivity acquiring an ever-greater weight, in such a way that one runs the risk of returning here to XIX century impressionist criticism, which is not so bad as advanced theory pictures it, except for its necessary elitism, which was one of the things these new movements rejected. When we think that underlying all these methodological restructurations are concrete pressures to make universities more profitable entities, we come back to the beginning of our issue. Regression may indeed assume several shapes and manifest itself under the most varied guises, but it is coherent, insistent and recurrent as long as real social change is not brought about. This was the third thing we learned as guest editors.

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