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# Anti-Fascism, Anti-Art, Doubt and Despair

## *Dubious history lessons*

Here is a poem by Franco Fortini, or rather its English translation, based on an original from 1975.

### Sonnet of the Seven Chinese

The Augsburg poet once said he had tacked  
an image of the Man of Doubt  
to the wall of his room. A Chinese print.  
The image asked: how ought one to act?  
I have a photo on my wall. Twenty years ago  
seven Chinese workers looked into my lens.  
They look wary or ironic or tense.  
They know I do not write for them. I know  
They didn't live for me. Yet sometimes I feel  
I'm being asked for more candid words,  
more credible deeds, by their doubtfulness.  
In turn I ask their help in making visible  
the contradictions and identities among us.  
If there's a point, it's this.<sup>1</sup>

This poem emulates the style of Brecht, the Man of Augsburg, as he is called. It imitates Brecht's style in pursuing a line of calm, but serious, questioning. Like Brecht's poems, it delivers a personal expression of a social agony, for which it seeks termination. Like Brecht's stance, it articulates explication of a contradiction that seeks resolution somewhere else, and, in this, is to provide a learning model. Specifically, the gulf between worker and intellectual is invoked, if it is also, at the same time, negated. For each side is requested to meet the other. One side works and acts and looks sceptically at the other. It asks for action and clearer words. The other articulates in words, in theory, how class-bound existence produces injustice. It needs to hear the other's sense of things. The contradictions – between worker and intellectual, between thinker and doer – are to seek an overcoming, by being laid bare. The poem speaks of the doubt on the part of the workers when faced with intellectual good wishes. It asks for more credible acts, more commitment, more proofs of a common cause. It requires tasks, actions yet to be done. The thinker, the I, doubts its own thoughts, or their efficacy. It wonders about its sphere of action and capability.

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<sup>1</sup> Translated by Geoffrey Brock, *Poetry: The Translation Issue*, Chicago, April, 2009

The poem mentions that the Augsburg poet tacked an image of the Man of Doubt to his wall. Testimonies to the fact that Brecht indeed carried two Chinese wall scrolls with him in his years of exile from Fascism exist.<sup>2</sup> On one was a figure with a stern look – possibly Confucius – who always cautioned Brecht to question everything. The other showed a Chinese sage, an elderly man, seated, hunched forward in deep thought, also looking stern. Brecht called the figure The Doubter. He wrote a poem on it in 1938:

Whenever we seemed  
To have found the answer to a question  
One of us untied the string of the old rolled-up  
Chinese scroll on the wall, so that it fell down and  
Revealed to us the man on the bench who  
Doubted so much.

I, he said to us  
Am the doubter. I am doubtful whether  
The work was well done that devoured your days.  
Whether what you said would still have value for anyone if it were less well said.  
Whether you said it well but perhaps  
Were not convinced of the truth of what you said.  
Whether it is not equivocal; each possible misunderstanding  
Is your responsibility. Or it can be unequivocal  
And take the contradictions out of things; is it too unequivocal?  
If so, what you say is useless. Your thing has no life in it.  
Are you truly in the stream of happening? Do you accept  
All that develops? Are YOU developing? Who are you? To whom  
Do you speak? Who finds what you say useful? And, by the way:  
Is it sobering? Can it be read in the morning?  
Is it also linked to what is already there? Are the sentences that were  
Spoken before you made use of, or at least refuted? Is everything verifiable?  
By experience? By which one? But above all  
Always above all else: how does one act  
If one believes what you say? Above all: how does one act?

Reflectively, curiously, we studied the doubting  
Blue man on the scroll, looked at each other and  
Made a fresh start.<sup>3</sup>

Contradiction is a force that counters dogmatism. What is to be done is a question. If it is not a question, then it becomes an assertion, versus belief, and evokes all the errors of political activism from voluntarism to tailism to hectoring to the seeding of confusion to determinism

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<sup>2</sup> For example, Douglas Hilt, 'Brecht in the Pacific: Asian Influences on his Exile Literature', in Irmengard Rauch, Cornelia Niekus Moore (eds.), *Across the Oceans: Studies from East to West in Honor of Richard K. Seymour*, University of Hawaii, 1995, p. 52

<sup>3</sup> John Willett, Ralph Manheim (trans. and eds.), *Bertolt Brecht: Poems 1913-1956*, Methuen, London, 1987, p. 290

to being stranded between theory and practice. To include doubt in the configuration of politics, in its various ways, might be called the capacity to be non-dogmatic. Fortini's poetics of doubt reinvokes Brecht's to remind anti-fascist intellectuals of the contradictions of their positions, and the dangers of dogmatism, as it has been experienced historically in the Communist movement.

Working through the artistic and theoretical contributions of anti-fascists Franco Fortini, Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin, this essay explores how poetic and artistic procedures used doubt in various ways to – in a twinned move - undermine art and ideological certainty, while not renouncing the importance of truths, material pressures that produce and block the capacity for action. How can these inherited fragments of avant garde practice and theory be re-constellated to make practical sense for anti-fascist mobilisation, once these are saturated by contradiction and doubtfulness, as they are now, after the exhaustion of paradigms of avant garde radicality in the post-war, and, more recently, the appropriation of certain avant garde tactics by a new Right that is fluent in pranking, ironic memes, disjunctive collage and the like? What are the possibilities of contradicting and doubting the co-ordinates of a world lorded over by Donald Trump and his alt-Right associates, a world that has succumbed to an 'aestheticization of politics' and a populist political manipulation of culture. Strategies developed by Brecht involving doubt and the restoration of truth – a necessarily contradictory relation - are used to re-capitulate the outrages of those transfusing the atmosphere with demagoguery.

### *Doubtful angel*

Walter Benjamin had a picture tacked above his desk wherever he lived. The new angel, *Angelus Novus*, by Paul Klee, purchased in 1921, for 1000 marks, quivered through his life. It provided the name for a critical journal he wished to establish. He wrote about it as an example of the childlike and critical aesthetic at the core of the modernism he prized. Benjamin deciphers the image as an emblem of a figure driven – however hopelessly – by an impulse to repair the damage wrought by history, by machines and humans.<sup>4</sup> There were other angels sketched by Paul Klee. Gillian Rose identified one as particularly resonant: *Angelus Dubiosus*, from 1939:

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<sup>4</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History', *Selected Works: 1938-1940*, vol. 4, Belknap Press, Harvard, Cambridge, MA., 2002, pp.392-3

With voluminous, blue, billowing and enfolding wings in which square eyeholes are cut for the expanse of rotund, taupe flesh to gaze through, this molelike angel appears unguarded rather than intent, grounded and slack rather than backing up and away in rigid horror. To me, this dubious angel suggests the humorous witness who must endure.<sup>5</sup>

For Rose, Angelus Novus is an angel who defers endlessly. The new angel is stuck in what she calls ‘aberrated mourning’. Angelus Novus is impotent, static, frozen in horror, pushing hope off into an impossible distance. Angelus Dubiosus, by contrast, stands for a ‘facetious reason’ that learns and grows.<sup>6</sup> It is an angel who tries to act for the good, but comes up against ‘the actuality of others and the unanticipated meanings between them’. From this it learns. It makes mistakes. Things go wrong. It discovers its faults and failings, yet still risks going on. It takes on new ventures. It appears, she says, in what could be a description of some of Brecht’s characters, or his writing style, perhaps, ‘commonplace, pedestrian, bulky and grounded’. Doubt is not quivering irresolution – it is a material and ordinary stance of self-questioning and other-questioning, which results in renewed actions.

Doubt mingles with thought and action. Doubt is ever probing and self-critical. Doubt, from self-doubt to doubting the relevance of actions in the world, is a motor of attempted change. There is, of course, the indubitable, the useful certainties: that we are hungry and that we can love. That may be enough to be the basis of a programme. As Brecht wrote in his lyrics to the song from *The Threepenny Opera* ‘Denn wovon lebt der Mensch?’, ‘What Keeps Mankind Alive?: ‘Erst kommt das Fressen, Dann die Moral’, ‘First grub, and then moralism’. Franco Fortini observed, in ‘The Writers’ Mandate and the End of Anti-Fascism’, that Brecht was oriented to those who constructed the Age of Science – be they peasants or the ascendant bourgeois.<sup>7</sup> Both these kinds, lovers of life, not ascetics, enjoyed their roast goose. In this, they were unlike Georg Lukacs, whose failing was to be sure that the functionaries of the Soviet Union communicated with a working class, or his imputation of that class, a spectre of it, of a class that could be led back and forwards along the narrow track of Lenin to Hegel. Their bodily desires were inconsequential. When the vistas open up, it is only onto the perspective of, what Fortini calls, the most insipid social-radical humanism. The overlord

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Gillian Rose, ‘Benjamin – Out of the Sources of Modern Judaism’, in Peter Osborne (ed.), *Walter Benjamin: Appropriations*, Taylor & Francis, London, 2005, p. 234 and Gillian Rose, *The Broken Middle: Out of Our Ancient Society*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1992, p. 261

<sup>6</sup> Gillian Rose, *The Broken Middle: Out of Our Ancient Society*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1992, p.XV

<sup>7</sup> Franco Fortini; ‘The Writer's Mandate and the End of Anti-Fascism’, *Screen*, Volume 15, Issue 1, 1 March 1974, pp.33–72

spoke to a spectre: that is to say, there was no communication, but there was an excess of apparent certainty.

‘Grub first, then ethics’, as W.H. Auden translated Brecht’s aphorism.<sup>8</sup> The line from ‘What Keeps Mankind Alive’ goes on to clarify: ‘Erst muß es möglich sein auch armen Leuten/Vom großen Brotlaib sich ihr Teil zu schneiden.’ ‘First it must be made possible for poor people as well to slice off their share from the large loaf of bread’ – or as Tom Waits’ version put it: ‘So first make sure that those who are now starving get proper helpings, when we all start carving’. Walter Benjamin’s reflection on this line amplifies and politicises this phrase, while developing an unconventional set of ‘fine and spiritual’ values that, for him, form the basis of a substitute proletarian morality. Negating any sense of an impotent and fragile New Angel, he writes in his *On the Concept of History* of another historical force and attitude, for attitude is what is key here:

The class struggle, which always remains in view for a historian schooled in Marx, is a struggle for the rough and material things, without which there is nothing fine and spiritual. Nevertheless these latter are present in the class struggle as something other than mere booty, which falls to the victor. They are present as confidence, as courage, as humour, as cunning, as steadfastness in this struggle, and they reach far back into the mists of time. They will, ever and anon, call every victory which has ever been won by the rulers into question.<sup>9</sup>

The historical materialist is tasked to pay heed to an immaterial set of qualities, spiritual characteristics – confidence, cunning, courage, humour, steadfastness – which have always existed, and which are a source of energy in history. From this attitude arises a certain negation of doubt, a certain material demand for a share of the pie. Now, in his day, reckons Benjamin, such attitude might enter onto the world stage in a more determined, or more desperate, way. The reigning set of fine and spiritual things – the appreciation of artworks, the ability to suppress bodily instinct in cultivating something higher – had proven themselves class-bound and, for Benjamin, in a transforming social world, anachronistic. In the 1930s, Benjamin tabulates the decline and exhaustion of numerous stances and values, including aesthetic ones (as in the art of great masters) and political ones (as in the failures and compromises of Social Democracy, as well as Stalinism). Benjamin attaches new characteristics, new attitudes vis-a-vis the world, to his panoply of modern anti-heroes, such

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<sup>8</sup> Stan Smith (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to W. H. Auden*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005, p. 64

<sup>9</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘On the Concept of History’, *Selected Works: 1938-1940*, vol. 4, Bellknap Press, Harvard, Cambridge, MA., 2002, p. 390

as prostitutes, gamblers and suicides and unpatronised poets turned hacks. These possess traits, such as shrewdness, humour, albeit it dark, and cool self-reliance, characteristics that stem from their own uncertain role in the world, their proximity to risk and redundancy, a kind of dubiousness or doubtful presence. He outlines no certain role for the intellectual in this new arrangement. Intellectuals and poets of the modern age are displaced and their purpose is in doubt from many quarters. Not least, it is doubtful that those of them with full bellies will know what those with empty bellies desire. For the intellectual, there is only an uncertain role, and those uncertainties are what give it life and purpose, for it needs again and again to justify itself in front of other tribunals, other audiences who do not come bemired in tradition and inherited privileges. This intellectual must start again, doubt what it has learnt. And sometimes it might name the enemy as itself, while not obliterating the material context in which some are allowed to be intellectuals or artists and some are condemned to be something else, and, in not wiping out that, it might try to find routes around and out of this inequality, and learn through it.

Benjamin's method of the dialectical image or 'dialectics at a standstill, just like Brecht's epic theatre, strives for capitalism's supersession, through the arrest of that which flows by – perhaps unnoticed and so unanalysed – and the attempt to make flow again that which has ossified – that is, become myth or a new nature, pervasive and unseen. It introduces doubt into the certainties of what is and will be. Doubt is the opening up of fate into possibility. Doubt questions even what stares us in the face as immutable. Brecht and Benjamin seek out the stasis and find ways to show the breaks in that stasis, the moments of movement, of potential unblockage. In his commentaries on Brecht's Chinese poems, Benjamin notes how Brecht shows that hardness can be overcome, 'the hard thing gives way' – in nature even granite and porphyry yield to the constant motion of water.

Benjamin writes, in a commentary on Brecht, on the 'the minimum programme of humanity'. He finds this programme in a poem by the Taoist Lao Tzu and it takes the form of the maxim about hard things giving way.

That yielding water in motion  
Gets the better in the end of granite and porphyry.<sup>10</sup>

Benjamin goes onto comment that the lesson learnt here is never to forget about the inconstancy and changeability of things. Change comes from the ceaseless effects of

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<sup>10</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, Verso, London, 1998, p. 74

something as abundant and common as water. Water he describes as inconspicuous, sober and inexhaustible.

The materialist dialectician will be reminded of the cause of the oppressed. (It is an inconspicuous thing for the rulers, a sober one for the oppressed and, in its consequences, the most inexhaustible of all.)<sup>11</sup>

Water is essential for life – but it passes by or flows unnoticed for those who expect it to always be there and for others to provide it. It refreshes those who work and who accept it gratefully. Dialectics denotes a conflict or contradiction of forces. Etymologically, it indicates the art of arguing through questions and answers. Dialectics is an argument, a speaking across or through, from which there are branches, possibilities. Zweifel, the German word for doubt, means two-fold. Samuel Beckett highlights this in his essay on *Finnegans Wake* – observing that English has made the word abstract, in a way that the German and also the Italian has not done: Joyce invents a new phrase to regain its sensuous suggestiveness: ‘in twosome twiminds’.<sup>12</sup> Doubt exists whenever there is some sort of choice, some sort of forking – indeed the German word for twig, *Zweig*, comes from the same root and is just such a branching. Doubt takes its derivation from twofold or double. Where there is doubt there is choice. Doubt your own self and what you assume to be the desires of others. Doubt that things can continue in this way. Fortini relates Paul Nizan’s address to the 1934 Congress in Defence of Culture. Nizan rejects humanist mythology, in favour of a limited humanism that recognises hate and death, as does Fortini, who phrases it as ‘a limitless capacity of self-determination of life and its limitless infirmity’. Life means something only when dialectically doubted by death. Politics is meaningful only when it has absorbed doubt into it. Nizan observes ‘Our attitude is neither a continuation nor a break: it is a set of choices’.<sup>13</sup> Which route and when? How does art, or poetry, help any of this find a passage into action.

Benjamin and Brecht discussed doubt on several occasions, as their conversations from 1934 attest. In July, they discussed artistic doubts:

Brecht, in the course of yesterday’s conversation: ‘I often imagine being interrogated by a tribunal. “Now tell us, Mr Brecht, are you really in earnest?” I would have to admit that no, I’m not completely in earnest. I think too much about artistic

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<sup>11</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, Verso, London, 1998, p. 74

<sup>12</sup> Samuel Beckett, ‘Dante....Bruno.....Vico.....Joyce’ [1929], in Beckett et al, *Our Exagimination Round his Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress*, Faber, London, 1961, p. 10.

<sup>13</sup> Franco Fortini; ‘The Writer’s Mandate and the End of Anti-Fascism’, *Screen*, Volume 15, Issue 1, 1 March 1974, p. 64



problems, you know, about what is good for the theatre, to be completely in earnest. But having said “no” to that important question, I would add something still more important: namely, that my attitude is, permissible.’ I must admit he said this after the conversation had been going on for some little time. He started by expressing doubt, not as to whether his attitude was permissible, but whether it was effective.<sup>14</sup>

Brecht’s political effectivity may be compromised by his theatrical concerns. But that should be allowable – if it is art that is made and not politics. How effective it is as politics is another matter. Brecht acts as he can only act – and there is no tribunal that can judge his aesthetic, but the doubts pertain as to how this material meets its audience, whether it meets it, whether it can do what it wishes to do, if it has efficacy in the world, can bring down capitalism, or fight fascism. The questions of *The Doubter* on the old rolled up Chinese scroll recur. Benjamin wrote, in September 1934, of Brecht’s doubts, regarding the effectivity of his artistic attitude:

This doubt is made up of two distinct strands of thought. Whilst becoming more closely concerned with the problems and methods of the proletarian class struggle, he has increasingly doubted the satirical and especially the ironic attitude as such. But to confuse these doubts, which are mostly of a practical nature, with other, more profound ones would be to misunderstand them. The doubts at a deeper level concern the artistic and playful element in art, and above all those elements which, partially and occasionally, make art refractory to reason. Brecht’s heroic efforts to legitimise art vis-a-vis reason have again and again referred him to the parable in which artistic mastery is proved by the fact that, in the end, all the artistic elements of a work cancel each other out. And it is precisely these efforts, connected with this parable, which are at present coming out in a more radical form in the idea of the didactic poem. In the course of the conversation I tried to explain to Brecht that such a poem would not have to seek approval from a bourgeois public but from a proletarian one, which, presumably, would find its criteria less in Brecht’s earlier, partly bourgeois-oriented work than in the dogmatic and theoretical content of the didactic poem itself. ‘If this didactic poem succeeds in enlisting the authority of Marxism on its behalf,’ I told him, ‘then your earlier work is not likely to weaken that authority.’<sup>15</sup>

The parable is an anti-artistic form, though it is cunning or artful. According to reported conversations with Ernst Schumacher and Manfred Wekwerth, Brecht observed how Lenin used parables to persuade his audiences of the rightness of his approach.<sup>16</sup> A parable is a simplification, which can be easily assimilated. It makes essential aspects clear. Brecht’s play

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<sup>14</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘Notes from Svendborg: Summer 1934’, Belknap Press, Harvard, Cambridge, MA., 1999, p. 784.

<sup>15</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, Verso, London, 1998, p.113

<sup>16</sup> Peter Thomson, Glendyr Sacks (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994, p. 190, 198.

*The Good Person of Szechuan* [1941] deploys the parable as a theatrical form. The doubled nature of the protagonist, who is a good woman and a bad man, tracks at one and the same time the actually existing nasty society that thrives on violence and ‘unfriendliness’ and the possible existence of one that does not. The parable makes circumstances comparable. The situation is clearly simplified, but, none the less, the lesson is forceful. Economy distorts. Other lives are possible, depending on circumstance. The parable sheds the refractory aspects of art. At some level, there is no doubt what is meant here. Doubts about artistic method are converted into the certainty that if the ideas, the dogma and the theory, resonate well enough, then the work is right. It is right not as art, but as a political intervention, or rather as art as political intervention. It is a revelation of the situation. Doubts are here productive – the artwork has to be doubted, as effective for politics, but doubt too has to be doubted, must return to certain immutable facts: capital corrupts, hunger is a scandal, the police are the enemy. The play throws resolution of the question of how to live rightly in a wrong world back to the audience for further discussion. It doubts the capacity of the artwork to provide answers. It offers choices.

Brecht maintained the framework of doubt, even as he dramatized dogma through parable. While working on *The Good Person of Szechuan*, in 1939, he wrote a poem titled ‘In Praise of Doubt’.

Praised be doubt! I advise you to greet  
Cheerfully and with respect the man  
Who tests your word like a bad penny.  
I’d like you to be wise and not to give  
Your word with too much assurance.<sup>17</sup>

Trust only those who do not show you unquestioning trust. Trust the untrusting. Feel certainty only with those who doubt. Doubt the veracity of your own articulations. Remain open. Question all that is said. The poem continues to describe the wearing away and wearing down of historical oppressors and it refers to the ‘most beautiful of all doubts’. This is ‘when the downtrodden and despondent raise their heads and/Stop believing in the strength/Of their oppressors’.<sup>18</sup> The best doubt is the doubt raised against the powerful. The doubt questions their right – and their capacity – to rule. There is a bad equivalence to be made should this not come to pass: ‘The thoughtless who never doubt/Meet the thoughtful who never act.’ The

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<sup>17</sup> John Willett, Ralph Manheim (trans. and eds.), *Bertolt Brecht: Poems 1913-1956*, Methuen, London, 1987, pp.333-4

<sup>18</sup> John Willett, Ralph Manheim (trans. and eds.), *Bertolt Brecht: Poems 1913-1956*, Methuen, London, 1987, p334

division of labour – embodied in manual and mental workers – is divided against the effectivity of doubt. The unmediated division of unreflective worker meets inactive intellectual. The ineffectual intellectual appears again, full of thought but distant from praxis. The intellectual can provide doubt. The worker can turn doubt into an act of rebuttal. But it is not enough, though, to praise doubt. It is necessary to split doubt, to be doubtful about doubt.

Therefore, if you praise doubt  
Do not praise  
The doubt which is a form of despair.<sup>19</sup>

Here is a play on words. The German word for despair is ‘Verzweifeln’, to doubt extensively. It is, it seems, possible to doubt wrongly, too much, or to take it too far. The prefix ‘Ver’ is a tricky one in German, as is attaining the right amount of doubt. ‘Ver’ suggests a leading away in the wrong direction. To doubt to the point of despair leads to an incapacity to act, a reconciliation to fate.

The right amount of doubt is nonetheless required in the face of the rigidity of Communist dogma, which is unable to countenance in any meaningful sense the idea of Brecht’s mentor, Karl Korsch, from 1934, that ‘Marxism is not positive but critical’.<sup>20</sup> The critical moment is, precisely, the moment of the splinter, a shattering. Critical is derived from crisis. Crisis is a turning point, an interruption, a change in quality. The critical moment proposes a before and after or a wavering on the borderland of those two moments. It might be phrased as aiming to articulate just the right calibration of doubting and acting.

### ***Anti-art***

Brecht’s parable was to be the means by which both Capitalism and Fascism would be combatted, and that meant that what he worked on was not an artwork, but an *anti-art work*, a production in which ‘all the artistic elements of a work cancel each other out’. Art is to be cancelled. Anything else is supply, and not transformation, of the apparatus.<sup>21</sup> Brecht doubts art, or he enfolds a doubtfulness into art, turning it against itself, undermining its art

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<sup>19</sup> John Willett, Ralph Manheim (trans. and eds.), *Bertolt Brecht: Poems 1913-1956*, Methuen, London, 1987, p.336

<sup>20</sup> Karl Korsch, ‘Why I am a Marxist’, in: *Modern Quarterly*, Vol. IX no. 2, April 1935, p. 88

<sup>21</sup> See Walter Benjamin, ‘The Author as Producer’, *Selected Writings vol 2, 1927-1934*, Belknap Press, Harvard, Cambridge MA., 1996, p.774.

character, but artfully. It was another way of attempting what Tristan Tzara tried more elliptically:

Dada places before action and above all: *doubt*. DADA doubts everything. Dada is an armadillo. Everything is Dada, too. Beware of Dada.  
Anti-dadaism is a disease: selfkleptomania, man's normal condition, is DADA.  
But the real dadas are against DADA<sup>22</sup>.

T.W. Adorno argued that the revolutionary politics that threw up Dada, and anti-art, were blocked in the post-war years, which was an age in which art – like the world – had become thoroughly technologised or bureaucratised. Action painting and action composing existed, noted Adorno, only as a cryptogram marking the space of the impossibility of action.<sup>23</sup> Art had not stopped being made, and as the war receded, art movement after art movement arrived with claims of radicalism, their self-presentations critical of existing circumstances. There were many moves made, from the 1960s onwards, to expand or detonate the frame of art, to criticise art institutions, to redraft the work of the artist through modes of de-skilling, to make form into anti-form and art into non-art, challenges to separations between art and craft, explorations of relations between creativity and gender. The questions raised by the first wave of early twentieth century avant gardists flashed up again. The post-war period, which saw first the emaciated practice of art after Auschwitz – bleak, dark stumps of negativity that found a space in galleries and museums – gave way to a reworking of the Constructivist-productivist and post-dada sense of art as critical practice, as it turned to process, left the gallery, worked on, or more specifically against the commodity nature of art, to the point of its non-appearance as object, its ‘auto-destruction’ or non-facture in the calls for an art strike. Something called an avant garde was as lively as fermenting yeast, but much as it presented different visions of the social world, even different – sometimes utopian – visions of what art might be, it did not undermine, in any fundamental sense, the category of art, indeed, it oftentimes expanded it, gave it more life, more presence and tangibility. Art was not in doubt. Its success was its failure. Adorno notes the postwar avant garde and its ‘happenings’ ‘no longer had any politically demolishing content and hence tend to take on a sectarian, séance-like quality – while everyone believes they have

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<sup>22</sup> Tristan Tzara, *Seven Dada Manifestos and Lampisteries*, Alma Press, Richmond, 2018, p. 38.

<sup>23</sup> T.W. Adorno, *Quasi una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*, translated by Rodney Livingstone, Verso, London, 2002, pp.315-316

participated in something uncanny, nothing at all happens, no ghost appears'.<sup>24</sup> The techno-bureaucratic complex basks under avant-garde lighting, which is so glaring it eliminates even shadows. It has no disruptive power. It is not just more or less at home in the world; it illuminates that world darkly. It confirms that art is a dubious business and its political worth doubtful.

Of the neo-Dadas, and much of the avant garde that carry out the furthering of experiment in art, Adorno is contemptuous, for *their* work, unlike that of their avant garde predecessors, 'degenerates at once into culture' and 'vacuous craft where its actions remain on the aesthetic plane and thereby submit to the very criteria of meaning – and culture is for good or ill the embodiment of meaning – which they have challenged'.<sup>25</sup> But the politics on which Dadaism drew is impossible, in 'an age in which every such action is either forestalled by technology or recuperated by an administered world'.<sup>26</sup> The avant garde remains trapped in art. Even avant garde art is recuperated by a society that 'defends itself ideologically by swallowing everything'.<sup>27</sup> By Adorno, only those are praised who, like Samuel Beckett, take on or replicate critically 'the crisis of meaning', and find a way to make meaning inhere in the negation of meaning, as did John Cage in his *Piano Concerto* with its 'inexorable aleatoriness', which makes critical meaning through its 'expression of horror'.<sup>28</sup> Undermining meaning is another way of pursuing doubt.

Some others, in being blatantly revolutionary, were as equidistant from affirmation of the imperial-capitalist West as they were from the stipulations of Soviet Cultural policy, which occurred in the name of Marxist materialist analysis. In 1958, Fortini wrote a poem titled 'Communism', in which he explored doubts of the self and of others.

I was a communist throughout.  
Justly though, the other communists  
looked askance at me. I was a communist  
despite their certainties, despite my doubts.  
Justly they did not see themselves in me.

They would not admit my discipline.  
My centralism seemed anarchy to them.  
My self-criticisms contradicted theirs.  
Special communists cannot be:

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<sup>24</sup> T.W. Adorno, 'Difficulties', 1964/66, in *Essays on Music*, Theodor Adorno, translated by Susan H Gillespie, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2002, p.658

<sup>25</sup> T.W. Adorno, 'Vers un Musique informelle' (1963), *Quasi una Fantasia*, pp.315-6

<sup>26</sup> T.W. Adorno, 'Vers un Musique informelle' (1963), *Quasi una Fantasia*, pp.315-6

<sup>27</sup> T.W. Adorno, 'Vers un Musique informelle' (1963), *Quasi una Fantasia*, p.314

<sup>28</sup> T.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, Bloomsbury, London, 2013, p.210.

to think so is not to be so.

Justly they did not see themselves in me,  
my comrades. Like them, I too  
was enslaved. Even more so: I tended to forget it.  
They did their work, I followed my inclination.  
Exactly that: I was a communist throughout.

Despite their certainties, despite my doubts  
I always wanted this world ended.  
Myself ended too. And it was that exactly  
which estranged us. My hopes had no point for them.  
My centralism seemed anarchy to them.

As if I wanted more, more truth,  
more for me to give them, more  
for them to give me. Thus living, dying thus.  
I was a communist throughout.  
I always wanted this world ended.

I have survived enough to see  
comrades who bruised me broken by intolerable truths.  
Now tell me: you knew very well I was with you?  
Was that why you hated me? My truth is truly needed,  
breathed in through space and time, heard patiently.<sup>29</sup>

There is no doubt in Fortini's communism. But it is doubted by those who adopt for themselves the name communist. He is a communist throughout. But communists doubt his fragilities, his lack of certainty in the face of dogma, his insufficient commitment to their terms, his poetic and intellectual orientation. Poetry remains a resource, if a doubtful one for Fortini. It is a locus of private reflection and public address, of composing and unravelling ideology, of fudging words and angling thoughts. Poetry is a space where self-doubts are raised alongside protests. Poetry protests against the hurtful certainties of dogmatic speech. It is another language, one that opens up, instead of closing down. The poem hopes to teach a lesson, to those who might have the patience to receive the wisdom handed on, tentatively.

### ***Returns, Misgivings***

The hateful certainties of dogmatic speech have been clamouring lately, though barely among the now scant communists. 'There shouldn't be a doubt', states President Trump on his

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<sup>29</sup> Translated by Angelo Quattrocchi and Lucien Rey, in *New Left Review*, I, 38, July/August 1966, p.81

colleague's sexual morality, for to doubt his team is to undermine the big project of remaking the nation.<sup>30</sup> In this present climate, residues of the past hang around like viruses in permafrost and can be reactivated, as we have seen so frequently in the global political scene of the past few years – Trump's 'Make America Great Again', for one, or the Brexit campaign's 'Take Britain Back', for another. Powerful fantasies of an indeterminate erstwhile, a speaking to something that is mythical, fuels prejudicial outlooks. Contemporary authoritarian demagoguery sees a leader whip up a crowd with hokey personalising stories, basic parables even, putting on the guise of being just one of the ordinary folks, not part of an 'international elite', 'the citizens of nowhere', as Theresa May put it, in her speech to the Conservative Party conference in October 2016.<sup>31</sup> She was Theresa from down the road, just like you. The rule of un specifics, of vast generalisations can be filled with any contents, any country, any public, as long as it believes itself to be justified, to be always, unlike the others, hardworking people.

Benjamin's diagnosis of an 'aestheticisation of politics' is barely less relevant, in the age of Trump and Brexit.<sup>32</sup> Politics appears as a soap opera, as a strategy to occupy the place of the political. Politics is redefined as what those people do, what they argue, what stance they occupy for a moment or two, as they further their careers. This is politics without the political – that is without the dialectics of discussion and democracy. This appearance as soap opera sounds too antiquated though. This apolitical politics is, rather, a twenty-four-hour rolling clickbait, link-bait machinery of stoked outrage that dissipates constantly, wiped away by the next horror. Each part of the populace, each bubble and niche on the web, gets to weep and wail hysterically in turn, before the focus turns to the next thing. There is an echo from the past here. In the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin cites an article from a June 1936 edition of the anti-fascist weekly cultural journal, *Vendredi*:

A shrewd observer remarked, one day, that fascist Italy was being run like a large newspaper and, moreover, by a great journalist: one idea per day, with sidelights and sensations, and with an adroit and insistent orientation of the reader toward certain inordinately enlarged aspects of social life – a systematic deformation of the understanding of the reader for certain practical ends. The long and the short of it is that fascist regimes are publicity regimes.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Tweet by Donald Trump, 3:14 PM - 21 Sep 2018.

<sup>31</sup> For the full text of the speech, see <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/10/05/theresa-mays-conference-speech-in-full/>

<sup>32</sup> Walter Benjamin: 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility'. In Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings (eds): *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings, Vol. 4—1938-40*, Belknap Press, Cambridge 2006, p. 270.

<sup>33</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Belknap Press, Harvard, Cambridge, MA., 2002, p. 768.

Politics without the political, without proper democracy, is a publicity regime, a governing by tweet and outrage. Each day there is a new talking point. Politics is a vote on the future, whose consequences are not spelled out before it happens. There is no room for doubt, only the certainty that something or someone is to blame for the mess and will be dealt with. Or there is only room for doubt – generalised suspicion of everyone else, be they experts, foreigners, intellectuals, media outlets or mainstream politicians. Here doubt is a weapon too – in the politics carried out by social media the currency is coined in doubt, ungrounded rumours, suspicions, the allegations of con-jobs. here is the appeal to broad but undefined groupings, in the name of political movements that mask their visions of the future and promise only that those who are hated, because they have apparently taken something from someone, will fare worse in the future, and, with luck, much worse. This is the politics of advantage and it is played as if it were a response to popular demand, but in actuality, it is a tactic of rule, through a setting of the parts against each other, with phony factions not always able to articulate what it is they hate so much or love so much. Populism comes courtesy of enriched elites playing games in public, making deals in private, distracting through endless talk, as if it mattered what we, in whose name we are told they act, think. Reaction, of whatever type, the more extreme the better, is generated and managed as a way of polarising and manipulating populations. Polarisation produces stalemate – business as usual – in all its horror – goes on regardless. Reaction pays dividends too, caught up as it is in the global systems of social media that are private revenue generators for which bad news cashes out best of all.

We are not so far away from the 1930s in terms of publicity as lie and distraction, in terms of structures of ownership, and the fetishising and mysticism around technology. There are few who hold with progress as benevolent. Even the Social Democrats do not pretend that there will be jam tomorrow. And yet have we really taken cognizance of how nasty, catastrophic, how precarious any future for us, any of us, actually is? That Social Democracy has failed, or has been unable to loosen itself from the illusion of the reformability of Capitalism, has been pertinent since Walter Benjamin first observed it in the 1930s. Some dull specks of light – a different quality of light – exist, but seem in the gloom much brighter than they really are.

There is human cost. In this world, violence is the currency freely flowing outwards and inwards, when hitting oneself and being hit – pain and spite – are indistinguishable and



interminable. Some are ‘damaged life’.<sup>34</sup> What critical theory, in its various forms, takes as a given in analysing aggressive life, commonplace brutality, is the reflexive turn towards the small-scale aggressor, the perpetrator, the ‘o little man’— and to see that person as, in various ways, damaged, hurt, wounded, victimised. Oppression in the workplace, disempowerment or everyday, workaday alienation makes of the self a ball of disappointment mixed with anger, the target of broken promises and structural relations that seize stuff, power and life from the worker, but fuzzes the workings of Reason such that the thief of it all is misidentified. Capitalism evades culpability. Critical theory of the old stripe recognised the historical, contingent nature of prejudice, of racism and hatred, directed in their lifetimes towards the Jews. These were socially produced phenomena – and so by implication able to be overcome socially. Adorno, for one, working within the context of government-funded sociology, in his study *The Authoritarian Personality*, for the most part, pragmatically, has his political perspectives squeezed out:<sup>35</sup> A stance is cryptically evident, though, in a passage in *Negative Dialectics*, where Adorno expresses the side from which his work emanates. He criticises in the name of a form of existence that is still to be made actual:

What dissolves the fetish is the insight that things are not simply so and not otherwise, that they have come to be under certain conditions. Their becoming fades and swells within the things; it can no more be stabilised in their concepts than it can be split off from their own results and forgotten [...] The means employed in negative dialectics for the penetration of its hardened objects is possibility – the possibility of which their reality has cheated the objects and which is nonetheless visible in each one.’<sup>36</sup>

The hardened objects can be broken down, as Brecht had intimated, though here only through a process of critical assault, an intellectual endeavour. Doubt dissolves the fetish.

In 1950, after he wrote his lamentful *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, Adorno went on, say conspiracy theorists, to write The Beatles’ songs, as well as other pop hit lyrics, and this as a vehicle for smuggling his brand of so-called Cultural Marxism, as part of a ‘fragmentation-maladaptation’ process undertaken by the Committee of 300, to introduce drugs, sexual depravity and pop music to the masses of the USA and worldwide in the

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<sup>34</sup> See T.W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on Damaged Life*, the title as translated into English.

<sup>35</sup> See, for more on this, Peter E. Gordon, ‘The Authoritarian Personality Revisited: Reading Adorno in the Age of Trump’, *B2O*, Boundary 2 online, June 15 2016, online at <https://www.boundary2.org/2016/06/peter-gordon-the-authoritarian-personality-revisited-reading-adorno-in-the-age-of-trump/>

<sup>36</sup> T.W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, Routledge, London, 2003, p. 52

1960s.<sup>37</sup> Adorno is charged with cynically manipulating the capacities of Capitalism in the interests of mind manipulation to bring about Communism. The term Cultural Marxism has snowballed in the wake of the re-emergence into light of neo-Rightist groups and Adorno's name is nowadays hurled around the internet and crops up even on Talk Radio shows, his influence inflated, his social impact amplified such that he becomes responsible for the soft, feminised, commodity-enslaved, frivolous mass society that is said to exist today. In a manned-up world, the swagger and narcissism of Donald Trump, his certainty in the face of doubters, is praised and set against Adorno's progeny, the snowflakes, the social justice warriors and the welfare queens. The world turns upside-down. For it is a truism in critical commentary that Adorno advocates the opposite: a commitment to avant garde music, against pop, a defence of elitism, against the dumb masses and commodification, adherence to a patriarchal stance, against the feminine, opposition to the instrumentalisation of culture with the aim of provoking social effects. The torn halves of Adorno do not add up. Does he negate himself as political masterstroke? Perhaps the negation works through him in terms of the dialectic that also contains the undialectical.

Revolution in art forms, revolution in social forms through art; revolutionary political allegiances: constellations of these terms have been the rubrics of the avant garde. Who can know what a new wave would initiate, so deep we are into the enmeshment of artists with all the technological forms, such as the internet and digital processing, so tied up are they with the bureaucracy of funding and the requirement to find a visible place within the surveyed, administered world. Technology and bureaucracy are the channels through which capitalism asserts and attempts to save itself, even as it heads towards automated disaster and environmental inhospitality. Technology and bureaucracy are enmeshed in crisis. Communism is not even a viable dogma.

Rather than locating and naming authentic art in the present, which runs the risk only of perpetuating art and its social relations, allowing it to go on existing as an afterthought and insult, is it possible to find critical practice, aesthetic experience that undermines Fascism, doubts the legitimacy of Capitalism, somewhere, amidst – within, alongside, as by-product of – the achieved and yet contested, dysfunctional and fractured bureaucratic and technological systems of an ailing world? What would be art after art, after what Adorno terms de-artisting (*Entkunstung*), after the collapse of art into, on the one hand, self-abnegation through anti-art critique, and on the other, into irrelevance in the face of entertainment, and so its pressures to

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<sup>37</sup> See, for example, Alan Watt transcript, Interview with Vyzygoth, *The Grassy Knoll*, 25 May 2006. Available at: [http://www.cuttingthroughthetmatrix.com/transcripts/Vyzygoth\\_Interview\\_with\\_Alان\\_Watt\\_052506.html](http://www.cuttingthroughthetmatrix.com/transcripts/Vyzygoth_Interview_with_Alان_Watt_052506.html).

assimilate to it?<sup>38</sup> What would be communism after communism – and how might these other emanations interact with each other? How can art, whether de-arted or not, be a political force for liberation against Fascism and the parameters of Capitalism and a vehicle for a revival of oppositional analyses and practices? Can it press in a progressive direction, or is it the last reservoir of elitism, an island-world, a place of insulated consolation? If the logic of art's own unfolding is an abandoned dialectical project, what waste dumps and blind spots might surface into view as sites to excavate authentic meaning and critique?

There is value in turning back to the point when the historic avant garde – that of the 1920s - is being bashed out of existence by Fascism, and abandoned by Communism. It is not a re-run. Communism has become somewhat more spectral than actual – while Fascism puffs itself up, spreading out, a cocky nationalism that surprises itself by its successes. Yet, to turn back to the avant garde of 1934, at a point of similar despair, that has not capitulated to inaction, is to turn back to a period of defeat *and* defiance. IN 1934, Brecht works in art and against art, mobilising its resources as socio-aesthetic act, from exile. In December 1934, Brecht writes 'On Restoring the Truth', which might seem to compromise the stance that affirms doubt.<sup>39</sup> Brecht knows what truth is, and can name it. But it does mobilise doubt in as much as, in the short contribution, advocated in it as strategy, words are peeled back, bashed up, undermined and suspected of occluding, as much as conveying, meaning. In 'On Restoring the Truth', Brecht lays out side by side speeches by the Nazi politicians Hermann Goering and Rudolph Hess and his own citation of the speeches with commentary embedded. This commentary corrects the deceptions of the left-hand column, replacing, as he puts it, 'false statements with true ones'. The process, akin to Walter Benjamin's process of citation and commentary, is disruptive – as Brecht notes of it the illusion in the significative function of the sentence is countered. The result is jagged, jarring and discordant. The crisis of meaning is foregrounded and countered. The words become expressive. Brecht puts it thus:

he places correct sentences alongside incorrect ones, without concerning himself with their context. He thus ruptures the context of the incorrect sentences, in the knowledge that a context often gives sentences an illusion of correctness, an illusion which comes from the fact that, in context, proceeding from one incorrect sentence, one can still deduce several proper conclusions.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1970, p.94

<sup>39</sup> Bertolt Brecht, 'On Restoring the Truth', *October*, 160, Spring 2017, pp. 137–142

<sup>40</sup> Bertolt Brecht, 'On Restoring the Truth', *October* 160, Spring, 2017, p.137

Brecht disrupts and recombines articulations. To articulate is to utter clearly or to put something into words. Articulation is the assembly or configuration of meaning by way of segments – that is, syllables and words – which are synthesised by grammar and syntax. Articulation is also a succession of connected engines and trucks or carriages, strung together with drawbars. Articulation is from the Latin *articulus*, a small connecting part, *articulare*, to divide into joints, and *articulatus*, distinct, intelligible. It is connected and divided, bifurcated. Articulations in their connections and separations may be intelligible, but they are also often provisional or dubious, and can be blasted out of the chain of meaning for a moment to see what other meanings emerge.

#### Verbatim Report of the Speech

With justified pride

in the spirit of selfless sacrifice and the willingness of our German Volk-comrades to help one may say today:

This Christmas and this winter Germany will not let a single one of its children go hungry,

#### Restoration of the Truth

With pride in the attitude of the propertied, who have sacrificed a little of that which had been sacrificed to them already by those without property, and in their willingness to appear as helpers to those who are kept by them in misery, one may say today:

This Christmas and this winter Germany's propertied classes will not let a single one of those without property starve completely.<sup>41</sup>

In our today, the alt-Right Neo-fascists cluster around Trump, become his henchmen, feed into his grotesque shitstorm, promulgating those conspiracy theories that included Adorno, Critical Theory, Jewish Marxism, Cultural Marxism. Those conspiracy theorists have an odd obsession with Beethoven, but Trump's musical taste appears to be more populist, or perhaps an irrelevance to him. He is, though, the one who has instrumentalised music for political ends in his use of Elton John's 'Rocket Man', as an insult to the North Korean leader, Kim Jong Un, and more latterly a gift

I have broken more Elton John records, he seems to have a lot of records. And I, by the way, I don't have a musical instrument. I don't have a guitar or an organ. No organ. Elton has an organ. And lots of other people helping. No we've broken a lot of records. We've broken virtually every record. Because you know, look, I only need this space. They need much more room. For basketball, for hockey and all of the sports, they need a lot of room. We don't need it. We have people in that space. So we break all of these records. Really we do it without like, the musical instruments. This is the only musical:

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<sup>41</sup> Bertolt Brecht, 'On Restoring the Truth', October 160, 2017, pp.139-40

the mouth. And hopefully the brain attached to the mouth. Right? The brain, more important than the mouth, is the brain. The brain is much more important.<sup>42</sup>

Trump, speaking off the cuff, speaking his mind, almost Dadaistic in its jump cuts, modernist in its stream of consciousness and yet, as a speaking act, it is not unintelligible. It means a lot, is heard as a tumble of significations that can be articulated only by he who is given office and therefore deserves it. Brecht's method can be undertaken on this, as any, speech by Trump. This one was circulated widely on social media, as a sign of Trump's apparent incompetency and absurdity. What if doubt were raised in relation to the idea that this is as incoherent as it seems to be on the surface? What if doubting the surface brought meaning, truthfulness, to the fore. If truth were to be restored to it, if it were restored to the meaning it means, alongside the lunacy, after the destruction of its own quasi-meaning, it might include such additions as 'I only need this space', 'because, contrary to what we claim, I am part of a very small elite' and 'we do it without like, the musical instruments', 'because we are the end of art, the completion, die *Vollendung* of art, as in the 'Benjaminian 'aestheticisation of politics', and we do not need art because we mush crush any possibility of Utopia or something other than us'. 'This is the only musical: the mouth. And hopefully the brain attached to the mouth': 'This is the only musical: the mouth – because there will be no other voice, no other performer but me and those I represent. And hopefully the brain attached to the mouth, for I am a grotesque organ. I have no organ, but I am an organ, the organ that organises, masterplans the great hoax'.

If the lie is big enough, like the lie that Adorno wrote the Beatles' songs, it seems more likely to be believed these days, less likely to be doubted, such is the derangement of our times. Those pop songs made the world as it exists more bearable, for good or ill, and if they changed the world, capital found an accord with them, or even took advantage of it. Other songs might have a greater, harder, more definitive task, not just to supplement or restore meaning, but to refigure it from the bottom up, such that the gobble is too hard, too bitter, too revolting for the enemy to swallow up in his brainy mouth, or that he chokes on it. These might be the properly anti-fascist resources of art, an art of re-articulation, in the context of a pervasive doubt that art possesses the requisite attitude or energy to bring about change.

Benjamin, in a radio lecture on Brecht from 1930, spoke of Brecht's character Herr Keuner, who displays 'cold and incorruptible thought', which is 'good for bringing people to the point where they become clear about the assumptions that have led them to the so-called

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<sup>42</sup> <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/trump-elton-john-696490/>

leaders, the thinkers or politicians, their books or speeches, and then to subject these assumptions to as thorough a criticism as possible'. Benjamin deploys an image that will be echoed in Brecht's poem on The Doubter (One of us untied the string of the old rolled-up/Chinese scroll on the wall, so that it fell down and/Revealed to us the man on the bench who/Doubted so much).

It will turn out to be a whole bundle of assumptions that will all fall apart once you have loosened the string that binds them together. The string of fixed opinion: somewhere or other, people are certainly thinking-we can rely on this. Notables who have the right posts, and are paid for it, will think for everyone else, are conversant with the relevant procedures, and are permanently occupied in disposing of the doubts and obscurities that remain. If you were to deny this, if you could prove that this is not the case, the public would undoubtedly be overcome by a certain anxiety. Because it might run the risk of having to think for itself.

Doubt can be the political demand to question, to untangle, to delve beneath the surface, a surface that does not lie, but covers over. Doubt was a technique honed by communist intellectuals, who doubted their own capacities to affect the world, to effect political change, doubted that their thoughts, their poetry, their art, would transfer to action. Doubt is a technique – it may be used variously, and not only by those who would question what exists to replace it with something better. The anti-fascist art, or articulation, or de-aring, has to propose a way between doubt and a relentless insistence on truth, but not as an empty act, rather one that meets an audience that will combine doubt with action, will direct mistrust usefully, productively, world-historically.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Bert Brecht', *Selected Writings vol 2, 1927-1934*, Belknap Press, Harvard, Cambridge MA., 1996, p.367.