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Left-wing melancholia today: Overview of a concept

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ABSTRACT

The following paper explores the connection between melancholy and the political Left, proposing an alternative to the prevailing psychoanalytic model of mourning and melancholia. This alternative conceptualises melancholy as an epistemological, ethical and historiographic attitude. The distinction is established through 1) a critical engagement with the works of Wendy Brown and Jodi Dean, representative of prevailing interpretations of left melancholy, and 2) the exposition and synthesis of writings by various authors, including Jonathan Flatley, Enzo Traverso, Bini Adamczak, Jacques Derrida and Mark Fisher. By reconstructing the inherent logic in these texts, the paper presents and discusses key characteristics and arguments for a positive form of left melancholy. This exploration encompasses issues of remembrance, temporalities, and the Left's relationship to defeats, among others.

KEYWORDS

melancholy; the Left; Enzo Traverso; Bini Adamczak; Mark Fisher; Walter Benjamin; Sigmund Freud; lost futures; loss

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INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of his book on melancholy in modernist literature, Jonathan Flatley presents the reader with a simple yet somewhat heretical observation about the affect-and-concept in question:

> The writing of this book originated in my desire to explain something that seemed simultaneously self-evident and poorly understood. That is: not all melancholias are depressing. More precisely, if by melancholia we mean an emotional attachment to something or someone lost, such dwelling on loss need not produce depression, that combination of incommunicable sorrow and isolating grief that results in the loss of interest in other persons, one's own actions, and often life itself. In fact, some melancholias are the opposite of depressing, functioning as the very mechanism through which one may be interested in the world. This book is about these non- or antidepressive melancholias (Flatley, 2008: 1).

The implicit judgement in those few sentences departs from the norm: melancholia is not necessarily something debilitating, pathological or destructive. In fact, putting it this way challenges two prevailing patterns in how melancholy is approached today. Flatley neither embraces the all-too-easy contemporary historiography that presents melancholy as proto-depression, retroactively imbuing the term with our present understanding of this mental illness, nor does he adopt the popular psychoanalytic schema found in Sigmund Freud, which views melancholy as a kind of autodestructive and incomplete mourning. It should be noted, however, that while this paper occasionally references Freud, it is focused more on the reception and contemporary uses of his conceptualisation, so individual misrepresentations or differences in definitions have to be understood functionally and not as a debate with Freud and his ideas. In fact, all this paper does in a sense is to give voice to those contemporary works in the humanities that wish to turn back our recent reduction of melancholy and perceive the variety of traditions of thinking about this affect-and-concept, also through the lens of its usefulness, criticality and productivity.

In the following paper I intend to adopt this alternative perspective on melancholy when discussing its connection with left-wing politics. While Flatley himself examines certain left-leaning fiction writers, such as William E.B. Du Bois and Andrei Platonov, along with the melancholy that supports their revolutionary urges, he refrains from fully developing the concept philosophically. Instead, he presents several possible theoretical approaches, ranging from Martin Heidegger to Walter Benjamin, ultimately opting for a methodological focus on "mapping" the affect within the authors' works. The objective of this paper is to outline a concept of melancholy in relation to left-wing politics that aligns with Flatley's thinking. So, this perspective challenges contemporary interpretations of this linkage by reconstructing and synthesising the

ideas of various contemporary theoreticians that have not really been analysed as examples of a larger tendency. What is noteworthy is that, despite the absence of direct references to each other's works, there exists a common thread of shared sensitivity, logic, and perspective that permits a unified discussion of their ideas. Furthermore, each of them addresses history, remembrance and the affective experience of the past in distinct yet interconnected ways.

But what prompts one to associate melancholy with the Left? Is it due to the past that "weighs on the brains of the living" (Karl Marx), the present that "culture has lost the ability to grasp and articulate" (Fisher, 2014: 14), or perhaps the perceived absence of a future? It is likely a combination of both past and present conditions that shape the worlds we inhabit and the forces that seek to transform them. The ideas presented here should be seen as a preliminary conceptualization and exploration, with the hope of discovering a trail to follow.

AGAINST DIAGNOSIS

Contemporary research on the links between melancholy and all things political, in particular emancipatory or revolutionary politics, left-wing culture and the figures of critical theory, has been steadily growing over the past few decades. In the conclusions of these studies melancholy is often portrayed as either an obstructive or, conversely, a symptomatic consequence of the current unfavourable socio-political climate and unsuccessful attempts at realising emancipatory ideas and projects (Žižek, 2000; Butler, 1995; Clemens & Hoens, 2016). Trapped in this vicious circle of cause and effect, melancholy is ultimately presented in a negative light — although, from a different point of view we could also say that it becomes a photographic-like negative in which all sorts of presuppositions get mediated and developed. This may explain the growing chorus of complaints against "melancholy on the Left", which seems to echo the mindset of mediaeval theologians (Agamben, 1993; Wenzel, 1967), early modern moralists (Burton, 2021) and later hygienists (Rabinbach, 1992) — even though the critique in most cases takes place within a framework of theoretical apparatus taken from the beginning of the twentieth century.

Two references that most often construct a theoretical and interpretative duality in contemporary literature on melancholy and (Left) politics are 1) the works of Walter Benjamin, in particular his famous essay *Left-wing melancholy* (Benjamin, 1994) and to a lesser extent his failed habilitation *The origin of German tragic drama* (Benjamin, 1977), as well as 2) Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory and especially the legendary paper *Mourning and melancholia* (Freud, 1957). It has to be said, however, that these two, distinct

conceptualizations of melancholy in modernity more than often get mixed up — in such cases it is the Freudian explanation and judgement that openly or unconsciously overrides Benjamin's ideas.

An illustrative example of this overcoding can be found in a very influential text for contemporary studies on the subject, authored by Wendy Brown in memory of Stuart Hall, titled *Resisting Left melancholy* (Brown, 1999). In it Brown presents a problematic critique of the contemporary Left, which, even if some of her points seem valid, feels superficial in the construction of the argument and is arbitrarily influenced by the intellectual concepts she seeks to employ, including melancholy itself. In this regard, the text fails to fully open the discussion it perhaps wanted to open up.

Brown's criticism targets many issues, reactions and defence mechanisms of the so-called "old Left" that intensified with the dissolution of many twentieth-century reference points. These reactions include adherence to "traditional" political methods, resistance to change, class reductionism, fear of what is termed identity politics and poststructuralism. Brown groups these accusations under the label of "left melancholy", a concept she borrows from Benjamin's 1931 review of Weimar-era poet Erich Kästner and his intellectual-artistic milieu. Just as Benjamin explained that Kästner's "heaviness of heart derives from routine" (Benjamin, 1994: 305), Brown contends that the Left's failure to adapt is due to its obsessive routine. She argues that the Left "has become more attached to its impossibility than to its potential fruitfulness" (Brown, 1999: 26).

While some aspects of her critique may be well-founded, two points of disagreement must be raised. The first point can be found in *Communist desire* by Jodi Dean, a purportedly orthodox Marxist scholar. She states that:

> Brown's continuation differs from Benjamin's. Benjamin is not criticizing a left for its attachment to left passions, reasons, analyses and convictions. Rather, he is calling out Kästner and the "new objectivity" trend for their compromise and the resulting "metamorphosis of political struggle from a compulsory decision into an object of pleasure, from a means of production into an article of consumption". He derides Kästner and other "left-radical publicists" as compromised intellectuals who turn revolutionary reflexes into "objects of distraction, of amusement, which can be supplied for consumption" and readily purchased at the "intelligentsia's department store". A new objectivist, he fatalistically gives way to the bourgeois vision of the existing world instead of holding fast to the revolutionary struggle of the proletariat to reorganize and transform production. Unlike Brown's, Benjamin's left melancholic sublimates left commitment to revolution and the proletariat (Dean, 2013: 4–5).

Dean's critique exposes the arbitrary nature of labelling certain political positions as melancholic or non-melancholic, highlighting the underlying assumptions inherent in this accusatory discourse. Interestingly, Dean herself falls into a similar trap, reinforcing the point that this type of accusatory voice

conceals presuppositions, right when she treats Benjamin as a hardline, "unproblematic" Communist — an orthodox just like her.

Returning to the second point of disagreement with Brown's text and the broader trend in contemporary uses of melancholy in scholarly literature — it appears that something is missing from Brown's account. The notion of "left melancholy", originally used by Benjamin, is referenced without any real care for the rest of his thinking about this topic. Brown does symbolically acknowledge that there is more to the story, stating that "Benjamin was neither categorically nor characterologically opposed to the value and valance of sadness as such, nor to the potential insights gleaned from brooding over one's losses" (Brown, 1999: 20), citing as an example his study on Baudelaire. However, this other aspect, the revolutionary "productive value of acedia, sadness, and mourning" does not find expression in her essay. Perhaps this omission can be partly explained by the fact that immediately following this recognition, Freud and his own "meditation on melancholia" take centre stage. This is in fact the real author that plays the main role in Brown's critique of the Left, or rather in the elusive alternative she tries to propose. That is why she primarily writes of "narcissistic identification" (Brown, 1999: 22, 23), or "lost objects" and "attachments" (Brown, 1999: 20) or the "emotional economy" (Brown, 1999: 21) of melancholy.

This pattern is also evident in Dean's critique of Brown. In the latter parts of her text, Dean delves into the analysis of melancholy through the perspectives of Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Žižek, recognizing the primary value of Brown's text in her smuggling of Freud into the discourse. It's not only arbitrary political positions and divisions that are labelled melancholic or non-melancholic; it's also done in psychoanalytical terms, which for melancholy means only one kind of treatment. This is the extent of this mix up of perspectives and erasure of melancholy as anything other than "diagnosis".

Finally, the particular framing of the issue that Brown uses enables her to construct her narrative by the opposition of conservative melancholy and "progressivism" (Brown, 1999: 22), implying an endorsement of the latter, although it is clearly not something Benjamin with his critique of "progress" and social democracy would approve of. The convoluted sentiment of Brown's contribution meant that for many and for long enough, the concept of melancholy was contradictory and destructive for the political agency of the Left. Whether framed as "left melancholy" or melancholy itself, these interpretations have hindered a thorough exploration of what the term could signify and what Benjamin truly intended.

Having offered this condensed overview of how melancholy is conventionally approached in scholarly discourse, I aim to diverge from the prevailing diagnostic-psychoanalytic and post-psychoanalytic model of melancholy which treats it as a passive, negative, pathological condition afflicting both

the individual and the more encompassing political subject. Instead, I propose an alternative understanding of melancholy, one that characterises it as a conscious attitude towards politics and history, with strong epistemological, historiographic and ethical dimensions. This alternative perspective, rooted in Benjamin's work, is advanced by Enzo Traverso, who, drawing heavily from Benjamin's ideas, defends the concept of left-wing melancholy. According to Traverso, while Benjamin despised and rejected melancholia understood "as a mood", made of "passivity and cynicism", without any critical and political potential, he very much affirmed melancholia "as a kind of epistemological posture" (Traverso, 2016: 48). The *episteme* of this melancholic approach is to be found through an active search for the sources of one's sorrow, discontent and discomfort. This in turn means not only the analysis of the present but recovery of the past and especially of "the objects and images of a past waiting for redemption" (Traverso, 2016: 48), as Traverso writes, echoing the theses of Benjamin.

It appears that there is a burgeoning recognition of the potential inherent in non-pathological melancholy, reflecting a subtle yet growing awareness or a particular melancholic *Zeitgeist* that anticipates a comprehensive exploration of this concept.

...AND TRIUMPH, OR ENDING THE VICTORS

> 0.000% of Communism has been built.
> Evil child-murdering billionaires still rule
> the world with a shit-eating grin.
> All he has managed to do is make himself *sad*.
> He is starting to suspect Kras Mazov *fucked him over*
> personally with his socio-economic theory.
> (*Disco Elysium*)

According to Traverso, melancholy is an intrinsic facet of the history and culture of the Left. It has been evident over the last two centuries, during which a particular "culture of defeat" and a "dialectic of defeat" characterised the socialist struggles. This melancholic disposition evolved in the midst of repressive measures, exiles, imprisonments, violence and the repeated failure of diverse political projects, but it never transpired into a pacifying power. "Instead of destroying its ideas and aspirations, these traumatic, tragic, often bloody defeats consolidated and legitimated them" (Traverso, 2016: 22), he writes. The flame of the desire to change the world and emancipate humanity never dwindled by the many attempts to extinguish it. Moreover, Traverso underscores the notion that navigating through various hardships and loss (both the loss of life, as well as losses in terms of defeats and failures) did not lead to isolation and

desolation among revolutionaries. Instead, they remained connected, directly or indirectly, to a community that embraced their afflictions, wounds and scars with reverence and pride, rather than relegating them to degrading misery. In his book, Traverso substantiates these claims with many historical examples, including the notable case of Rosa Luxemburg whose final text, *Order prevails in Berlin*, encapsulated these sentiments:

> The whole road of socialism — so far as revolutionary struggles are concerned — is paved with nothing but thunderous defeats. Yet, at the same time, history marches inexorably, step by step, toward final victory! Where would we be today without those "defeats," from which we draw historical experience, understanding, power and idealism? Today, as we advance into the final battle of the proletarian class war, we stand on the foundation of those very defeats; and we cannot do without any of them, because each one contributes to our strength and understanding (Luxemburg, 2010: 267).

The final victory did not come, either for Luxemburg, nor for others. Traverso comments:

> Defeats put into question neither the socialist goal nor the capacity of revolutionary forces to fulfil it. They only had to draw strategic and tactical lessons from their downfalls. There were no final defeats; defeats were only lost battles (Traverso, 2016: 36).

Here, we delve into an essential aspect of melancholy and its "epistemological posture", a theme previously alluded to through references to Traverso. This distinct approach to viewing failures, defeats and losses as subjects for contemplation that should underpin current and future struggles is rooted in what Traverso describes as the absence of "final defeats". In melancholy, there is an absence of ultimate closure and completeness due to failure. But what about victory, or even the "final victory" mentioned by Luxemburg? Surely, the type of bitter "victory" that unfolded throughout the 20th century, which for some on the left had long been perceived as a "failure", could not have been truly final. This issue shall be expounded upon later in this paper, in reference to the work of Bini Adamczak. For now it should suffice to say that the desire for any victory to be conclusive might ultimately lead to a profound disappointment when one is forced to acknowledge it as a defeat.

Traverso observes that the defeat experienced in 1989 differed significantly from prior defeats, marking a fundamental shift that influenced the logic of melancholy:

> a Promethean impetus or consolatory justification was no longer available; it had become an exhausted spiritual resource. [...] the melancholy born from defeat could not find anything to transcend it; it remained alone in front of a vacuum (Traverso, 2016: 52).

The vacuum was caused by the erasure of the utopia, a process that had been unfolding since the aftermath of the Second World War but became more pronounced with the apparent 'triumph' of (neo)liberal democracies. As Traverso writes of these transformations of memory and history:

> The memory of the Gulag erased that of revolution, the memory of the Holocaust replaced that of antifascism, and the memory of slavery eclipsed that of anticolonialism: the remembrance of the victims seems unable to coexist with the recollection of their hopes, of their struggles, of their conquests and their defeats (Traverso, 2016: 10).

Instead of the logic of "memory being incorporated into contemporary struggles" (Traverso, 2016: 13) or memory being "mobilized in order to fight the executioners of the present" (Traverso, 2016: 13), the shift in collective memory led to a new paradigm where memory was externalised through historical monuments and state-sanctioned "duty of memory" (Traverso, 2016: 19). Remembering was no longer focused on the defeated but on the victims, evolving into a ritualised, almost religious performance in which passivity prevailed: "remember in order to forget".

Before the institution of this "duty of memory", Theodor W. Adorno had already noticed the hypocrisy inherent in the idea (Traverso, 2016: 19). In one of his critical texts on post-World War II culture, Adorno cast a dubious eye on "the meaning of working through the past" (Adorno, 1998: 89), a concept that had become commonplace in post-war Germany. Adorno discerned that it did not signify a sincere and conscious effort to engage with the past:

> [it] does not mean seriously working upon the past, that is through a lucid consciousness breaking its power to fascinate. On the contrary, its intention is to close the books on the past and, if possible, even remove it from memory. The attitude that everything should be forgiven and forgotten, which would be proper for those who suffered injustice, is practised by those party supporters who committed the injustice (Adorno, 1998: 89).

Even though Adorno does not use here the same German term as Freud in his naming of "working through the past" that is supposed to take place in mourning, the underlying logic shared similarities, especially when Adorno's description is compared to the diagnostic model prevalent in contemporary literature on melancholic leftism. This point is immensely important. The sense of superiority of those who supposedly know how to "work through the past" (while in reality they fear it and desire to "close the books on the past") hides in fact the arbitrary nature of this gesture. It is in some sense an erasure of the defeat in the hope of making oneself more of a victor. Seen through the perspective that wants to deconstruct and invert the judgement of mourning and melancholia, it is in fact the intensity of mourning that becomes

problematic and eventually has to end in some kind of neurotic or paranoiac catastrophe — a haunting.

Jacques Derrida, more than four decades after Adorno, identified a comparable amnesic tendency to bury the past in the discourse of "the end of history". In the highest phase of the triumphal march, Derrida permitted himself a grievous dissensus and discord through his book *Specters of Marx* (Derrida, 2012). Derrida deconstructs and transvaluates Freudian distinction:

> This dominating discourse often has the manic, jubilatory, and incantatory form that Freud assigned to the so-called triumphant phase of mourning work. The incantation repeats and ritualizes itself, it holds forth and holds to formulas, like any animistic magic. To the rhythm of a cadenced march, it proclaims: Marx is dead, communism is dead, very dead, and along with it its hopes, its discourse, its theories, and its practices. It says: long live capitalism, long live the market, here's to the survival of economic and political liberalism! (Derrida, 2012: 64)

To the mournful gesture of the official discourses that want to get rid of the dead, they melancholically stay and are already coming back, says Derrida — the spectre of Marx comes time and time again. Derrida aimed not to exorcise these spectres but to acknowledge their presence and stay with them. The spectres, or the past, the unrealized past promises, come back and break the clean slate of the socially ignorant optimism that wishes to talk of the ideals of liberal democracy and the realisation of human history, but not "violence, exclusion, famine" (Derrida, 2012: 106). These themes of hauntology, haunting, and spectres have become recurrent motifs in contemporary left-wing melancholic discourse.

This line of argument, wherein an inversion of the judgement on mourning and melancholia offers insight into the circumstances of modern societies, subjectivities, cultures and the Left, recurs throughout later left-wing melancholic accounts. In his response to Brown's critique and the Freudian model, Traverso writes:

> However, one could observe that it is precisely the lack of a new spirit and vision that annihilates any attempt to distance oneself from the lost object and to overcome the loss. This "conservative tendency" could also be viewed as a form of resistance against demission and betrayal. Because of the end of utopias, a successful mourning could also mean identification with the enemy: lost socialism replaced by accepted capitalism. If a socialist alternative does not exist, the rejection of real socialism inevitably becomes a disenchanted acceptation of market capitalism, neoliberalism, and so on. In this case, melancholy would be the obstinate refusal of any compromise with domination. If we abandon the Freudian model and "depathologize" melancholy, we could see it as a necessary premise of a mourning process, a step that precedes and allows mourning instead of paralyzing it and thus helps the subject to become active again. In other words, melancholy could be seen as an enabling process (Traverso, 2016: 45).

Mark Fisher advances a similar argument. In an interview from 2014, following the publication of a collection of his essays dedicated to "depression, hauntology, and ghosts of his life", Fisher reflected on the twilight of "popular modernism" in the 1980s. This era had facilitated experimentation with theory and cultural artistic practices (Fisher, 2018: 1026). The disappearance of certain elements that had been taken for granted led him to conceptualise "hauntological melancholy'", distinct from standard depression (neither chemically induced, de-socialized, nor oedipalized). If the symptom of a depression would be a maximum lowering of expectations towards life — in a sense an adaptation to the "no-alternativity" of capitalist realism, then the hauntological melancholy was an aestheticized, conscious process of articulation of the refusal to adapt to the ruling present and reality (Fisher, 2018: 1027). Melancholy as a refusal or impossibility of conformity; withholding the relation with objects (speaking in psychoanalytic language) which according to all official communiques should be lost, erased and buried. This distinction between depression and melancholy, as drawn by Fisher, echoes Flatley's observation of mapping the "non- or anti-depressive melancholias", as well as Traverso's assertion that the traditional "melancholy of defeat [...] did not result in defeatism or depression because it was supported by a world vision that had its core in revolutionary utopia" (Traverso, 2016: 50). To Traverso, left-wing melancholia is "neither regressive nor impotent" (Traverso, 2016: xiv) if it "does not evade the burden of the past" and looks at it with a critical eye.

However, discussion of melancholy does not hinder consideration of the future; these authors rather argue that one cannot envision the future without grappling with the past, as liberation necessitates an acknowledgment of all inherited defeats. The hauntological dimension in Fisher's definition of melancholy lies in the experience of being haunted by "lost futures" — futures that might have been, the trajectories cut short by neoliberalism. According to Fisher, since the 1980s a form of nostalgia has emerged, defining "future", the "music of future" and "futurism" as concrete aesthetic choices. The future became a matter of tastes and preferences. Fisher contends that we continue to "rely on an old future" (Fisher, 2018: 1028).

Earlier in the paper, we explored the connection between melancholy and the finality of defeat or victory or political closure as such. Now, based on our reconstruction of the concept in the context of past and future, we can also consider its intricate relationship with temporality. The peculiar interplay of unclean, mixed temporalities is not exclusive to the post-neoliberal era, as expressed by Derrida's quotation of Hamlet, that "time is out of joint" (Derrida, 2012: 20). This temporal disarray is also a defining aspect of the melancholic epistemological posture, which seeks to uncover potential futures in the past and understand how they resonate with our current time. As Adamczak writes:

> The failure of struggles for the future in the past affects not only the present but also the relationships between these temporalities. The future today cannot simply be located in the moments of the present that point beyond it — there is no latent communism, no new society slumbering within the old — but instead must first be dislodged from the moments of the past in which they are anchored. Lines broken off. In the gaps between the compulsory historical context exist vanishing points whose vectors point in other directions (Adamczak, 2021: 77–78).

FAILURE..., OR STARTING FROM THE END (OF HISTORY)

You: Wait, first — what's this *communism* even about?
Rhetoric: Failure. It's about failure.
You: Failure?
Rhetoric: Yes! Abject failure. Total, irreversible defeat on all fronts! Absolutely vanquished, beaten, curb-stomped and pissed on...
(*Disco Elysium*)

Until now, our exploration has centred on a melancholic perspective constructed in relation to a somewhat idealised Left. This can be attributed to Traverso's aim of reconstructing the history of melancholy on the Left, challenging the prevailing anti-utopian and anti-melancholic discourse post-1989. However, a contrasting viewpoint emerges in the work of Adamczak. While Traverso primarily illustrates how revolutionaries were defeated by reactionary forces from an external standpoint, Adamczak seeks to narrate a story of betrayal within the ranks of the Left. This approach encourages a departure from an overly simplistic and comforting, innocent sentimentality, urging instead a full realisation of the profound critical potential inherent in such melancholy. For instance, Traverso extensively discusses the (anti-)bohemian Leon Trotsky during his exile in Western Europe (Traverso, 2016: 141–148) but barely mentions his authoritarian ideas and completely overlooks Kronstadt and its revolutionaries. In contrast, Adamczak recovers and defends their commitment to the promise of the revolution, their suppressed voices, and the future they envisioned.

In *Yesterday's tomorrow. On the loneliness of communist specters and the reconstruction of the future*, she wants to retell and contemplate the events spanning 1917 to 1945, focusing on the Communist movements in Russia and Germany. Tracing the thread of a "communist desire", she reconstructs biographies of individuals seemingly lost to time, memory and history. Her method involves moving backward from her present standpoint, delving deeper into the rubble.

The narrative commences with the chapter entitled *End*, where the train of the revolution reverses from Socialist Russia to National Socialist Germany before reaching Lenin going the other way — passing backwards from the late

30s and 40s to the inception of the October Revolution. It begins with the most harrowing story, the most grievous charge a Communist could make towards other Communists: Adamczak describes how hundreds of *émigrés* from Nazi Germany — communists, anarchists, antifascists, social-democrats, Jews — are turned over by NKVD from the USSR to the Gestapo and Nazi Germany. This was being done "not according to some overarching principle of political calculus nor as currency in an exchange but rather as a kind of gift" (Adamczak, 2021: 13), even before the Hitler–Stalin Pact of 1939. Each chapter in her book brims with similar stories and recollections, traversing the fates of thousands imprisoned and deceased during trials, repressions and camps. She employs this melancholic lens to disrupt not only the bleak present but also the Left itself, laying bare its tendencies to discard the legacy of Communism and the aftermath of its catastrophe.

The incomprehensible betrayals that Adamczak describes cannot be labelled sacrifices. The melancholic perspective is not a lookout for martyrdom or sacrifice. In fact those willing to sacrifice their lives for the revolution or their comrades were killed and enslaved but not sacrificed. As she writes of the refugees lost by the orders of the NKVD:

> Without a name, they die, without a struggle, most of them, not at the barricades, but behind them, in Moscow's prisons, deep in the Siberian steppes, back in the German camps. They counted on dying, on an early and violent death. But they do not die for revolution, nor for communism, if such a thing exists. For them, there will never be any communism. There is no communism for them. There is no communism without them. There will never be any communism without them (Adamczak, 2021: 16).

If they were not sacrificed then they died for nothing. Their lives have ended but history has not, communism has neither come as its end, nor has it become any more viable without them. This final was not a final victory. If it is not to become an ultimate defeat, they have to be somehow included in the future. "But how are we to remember them?", asks Adamczak. "How do we remember those of whom there is so little left to remember? And above all, with whom do we remember them? To whom do we raise the alarm, whom do we warn or turn to for help?" (Adamczak, 2021: 16).

This line of questioning is an alternative to two other responses that were described in this paper at length and that one can find on the Left in relation to the dissolution of socialist states. The first one could be called "nostalgic" (perhaps this is the term Brown should have chosen). Adamczak calls its representatives the "communists of the past", who are "still trapped in the logic of the Cold War" (Adamczak, 2021: 20). To them the remembrance of the victims of communism means a betrayal of the communist camp, 'an anticommunist strategy' (Adamczak, 2021: 20) par excellence. As she writes:

> In their fears, they feel stalked by an army of corpses marching beneath the banner of counterrevolution, determined to drag the last living communists down into their graves. In their blind defence of an allegedly real socialism, which was generally decent enough to refrain from using the c-word in the present circumstances, they endorse, with an authority they are as communists entitled to, their enemies' assertion that this is what communism was, and an alternative, if not the only alternative, to capitalism, to which, consequently, there is no real alternative. [...] they defend a temporarily victorious past as presented from the perspective of a present in which Stalin's head will forever remain welded to Karl Marx's cheek. They take the side of the party that liquidated their standard-bearers, position themselves behind the murderers who buried the revolution along with the murdered revolutionaries (Adamczak, 2021: 20).

Perpetuating the triumphalist memory of the Soviet Union and the "final victory" that somehow slipped away, these communists already live in an underworld with no chance for a different future — at least as long as they do not live with a different past. This echoes Derrida and Traverso's perspectives on neoliberal capitalism post-1989. In fact, Traverso, akin to Adamczak, distinguishes between left melancholy and "nostalgia for real socialism and other wrecked forms of Stalinism". The former is not about faith in the regimes and or particular ideologies but the revolutionary spirit of emancipation. With its fragile promises, it means an awareness that things could have gone differently (Traverso, 2016: 52).

The second problematic response is forgetfulness, or "closing the books on the past", a repressive hope that one can inherit the revolutionary or emancipatory promises without all the shadows of their past. Adamczak calls them "communists of the present" (Adamczak, 2021: 21), but perhaps a better name would be "communists of presentism", as she means by those that would like to purify the Left of history in the hope of getting a new, clean start, unburdened, with "a new terminology" (Adamczak, 2021: 20). They wish to have continuity without continuation, to be a (new) historical force without a history of their own. In some sense they also assert "that the End of History has already been reached" (Adamczak, 2021: 21).

To Adamczak, both responses are burdened not only by history (even if they would like to decide which parts of history) but also by ethics. In a sense, both betray those communists whom the communists have already betrayed in the past (Adamczak, 2021: 21). Once again, we see a gesture of double burial, of double forgetting, akin to the earlier critiques of Freud's mourning model (losing the one that is lost). This lack of remembrance eventually turns into a caricature and Schadenfreude, where those killed by Stalinism are remembered (and their dreams dismembered) by those that are the enemies not only of the Communist project but all Left politics or even liberalism. "The dead cannot defend themselves" (Adamczak, 2021: 19) and as Benjamin prophesied, "even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins".

Adamczak seeks to respond to the "unmitigated loneliness" of communists, both the dead and the living, for if "there are more people living now than ever before in history" then "that isn't true for the communists. For them, a small minority of the living is faced with the overwhelming majority of the dead" (Adamczak, 2021: 61). The project becomes "hauntological", Adamczak writes:

> Arriving here from history, working backward, we may try to engage in a spectral conversation with the dead. Feeling our way haltingly toward the moments of hope, which can only be salvaged truthfully through history, not by dispensing with it. Hence this construction, which begins at the end. Hence this procedure of antihistoric historiography, which is not antihistoric in the sense of opposing a given concept of history but instead opposes history itself. Which does not, like genealogy, turn to the past to make the present comprehensible but rather tries to grasp its unfulfilled future, a possible present that never managed to become the present. Its task is not to strip present reality of its natural armor, not to pay tribute to the tributaries, the thawed runoff, of history, not to reveal the matter-of-fact as a matter-of-acts, as the matter that composes the factual. Rather to breathe into the dust of history, make it whirl, so that in it, as in an animated film, the phantoms of a possible future will become visible (Adamczak, 2021: 83).

If those betrayed and lost to memory remain in their spectrality, often unnamed, and so do their dreams and their lost futures, then Adamczak in her gesture of solidarity wants "at least to offer them companionship, imaginary, belated companionship", be that someone with whom they would be able "to share their loneliness" (Adamczak, 2021: 17). That is the crux of her idea of writing their biographies and their fates. Taking her cue from Derrida, Adamczak says her

> goal is to make the dead speak, but tentatively, without resorting to the trickery of the carny in the marketplace, the ghost speaker who puts words into their mouths. To make their dreams audible even when no one wants to hear them, even when these dreams are over-fulfilled, unfulfilled, and a strange combination of both (Adamczak, 2021: 17).

If the real communists mostly remain "silent" while "the archives are open" (Adamczak, 2021: 20), then she wants to make a melancholic noise. All of this, she says, is in order for the future to "avoid being a repetition of the past" (Adamczak, 2021: 43). The hopeful tool that left-wing melancholy offers seems to be the power to reclaim what seems to have been lost.

CLOSING REMARKS WITHOUT CLOSURE

In the inaugural chapter of her work, Adamczak cites a poignant statement by Manès Sperber, asserting that "[i]n every generation there must be those who live as if their time were not a beginning and an end, but rather an end and a beginning" (Adamczak, 2021: 9). The culmination of this brief preliminary

exploration serves as a propaedeutic exercise. The themes, arguments and figures introduced here provide a sufficient ground for further constructive philosophising of left-wing melancholy. However, what has been sketched out allows for a few concluding remarks.

Melancholy on the Left is elusive yet distinct from other concepts. Firstly, it does not align with "depression". Rather than immobilising the will or stifling ideas and action, its radical stance of critical fidelity, as articulated by Flatley, has the transformative potential to render one "interested in the world". Melancholy, in this context, opens the subject to the world and history, irrespective of the inherent pain, and strips finality from past defeats. Secondly, it stands apart from political "nostalgia", eschewing the inclination to idealise a bygone era or indulge in illusions of an undiscovered final victory — an illusion clung to by staunch believers of "there is no alternative". This sentiment shared by neoliberal and Stalinist realism, is disrupted by the critical, "antihistoric" inquiry (Adamczak, 2021) into the past, aiming to recover missed opportunities and forgotten past futures by siding with the victors. Melancholy roots for the underdogs. Thirdly, this productive, critical left-wing melancholy cannot be reduced to a melancholy as perceived in the psychoanalysis-inspired theorems. Instead, as was the case of Fisher and Traverso, it works through a reversal and deconstruction of the distinctions. Writers of left-wing melancholia go against psychoanalytic theory of mourning where the past and the loss get killed twice, buried twice, and lost twice. Melancholy goes here against the tendency to erase (in reality: to repress) the burden of the past that political positions have, and simultaneously against the acceptance of the new status quo.

The embodied discomfort and discontent of melancholy become necessary components of dissensus in politics. The refusal of closure opposes defeatism, rejecting the belief in final defeats, while simultaneously challenging overconfidence in the inevitability of victory, particularly a final victory — an attitude expressed in Benjamin's *On the concept of history*. Melancholy on the Left perceives its praxis of reminding, remembering and conjuring spectres as an essential means to restore utopian hope. Its power to reclaim what was once believed to be lost is harnessed in constructing a politics built from salvaged parts, precluding any kind of purification within the realms of temporality, politics and the inheritance of the Left itself.

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