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THE FUTURE AND THE LEFT

IN TIMES LIKE these, the very appearance of an essay like Oliver Eagleton's offers a glimmer of hope.¹ His critique of my work is both historically conscious and generous towards the often less-than-successful endeavours of an older generation; he maps new paths with impressive commitment and knowledgeable insight into the complexities of the terrain ahead. A promising new cohort of the left is already emerging. Eagleton raises important issues of both theory and politics, and I shall respond to them in turn.

First, though, a quick re-cap. In 'The World and the Left', I argued that the great dialectical processes that had helped drive social advance for a century after 1870 had stalled, defeated in part by the powerful capitalist offensive known as neoliberal globalization. The emergent international left of the 21st century was now faced with the toxic legacies of capital's onslaught—soaring inequality, climate chaos, inter-imperial rivalries. These tendencies offered no dialectical direction, not even for elementary human development. 'The World and the Left' examined the forms and repertoires of the new left—the alterglobalists, the climate movement, indigenous and peasant movements, slum-dwellers, feminists, trade unionists; the urban uprisings of the Arab world, Latin America's pink tide, Latin Europe's *indignados*, Anglophone democratic socialists—and attempted an evaluation of its weaknesses and strengths, in light of the social, ecological and geopolitical challenges that confront it.

In his response, Eagleton sketched out a history of my work and formation, registering a shift 'from an *engagé* standpoint towards an Olympian one' around the turn of the century, amid uncertainty over

whether Marxism would retain its relevance in the new era.² Drawing on my *Science, Class and Society* (1976), he questioned the claim that the great social dialectics of the 20th century have stalled—or that ‘Marxian dialectics have been surpassed’. The halting of ‘labour’s forward march’ did not preclude the emergence of further dialectical processes: might the triad of ‘ecology, geopolitics, inequality’ harbour systemic contradictions comparable to those between the forces of production and the relations of production analysed by Marx? For Eagleton, ‘the rise of fossil capital and the recoil of climate breakdown constitutes a dialectic in the strictest sense’—‘the system’s “developmental logic” subverts itself’.³ Furthermore, he argued, the dialectic of climate crisis is bound up with the dynamic of geopolitics: ‘the two are inextricable and co-constitutive’, the rise of US hegemony and the shift to an oil-based world economy mutually reinforcing each other after 1945, while the deregulation of finance and orchestration of global manufacturing from the 1970s on constituted ‘another turning point in the history of fossil capital, one which strengthened both the imperial matrix and its energetic foundations’—albeit paving the way for China’s rise as carbon-spewing workshop of the world and potential challenger to US geopolitical supremacy.⁴

How else to describe this trajectory, Eagleton asked, if not as ‘an endogenous dialectic in which forces of fossil-backed production enter into contradiction with relations of American domination?’⁵ Inequality might not have the same dialectical structure, he conceded, since it is not an inevitability that oppressed populations will rise up against their rulers—but given the effects of environmental collapse and geopolitical

¹ Oliver Eagleton, ‘Therborn’s World-Casting’, NLR 144, November–December 2023, henceforward, TWC.

² TWC, pp. 50, 53. To Eagleton’s presentation, I would add one minor amendment. My political formation was anti-imperialist, from a very early age. My father took a keen interest in foreign affairs, from an anti-Nazi, Anglo-American perspective. My first political debate with him was in the autumn of 1950, when I was nine years old: I could not understand why the Americans were waging war in Korea, on the other side of the Pacific. My first consciously anti-colonial stand was catalysed four years later by the Vietnamese siege and capture of the French fortress at Dien-Bien-Phu, which I followed on the radio. Soon after came the Algerian War for Independence. This was the world-political context in which I came of age.

³ TWC, pp. 59, 60.

⁴ TWC, pp. 60, 61.

⁵ TWC, p. 61.

tension, there was every reason to expect these antagonisms to intensify. Eagleton agreed that these structural trends lacked a progressive character: 'rather than prefiguring emancipation, these binaries merely pit differently destructive forces against each other.' The 21st century marked the transition away from a hopeful, future-oriented dialectic towards a darker one, with the nationalist right the main beneficiary of popular discontent. The left might still re-ground itself, however, as the only current to offer a genuine alternative—this time by working against the dialectical dynamics of history, rather than with them, while drawing on its own past as a living resource.⁶

Theoretical problems

It will be obvious even from this brief summary that Eagleton's is a great and thought-provoking essay, bound to stimulate wider debate. As I understand it, Eagleton's theoretical critique focuses on two characteristically central questions: the analytical and political relevance of Marxism today, and the contemporary power of dialectics. My relationship to Marx and Marxism has certainly changed since my youth. Working on my 'Marxist trilogy' in the 1960s and 70s, my ambition was to make historical materialism *the* social science, for progressive scholars at least, while incorporating new thinking from the field.⁷ In retrospect this project was, of course, unrealistic: it ran up against the confines of entrenched academic institutions but also, and more importantly, against the limitations of classical 19th-century Marxism.

But I would keep the question mark in *From Marxism to Post-Marxism?*⁸ More broadly, I would summarize my position as Marxism Plus, in the sense of a continuing commitment to Marx's emancipatory reason, to historical materialism and to inquiries that take social dialectics as broadly directive of analysis. The 'Plus' also meaning a refusal to treat Marxism as a manual to be implemented, and instead to see it as a political and intellectual commitment, combined with an openness to other

⁶ TWC, pp. 63–7.

⁷ Respectively: Therborn, *Science, Class and Society: On the Formation of Sociology and Historical Materialism*, London and New York 1976; *What Does the Ruling Class Do When It Rules?: State Apparatuses and State Power under Feudalism, Capitalism and Socialism*, London and New York 1978; *The Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology*, London and New York 1980.

⁸ Therborn, *From Marxism to Post-Marxism?*, London and New York 2008.

analytical approaches when these seem appropriate. An example would be my recent work and activism on inequality, understood as the distribution of life-chances—a matter that Marx the scholar never concerned himself about; inequality was a necessary consequence of capitalism and would disappear with it.⁹

The importance of inequality has grown with our distance from socialism, and academic as well as civic interest in the phenomenon has surged since the financial crisis. ‘In-equality’ is also a question of norms, the importance of which classical Marxism never recognized. Marx had some good arguments against the invocation of norms and rights by the liberal ideologues of his time. But after Auschwitz and the military dictatorships of Latin America, ‘human rights’ have become a forceful normative argument—to the point of being geopolitically weaponized by the US and the EU. The great Durban strike of 1973, which set in motion the endgame of South African apartheid, was driven by the demand for ‘human dignity’.¹⁰ Similarly, in my research on sex-gender-family structures for *Between Sex and Power*, and on relations between the built environment and modes of rule for *Cities of Power*, driven by curiosity about, *inter alia*, family law and urban symbolism, I chose to navigate outside the Marxist orbit, while remembering its lessons on capitalism. But Marx was always larger than Marx-ism, and for me the ‘categorical imperative’ of the Young Marx remains a valid lodestar: ‘to overthrow all relations in which man is a debased, enslaved, forsaken, despicable being.’¹¹

To turn now to Eagleton’s other theoretical charge: the matter of dialectics. Eagleton has a sound instinct for sniffing out social contradictions, and both of us are looking at dialectics not as the topic of a philosophical seminar but as a tool of political analysis. Apparently, we are operating with different conceptions of it, although we might both agree that dialectics is about the contradictoriness, the conflictuality of the world. To me, the most interesting—and, sociologically and politically, the most fruitful—way of deploying it as a conceptual tool is in the search for and

⁹ Karl Marx, ‘Critique of the Gotha Programme’, *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 24, London 2010, pp. 87–8, 92; henceforward, *MECW*.

¹⁰ I am here indebted to a study by the doyen of South African labour studies, Eddie Webster, “‘Exodus Without a Map’: What Happened to the Durban Movement?”, *South African History Online*, September 2022.

¹¹ Marx, ‘Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law: Introduction’, *MECW*, vol. 3, p. 182.

analysis of dialectical *processes*; that is, the self-destructive tendencies of a social system, whose developmental logic alters the interrelations of the system's fundamental components—classical Marxism would have talked about 'totality' and 'unity of opposites' in this context—in a manner detrimental to its functioning.

This was how Marx and Engels deployed the concept in their analysis of capitalism. They detected two such dialectical processes. The first lay in the structural contradiction between the increasingly social character of the productive forces and the private ownership of the means of production, leading to structural incongruities and from there to economic, social and political crises. The second was a social or class contradiction, arising from the growth of the proletariat as 'a class constantly increasing in numbers, and trained, united and organized by the very mechanism of the capitalist process of production.'¹²

Both tendencies materialized in the century between 1870 and 1970. The structural contradiction manifested itself in the increasing role of public coordination (or regulation) and public ownership in the advanced-capitalist economies, and the expansion of state funding for infrastructure, transport, education and science. However, this dialectic never came close to causing a crisis of capitalism. Capital and the capitalist states developed ways to cope with the tendency, with the US military-industry complex being perhaps the most successful instance.

The tendency of the working class to grow in size, concentration, cohesion and autonomy also materialized, culminating in the capitalist core in the 1970s. By then, labour had achieved significant advances in workplace and civic rights, and an expanded influence within society at large. This dialectic operated mainly in the most heavily industrialized societies, of course, although labour movements emerged and grew all over the capitalist world. In the 1970s, European labour produced two reformist socialist projects: the Meidner Plan for wage earners' funds in Sweden and the Common Programme of the PS-PCF in France. However, at their first encounter with bourgeois resistance—parliamentary in Sweden; market-based (capital flight) in France—both surrendered without a fight. Neither process, as envisioned by Marx and Engels in an impressively prescient way, took into account the elasticity and adaptability of capitalism.

¹² Marx, *Capital: Volume I*, trans. Ben Fowkes, London 1976, p. 931.

I have argued that a further grand dialectic developed out of the final phase of colonialism and helped to power the decolonization process. This stage—capitalist-developmental colonialism—appeared in the wake of earlier forms of colonialism: conquest and plunder, plantation slavery, forced labour. The core idea was to develop the colony for imperial capital accumulation, which required an indigenous subaltern staff that was bilingual and had (some) modern education. The anti-colonial intelligentsias who led their people to independence developed from this layer of colonized, modernized subalterns. Their training as colonial staff bore a striking resemblance to industrial workers' factory education.¹³

These vast and world-changing dialectical processes have now ended or been marginalized. Decolonization has been achieved, at least in a formal sense, though with the significant exception of Palestine. The structural contradiction that Marx put at the heart of his analysis, between the social character of the productive forces and the private relations of production, has been neutralized by the immense scale of private capital accumulation over the last fifty years. The social dialectic—the rise of an increasingly cohesive industrial working class—has been broken in the Global North by de-industrialization, the expansion of the service sector and the financial turn. That of Southern industrialization continued to open possibilities for labour, but it is stalling, or even starting to decline, at a much lower rate of industrial employment than in the historical development of the North. East Asia appeared to be the exception for a while; but even in China, industrial employment has shrunk below 30 per cent of the workforce, overshadowed by a burgeoning service sector which now accounts for nearly 50 per cent of it.

Against this background of the world-shaping yet delimited dialectical processes of the 20th century, I remain sceptical about Eagleton's speculative construction of what might constitute the dialectics of the 21st. We might agree that 'the rise of fossil capital and the recoil of climate breakdown constitutes a dialectic', although in my opinion hardly 'in the strictest sense'.¹⁴ We might rather, I think, see it as a collision of two

¹³ As I pointed out in 'The World and the Left', the comparison of colonial and labour history is indebted to Benedict Anderson's splendid analysis of the formation of the anti-colonial intelligentsia in Indonesia. See Therborn, 'The World and the Left', NLR 137, September–October 2022; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, London and New York 2016 [1983], chapter seven.

¹⁴ TWC, p. 59.

systems, capitalist economics and planetary ecology. Does it matter much which interpretation we choose? It is more difficult to follow Eagleton in finding a constitutive dialectic in contemporary geopolitics. The climate crisis and the geopolitical dynamics of great-power conflict are not only 'equally dialectical processes', but 'entangled', 'inextricable and co-constitutive', he writes.¹⁵ Yet Eagleton's move here seems to involve a conflation of dollars, oil and military throw-weight that confuses rather than clarifies their material and historical inter-relations. He argues that it was 'US state investment in petroleum innovation during WW2 that allowed the country to exercise control over the inter-state system in its wake.' Drawing on Adam Hanieh's NLR essay, 'Petrochemical Empire', which sees a 'mutually reinforcing relationship' between the consolidation of American hegemony, the shift to an oil-centred global energy regime and the rise of plastics, Eagleton writes:

America's status as the source of global liquidity, its role as the organizing centre of global production and its attendant seigniorial privileges were rooted in its petroleum feedstock . . . The oil-based development of the productive forces entrenched asymmetrical productive relations in which America reigned supreme.¹⁶

By the 1970s, with rising competition from Germany and Japan, this led to problems of manufacturing overcapacity and falling profit rates, necessitating, Eagleton argues, both a shift to financial speculation and 'a *volte face* in imperial strategy', from encouraging domestic manufacturing to seeking out cheaper labour abroad:

That outsourcing operation created the conditions for a new coal-fired super-power in the East. China's high-speed growth subsequently enabled its emergence as a non-conforming actor in the international system . . . The US, still suffering from persistent stagnation and sapped state capacity, has come to view this as an impingement on its sovereign authority, and responded with an aggressive programme of economic containment and military encirclement.¹⁷

¹⁵ TWC, pp. 60–61.

¹⁶ TWC, pp. 60, 61

¹⁷ TWC, pp. 60–61. Although not convinced by Eagleton's claims, I found his source on this matter fascinating in its fruitful combination of business history and Marxism. See Adam Hanieh, 'Petrochemical Empire: The Geopolitics of Fossil-fuelled Production', NLR 130, July–August 2021, pp. 25–51.

This for Eagleton demonstrates the endogenous dialectic through which ‘forces of fossil-backed production enter into contradiction with relations of American domination’. But Eagleton may be at risk here of resorting to dialectics as metaphor, rather than naming an empirically delimited and definable social process. ‘Fossil capital’ is an important idea, but capital doesn’t stand or fall with fossil fuels, and ‘fossil capitalism’ cannot stand in for capitalism in general. Indeed, the extravagance of the metaphor may serve to narrow our vista on the struggle for world domination. America’s global power needs to be understood as resting on a broad base of resources and capacities—economic, military, scientific-technological—that underlies its political-diplomatic alliance system. The US succession to the North Atlantic throne of world power was already discernible by the late 19th century, when the industrializing continental state overtook Britain in GDP per capita. In historical retrospect, WW2 was the coronation ceremony, since the US emerged from it as the sole warring power not only undamaged but actually enriched by the fighting; the bombing of Hiroshima was the placing of the crown. (The USSR emerged from WW2 as the second superpower, but it looked much stronger than it was. It had suffered tremendous population losses in the war, and its western cities were devastated by the Nazi onslaught; Minsk in 1945 looked like Gaza in 2024.)

Nor am I entirely convinced by Eagleton’s treatment of inequality. Though he thinks it ‘not a historical inevitability that oppressed populations will rise up against their rulers’—indeed, an empirical dialectical materialist would want to avoid invoking historical inevitability—he still finds ‘every reason to believe that wealth disparities could produce forms of class antagonism that are just as sharp and binary as those of the last century.’ I fully agree with his possibilistic conclusion, but not for reasons of dialectical process. The 21st-century popular classes are less deferential than those of earlier epochs; but there seems little discernible tendency in contemporary capitalism to generate more cohesion and strength on the side of the disadvantaged.

Political priorities

This is a comradely discussion; Eagleton and I are basically in political agreement, and our debate is about the best way to locate ourselves in the welter of this world—and the best way to change it. Neither of us, I think, is claiming to know the answers for sure; we are both trying out

ideas. We seem to concur that the 21st-century world poses three major challenges to the left: first, climate change and the future of our planet; second, the substitution of imperial geopolitics for capitalist globalization, as the predominant game for world domination; and third, the horrendous degradation of human lives caused by persistent inequality, most spectacular in income and wealth, but also, even if moderated in recent times, in access to education, in life expectancy and existential recognition and respect.

The stakes are high. Policies on climate change may determine the liveability of the planet. In imperial geopolitics, five hundred years of world rule by a Euro-American dynasty, representing the white Christian ruling classes of the North Atlantic—from the Kings of Spain and Portugal to the President of the US—is being challenged. Will the class and gender equalizations of the 20th century turn out to have been a historical aberration, and the neoliberal reversal from about 1980 be able to resurrect the bleak world before trade unions, labour parties, feminist and anti-imperialist movements? Before trying to construct the interrelations of these three issues, it may be helpful to set out the distinctive political problems of each.

Ecology. The climate emergency is capitalism's worst crisis and the greatest challenge in its history; the future of humankind may be at stake. Global warming is also a focal point for global outrage at the injustices involved, because those responsible for producing the impending catastrophe—historically, the North Atlantic capitalists of the Industrial Revolution; currently, the top 10 per cent of the world population who, as consumers and owner-producers, account for almost 50 per cent of greenhouse gas emissions—are those with the best socio-geographical chances of escaping it. In one sense, the climate crisis is a major opportunity for the left: it clearly necessitates a great socio-economic transformation, raises obvious issues of global redistributive justice and provides a simple concrete idea that overrides capitalism's ideological ace—its claim to produce more economic growth and prosperity than any other system. The new trump card is the need for sustainable planetary economics. The question for the left is: will this opportunity be lost? It certainly could be—but need not.

Thanks to environmental groups and committed scientists, there is an impressive worldwide awareness of the climate crisis, but left political

forces are minuscule relative to the tasks ahead. There is, to my knowledge, no major left party or left government on the frontline; the German Greens definitely do not count as such. Gustavo Petro's governing coalition in Colombia, which had perhaps the most promise in the short run, has already fractured and stalled. Instead, the world climate stage is dominated by varieties of 'green capitalism'—electric vehicles, steel made using hydrogen gas, carbon-capture projects and much more—some honest, others mainly greenwashing still expanding forms of fossil-fuel capitalism. Some varieties of 'green capitalism' are creating labour conditions in battery factories and lithium mines reminiscent of the Black Industrial Revolution, even in the north of Sweden.

In the medium term, the devastating weather conditions from climate change will undoubtedly worsen. Green capitalism may become an emperor who has no clothes. Then the moment of what Eagleton and I have both called *mobilization by anticipatory fear*—drawing new strength from a *mobilization by revival* of past democratic and egalitarian struggles—may appear and will need to be captured.¹⁸ In the left's programme, the redistribution of life-chances and special protection for vulnerable areas and people will need to be central. Yet the planetary character of the climate question also makes it dependent upon geopolitical developments.

Geopolitics. Imperial geopolitics is a brutal, cynical and hypocritical game—not a good one for left players, who tend to be idealistic. Geopolitical clashes, characterized as they are by violence and mendacity, also tend to divide the left with their invented tales of good and evil. This was apparent in the summer of 1914, when the European labour movements nearly all rallied to their national warmongers. It has reappeared with the recent divisions over the Ukraine and Gaza wars. Eagleton and I agree that the left has no reason to align itself with any of the geopolitical rivals in play. However, we need to clarify longer-term left perspectives. This means considering the answers to questions that the 21st-century left has so far tended to avoid. Which power is the ultimate bulwark of capitalist exploitation and privilege? What constellation of world powers would make a just global socio-ecological transformation least difficult? Which power has been the worst violator of the most elementary human rights in the 21st century—the right to live and to live in peace?

¹⁸ *The Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology*, pp. 121–3; TWC, pp. 65–66.

A multi-polar world, in which the power of the states representing the most privileged 10 per cent—North America and Western Europe—is constrained by powerful states representing the remaining 90 per cent, seems likely to offer the best chances for a planetary and socially just way out of the climate crisis. A multi-polar world might also be a world with a greater number of social options, as neither China nor India has the Christian missionary drive of the US to make the rest of the world their disciples. Conceivably, after finding out that there is no future for China in a geopolitically capitalist world of economic warfare and ‘sanctions’, the Chinese Communist Party might even return to a ‘socialist road’.¹⁹ However, the probability that the 500-year-old Western dynasty of world emperors will abdicate peacefully must be rated rather slim. The possibility of a peaceful transition may depend significantly on the left in the West. The struggle from which Eagleton’s generation might draw lessons, inspiration and strength is the movement against the US war on Vietnam.

Inequality. World inequality is becoming increasingly intra-national. According to the World Inequality Database, within-country economic inequality overtook between-country inequality soon after 2000.²⁰ It is most horrific in the Global South, where societies have been ripped apart in multiple ways by colonialism and its persistent legacies, to the point of pre-empting any sustained force for equality. The world’s most unequal economies are the former settler colonies in Southern Africa—from South Africa to Zambia—and the vice-regal heartlands of the Spanish imperial settlements, Mexico and Peru.²¹ There is no dialectical tailwind in sight tending to strengthen the poor and the miserable. But there are arenas of contention across much of the Global South, and there is no reason to expect more docility; rather the contrary, as new social media aid comparative communication. So-called informal workers lack secure social and workplace rights, but some are organized, as are street vendors. It is not militancy that has been lacking, but

¹⁹ There is a lively intellectual discussion of Marxism and socialism in China today, with many university departments of Marxism and several journals. One of the more significant, *Wenhua-Zonghang*, has an international edition in English accessible through thetricontinental.org.

²⁰ Lucas Chancel and Thomas Piketty, ‘Global Income Inequality, 1820–2020: The Persistence and Mutation of Extreme Inequality’, World Inequality Lab Working Paper, December 2021, Figure 4.

²¹ The measure is the national income share of the richest ten per cent. See the World Inequality Database’s Interactive Map online.

programmes, transformational skills, democratically accountable political leadership and administrative capacity.

The catch-up tendency between states in the world economy that marked the first two decades of the 21st century has faded since the pandemic and international egalitarian prospects now look bleak. None of the major UN Sustainable Development Goals—zero hunger, zero extreme poverty and so on—will be reached by 2030, as intended. At the other end of the scale, the Bloomberg Billionaire Index is ballooning and GHG emissions are increasing instead of being reduced.²² However, geopolitical rivalries may also offer new opportunities for countries of the South; both the EU and the US have announced plans to compete with the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative in developmental support.

The radical right

Eagleton correctly stresses that a serious discussion of left prospects should pay analytical attention to the rise of the radical right—‘the main beneficiary of popular discontent with neoliberalism’ in Europe and the US.²³ I plead guilty of neglect, being much more interested in understanding the left, including its failures and defeats. Eagleton’s analysis, setting out to capture ‘the underlying logic of the right’s ascent’, relates it to the afflictions of mainstream liberalism, condemned to manage stagnant capitalist economies, without the hope of social progress. In his view, the new rights pursue the same policies as the neoliberal centre-left—‘national chauvinism mobilized in the cause of selling one’s country to investors’—minus their hypocrisy. This allows the new rights to reap the benefits of liberal ideology, its ‘persistently hegemonic status’ in public life, while also capitalizing on frustrations with it. Once in office, however, ‘nationalist politicians betray their continuities with their “globalist” predecessors: identical fealty to corporate interests, disregard for rustbelt populations, subservience to American empire.’²⁴

Rather than trace a single ‘underlying logic’ of the right’s ascent, I would start by thinking about its configurations. The most common mobilization issue has been ethno-nationalism, mainly triggered by immigration,

²² ‘The Sustainable Development Goals Report Special Edition: 2023’, United Nations, July 2023, p. 29.

²³ TWC, p. 63

²⁴ TWC, pp. 63–4.

which has trebled internationally since 1970.²⁵ That increase reflects increasing world polarization between areas of peace and economic security and those under attack, or in turmoil and misery. Exclusivist ethno-nationalism may also be directed against religious minorities—Muslims in India and in Europe; Christians in Indonesia—cultural minorities, like the Catalans and the Basques in Spain, or indigenous minorities: the Mapuche in Chile, Maoris in New Zealand. A surprising revival of fundamentalist religion, of every creed, has also provided shock troops for the radical right in a militant backlash against ‘the ideology of gender’, abortion and gay rights, the latter being one of the few areas of 20th-century equalization to have survived neoliberalism more or less intact.

The conjunctural background for the emergence of the new radical right was, of course, the triumph of neoliberalism. Its typical social base comes from the ‘losers’ of capitalist globalization, the economically and culturally disadvantaged parts of the national population, often found in regional concentrations—the de-industrialized zones of France, Germany, the US and UK—or along the fault lines of ethnic or ethno-linguistic division, as in Chile, India and Spain. In many countries the left had once represented these people, but by the late 1980s it was becoming demoralized and disoriented, crushed or in the process of self-immolation. The centre-lefts—erstwhile European social-democratic parties, US liberalism, the Indian Congress—had adopted neoliberalism with a supposedly human face, which for a short while enjoyed middle-class electoral popularity. But the centre had lost interest in the ‘losers’, who were thought to have no social role to play—and no electoral alternatives—and abandoned them. The radical right was pushing at an open door of frustration and resentment.

Yet if it is a radical right—to call it ‘populist’ would be an insult to the people—it is hardly ‘extreme’ or fascist. Even the Fratelli d’Italia and their leader Giorgia Meloni owe most of their policies to Thatcher and virtually none to Mussolini, though they may admire him as presiding over a time when Italy was ‘great’. As Eagleton notes, the new right’s policy proposals are all within the parameters of liberal economics and liberal politics, which can be nasty enough. It is now embracing the EU and NATO, at most with minor qualifications, and parties with clear Nazi and

²⁵ ‘Interactive World Migration Report 2022’, IOM UN Migration, December 2021.

anti-Semitic origins, like the Austrian FPÖ, the French National Rally and the Sweden Democrats are now taking up pro-Zionist positions. The traditional right and the new radical right are in the process of fusing.

Rational hopes

All this, plus the fact that neoliberal economics retains a certain appeal in the South for having ignited (radically unequal) economic growth in Asia and Africa—in Latin America, mainly confined to Chile and Peru, at high social cost—leads to a sombre view of the present, which Eagleton and I share. But neither of us will surrender, and I will conclude with two arguments for the rationality of such a position. First, political conjunctures and their focal issues tend to move in waves, seldom lasting longer than a decade, sometimes less. The present one will end, and a new wave will rise. In the interim, the decisive issues of the century will remain. We should be prepared to take them on.

Second, the future has arguably become a matter of hope, rather than of unfolding dialectics. These days I am reading Ernst Bloch's *The Principle of Hope*. Written at the same time as Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, by another German-Jewish Marxist philosopher in US exile, the theme and the tone of Bloch's work make a dramatic contrast to the Frankfurters' autopsy of the self-destructing Enlightenment. *The Principle of Hope* may therefore offer a more helpful intellectual tool in our dark times. (Though even Adorno and Horkheimer could hold, in 1944, that the task to be accomplished was 'the redemption of the hopes of the past'.)²⁶ For Bloch, hope is superior to fear, for it is neither passive nor 'locked into nothingness'. Hope is active, outward-facing and future-oriented; it aims at a better life. 'How richly people have always dreamed of this', Bloch writes—'dreamed of the better life that might be possible.'²⁷ His two-volume work—three volumes, in English—examines the character of 'expectant emotions', 'anticipatory consciousness' and the utopian imagination, distinguishing between wishful thinking, 'energating escapism' and 'syrupy stories', on the one hand, and daydreams enriched by 'participating reason', on the other.

²⁶ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, London and New York 1997, p. xv.

²⁷ Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope, Volume One*, Cambridge MA 1986, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice and Paul Knight, p. 3; originally published as *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, Frankfurt am Main 1959.

For Bloch, hope is a feeling or a faculty that can be enlarged and educated, developed into *docta spes*, or *begriffene Hoffnung*: 'educated hope'. While the social, technological and religious utopias that he surveys, in the work of Plato and Augustine, Fourier and Weitling, devote nine-tenths of their space to the ideal state of the future, 'the path towards it remains hidden'. Marx instead starts from the 'operative tendencies' of the present, the better to discover a path forward through what Bloch calls 'the unity of hope with the knowledge of process'—or, we might say: hope and dialectics. This for Bloch is 'a concrete dream', 'a utopia mediated with process'. The balance between the two was important: the scientific fight against idealistic cloud formations should not be allowed to extinguish the utopian 'pillar of fire'.²⁸ People still have dreams of a better life, and therein lies the hope for social change. Those dreams may point in different directions, but there remains a fair chance that the downtrodden and disadvantaged—and many others, too—will decide on the basis of experience that a better life requires an egalitarian, peaceful and democratic world.

²⁸ Bloch, *The Principle of Hope, Volume Two*, pp. 620–23.