

# VIEWPOINT MAGAZINE

## Lineaments of the Logistical State

Alberto Toscano

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Lineament. *noun*. GEOLOGY. A linear feature on the earth's surface, such as a fault.

“State space subordinates both chaos and difference to its implacable logistics.” – Henri Lefebvre, “Space and the State” (1978)

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## **Logistical revolts**

Sometimes, we have to look in unlikely places for news that can nourish a radical political imagination.<sup>1</sup> *World Cargo News*, for instance:

According to The Strike Club, the market leader for delay insurance for the maritime trades, the early months of 2013 have been marked by extremely damaging strike action in several countries, which has punished shipowners and charterers even though they are innocent parties. Some of the worst trouble spots in recent weeks have been in South America, particularly Chile, where a three-week strike crippled the country's key ports, blocking exports of copper, fruit and wood products. Chile's business leaders estimate the country lost more than US\$200M a day due to the conflict. There has also been a miners' strike in Colombia and it was only this month that US stevedores signed a six-year master contract with employers that removed the strike threat at east and Gulf coast ports. In South East Asia, a port workers' strike has now dragged on for more than three weeks in Hong Kong, while Greece is currently in the spotlight as the seafarers' union is threatening strike action in protest at new maritime legislation that, it is claimed, will swell their current high unemployment number. It was against this background that the Strike Club's directors met in Singapore at the end of last week, where the managers reported higher levels of shore-related claims from a wide range of incidents. These included general strikes, port strikes, strikes by land transport operators, customs and pilots, as well as port closures, blockades by fishermen, physical obstructions and mechanical equipment breakdowns.<sup>2</sup>

It has long been noted that the apparatuses of control and accumulation that structure the social and material reality of circulation – transport, the energy industry and, after World War Two, “business logistics” as a veritable science of real subsumption – though born to break the bargaining power of transport workers and accumulate profits by annihilating space and depressing wages, have also, especially through their energetic dimensions, created dynamic arenas for class struggle. Tim Mitchell has advanced this argument with great acumen – writing that in the age of coal, workers' power “derived not just from the organizations they formed, the ideas they began to share on the political alliances that they built, but from the extraordinary quantities of carbon energy that could be used to assemble political agency, by employing the ability to slow, disrupt, or cut off its supply.”<sup>3</sup> Interruption here represented a form of power correlated to the energetic vulnerabilities of capital accumulation and political power. The strike and the blockade, control and interruption, were entwined in the history of what, repurposing Mitchell, we could call *carbon syndicalism* or *carbon communism*. More

recently, struggles at the choke points of a planetary logistical system have led Sergio Bologna to speak of “the multitude of globalization,” designating all of those who work across the supply chain, in the manual and intellectual labor that makes highly complex integrated transnational systems of warehousing, transport, and control possible. It is members of this multitude, clerical workers and truckers in Los Angeles and Long Beach,<sup>4</sup> crane operators in Hong Kong,<sup>5</sup> distribution centre workers for Wal-Mart,<sup>6</sup> logistical workers in Northern Italy<sup>7</sup>, or even air-traffic controllers in Spain<sup>8</sup> that have led some to see not a secular vanishing but a shift in the loci of class struggle. This has prodded some to look again at the critical role of antagonism along the conduits of circulation – an abiding feature of the workers’ movement throughout its history – taking into consideration the intensifying significance of logistics to the reproduction of capital, but also its contradictory, uneven relationship to the reproduction of the capital-labor relation.

Can we define or declare a relocation of political and class conflict, in the overdeveloped de-industrializing countries of the “Global North,” from the point of production to the chokepoints of circulation? Is it possible to raise the status of logistical counter-power, in the guise of the blockade, for instance, from that of a tactic to that of a *strategy*, one that would redefine anti-capitalist and revolutionary action in a context where the appropriation of the means of production is either a distant or an unappealing prospect? In order to begin to approach such challenging issues of theory and practice, I believe it is necessary to consider the centrality of a theory and practice of *interruption*, targeted at logistical apparatuses, which has become increasingly attractive to anti-systemic militancy – and in a second moment to explore the forms of capitalist and political power that have accompanied the “logistics revolution.”

In this light, I would like to revisit – meaning both to expand and revise – some arguments about the current political significance of logistics that I rehearsed 3 years ago in a brief article for Mute magazine, entitled “Logistics and Opposition.”<sup>9</sup> That article tried to identify, picking up on one of the leitmotifs of The Invisible Committee’s *The Coming Insurrection*, how an ambient radical preoccupation with events, ruptures, dissensus, was being both concretized and in some ways surpassed by a “spontaneous philosophy of interruption,” or

even of sabotage, which saw disruptive actions at the nodes and terminals of circulation (here used loosely to include distribution, transportation, and consumption, but with an emphasis on the logistical) as overtaking workers' actions at the point of production, the paradigm for nineteenth and twentieth century socialist politics. The Invisible Committee's stance – which I think faithfully renders a structure of feeling of contemporary radicalism – is nicely encapsulated in the following declaration:

The technical infrastructure of the metropolis is vulnerable: its flows are not merely for the transportation of people and commodities; information and energy circulate by way of wire networks, fibres and channels, which it is possible to attack. To sabotage the social machine with some consequence today means re-conquering and reinventing the means of interrupting its networks. How could a TGV line or an electrical network be rendered useless?<sup>10</sup>

As suggested by some statements and reflections that accompanied the 2 November 2011 shutdown of the Port of Oakland,<sup>11</sup> this could be framed – in that periodizing register so prevalent in contemporary debates – as an epochal transformation in anti-capitalist action, figuratively captured as a move from the strike to the blockade, as well as from workers' demands centered on their own workplaces to a less regimented convergence of an “extrinsic proletariat” around the interruption of capital flows. If capital not in motion, is (as Marxists and managers concur) no longer capital, then its political immobilization, however fleeting, lends an impact otherwise absent from defensive anti-austerity politics. Motion and mobility, or rather “mobilization,” were the targets of The Invisible Committee's jeremiads against the depoliticizing despotism of the metropolis, and their wager – common to other strands in contemporary insurrectionary thought – was that the interruption of this spectacular regime of commodity flows may serve as the catalyst for the forging of antagonistic collectivities and forms-of-life: a recasting of the political form of the commune, which traced its arc from the beginning of the age of Empire to the present through the transfiguration of the social spaces and political temporalities of cities such as Paris, Barcelona, Shanghai, Kwangju, mutating in step with economic conjunctures and ideas of politics.

In my Mute article, leaning on Furio Jesi's remarkable book on the Berlin insurrection of 1919, *Spartakus: The Symbolology of Revolt*,<sup>12</sup> I suggested that the spatio-temporal imaginary

at work here is not one of revolution but of revolt, yet that the revolt imagined in *The Coming Insurrection* and kindred texts is a different kind of revolt, one aimed not so much at the *urbanization* of capital, à la David Harvey, but at the all-encompassing *integration* of production, circulation and distribution in logistical systems through which the supremacy of constant capital prophesied by Marx writes itself on the surface of the earth in forms both titanic and capillary. This is the baleful spatio-energetic complex that Mumford identified when he argued that “processing” had become “the chief form of metropolitan control.”<sup>13</sup>

Beyond the notion, shared by both the pro- and anti-union left, that attention to logistics lays bare some of capital’s nerve-centers, be they levers for political pressure or sites of negation, I also wanted to speculate about, and partially endorse, a trend in some recent radical thought, to consider the “logistical revolution” as an important site for thinking the “reconfiguration” or “refunctioning” of capitalist social relations of production – efforts towards imagining and practicing non-capitalist uses of quintessential instruments of contemporary capital accumulation. Could the speed, standardization and automation of the container port, or the capacities of Walmart distribution chains, be regarded as possible material bases for alternative, antagonistic organizations of production, circulation and distribution?

My Mute article has been the object of trenchant if comradely critique in a contribution to the journal *Endnotes* by Jasper Bernes. That piece, “Logistics, Counterlogistics, and the Communist Prospect”<sup>14</sup> raises some urgent critical and strategic questions, and I want to take the opportunity to respond to some of its arguments here, since I think they clarify the stakes (as well as the different conceptions) of a politics of circulation. I then want to consider how our conceptions of capital accumulation, the capital-relation, and material flows might determine a certain understanding of tactics of resistance and strategies of antagonism by considering two geographically-inflected ways of approaching these problems – drawn from Marx and Henri Lefebvre – that can help us better to specify what kind of “circulation” is at stake. What emerges from this brief foray into historical materialist geographies of circulation are two corrections to a direct political identification of crisis capitalism with its logistical infrastructure: first, the need to offset a tendency to class logistics and transport on the side of circulation, neglecting Marx’s prescient assertion that locational change could be a

commodity on its own right, and that the capitalist transport industry was itself a form of, as it were, *directly productive circulation*, blurring the boundaries between making and moving<sup>15</sup>; second, now following Lefebvre, a recognition that even or especially in a neoliberal moment, the state has played an absolutely crucial role in the deployment and securitization of logistics, meaning that conflicts at the choke points of circulation are not immediate challenges to value-in-motion, but mediated assaults on capitalist power, in the guise of what Lefebvre depicted in the 1970s as the emergent logistical state.

### **The reconfiguration thesis: a reply**

Bernes's article takes me to task as a representative of what he calls the "reconfiguration thesis," a strategic hypothesis which argues that anti-capitalist politics should move beyond a mere negation of capitalist relations, orienting itself instead towards a reckoning with what can be redeployed or refunctioned in the vast, and vastly complex, systems of "dead labor" that capital accumulation has thrown up – systems of which logistics is both an emblem and a vital component. Bernes's text is an important theoretical balance sheet of the struggles that culminated, for the time being, in the Oakland port blockade, and provides a rich, polemical synthesis of many of their key stakes. For that reason, I hope that engaging with his criticisms can serve to clarify the problems of circulation and logistics that confront present efforts to revive communist theory and practice.

Bernes suggests that I – along with other advocates of the aforementioned thesis, namely Mike Davis<sup>16</sup> and Fredric Jameson<sup>17</sup> – hold to the argument that "all existing means of production must have some use beyond capital, and that all technological innovation must have, almost categorically, a progressive dimension which is recuperable through a process of 'determinate negation.'" Though I was purposely bending the stick against a romantic vision of communitarian sabotage,<sup>18</sup> I stressed that any "reconfiguration" concerns an evaluation, both practical test and theoretical anticipation, of, as I had said, "*what aspects* of contemporary capitalism could be refunctioned in the passage to a communist society." This implies that some (many, *even most* – the ratio is not decidable a priori) of these aspects could not be refunctioned at all (though they would still need to be somehow dealt with or disposed

of). Notwithstanding our strategic differend, or our different intuitions about the leeway for repurposing, I think we broadly agree that there is no a priori way to simply declare certain features of capitalist production and circulation as allowing for communist uses. The test is a practical and political one. Where we part ways, perhaps, is in the confidence with which Bernes dismisses the potentialities of the assemblages of capitalist accumulation – logistics *in primis* – which he presents as (to employ Jameson’s terminology) essentially mono-valent, dialectically irrecoverable.

Approaching logistics in a transitional horizon necessarily involves reflecting on how much of the gigantism of the contemporary logistical complex is unthinkable outside of capital’s irrational rationalities – as Sergio Bologna has pointed out in some very interesting “insider” interventions (his “day job” for many years has been as a logistics consultant) on Italian ports: the vast majority of containers travelling east from Europe are full of “shit and air” (waste products and emptiness) and the craze for supercontainers as well as for the building of countless deep ports is comprehensible only in the context of the financialization of maritime assets and the correlated competition between different local authorities for subsidies and capital.<sup>19</sup> So speaking of “potentially reconfigurable” devices is, I hope, compatible, with the practical evaluation of what, where and how any reconfiguration could occur (we could think here of the experience of the Lucas Plan in the UK as a rough precursor for this kind of social practice<sup>20</sup>). As both Bernes’s “communist prospect” and Bologna’s advice to the Italian logistics industry suggest, this would most likely involve smaller ships and fewer ports...

Bernes also suggests that, together with its contribution to the tendential evanescence of an organized working class at the hinges of circulation, the specifically capitalist use-value of logistics – principally its depression of labor costs through a smooth despotism over the international division of labor – means that it cannot be approached by analogy with the factory, traditionally envisaged by the left as the site of workers’ reappropriation and control.

That logistics has been driven by labor arbitrage and class struggle (the latter more in its inaugural moments, I think) is certainly true, but I remain skeptical about some of the conclusions Bernes draws from it, as well as about the assumption that logistics has made

possible a linear race to the bottom. Though conditions there are hardly rosy, if we view the logistical revolution say from Shenzhen and not Long Beach, the bargaining power as well as wages of some sectors of the Chinese workers have risen.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the complexities of the international division of labor and possibilities of class struggle involved therein are not comprehensible, in my view, through the axis of absolute/relative surplus value alone – as suggested in Bernes’s claim that, inasmuch as the “technological ensemble which logistics superintends is therefore fundamentally different than other ensembles such as the Fordist factory,” focusing on labor arbitrage rather than increased labor productivity, logistics “is absolute surplus value masquerading as relative surplus value.” The passage from craft to industrial (assembly line) production in the earlier twentieth century was also viewed as a devastation of the workplace and associational bargaining power of workers, but it turned out not to be such a univocal process. Here I think Bernes falls into what for me remains a serious shortcoming of so-called communization theory, the positing of a linear periodization of figures of struggle and exploitation (not dissimilar from the periodizing problems of *operaismo*, with a similar tendency to generalize from “Northern” conditions), and a disregard for the political and economic unevenness of capitalism, which at times ends up generating a baleful materialist teleology. In short, the notion that Chinese industrial strikes are somehow historically residual is as untenable today as the Stalinist notion that agrarian struggles were regressive was in the 1940s.

In the final analysis, I think the economic and political arguments enlisted by Bernes to establish that logistical systems are lacking the “refunctionable” potentialities that were once projected onto the factory are not definitive. In effect, we could see logistics as a crucial component of the materialization of that old Italian workerist thesis, the “social factory.” Leaning on the embryonic theorization of value-production in the transport industry in volume 2 of *Capital* (on which more below), on the material reality that commodities today are “manufactured *across logistics space*,”<sup>22</sup> as well as on the explicit capitalist strategy behind the rise of logistics in the postwar period – grounded as it is on the idea of a “shift from cost minimization *after production* to value added *across circulatory systems*”<sup>23</sup> – it seems difficult not to conclude that logistics is only analytically and not *actually* separable from the production-process nowadays, such that we could really hive-off valorization in the

factory (which is a spatially-segregated production unit only in economic abstraction) from valorization at the container terminal. Moreover, as a complex material and social relation of circulation and exploitation, it does not seem to me that logistics is “more” constitutively hostile to workers’ needs than the factory. That said, I think Bernes’s essay is to be commended for delineating some of the formidable problems for political strategy and especially for envisaging transitions out of capitalism that the “logistics revolution” entails.

Bernes, who nicely presents logistics not only as “capital’s art of war” but as its own solution to what Jameson had called the problem of cognitive mapping rejects the idea that some kind of counter-logistics, or more bluntly the collective planning of circulation, could throw up such a map.<sup>24</sup> For him:

Because of the uneven distribution of productive means and capitals – not to mention the tendency for geographical specialisation, the concentration of certain lines in certain areas (textiles in Bangladesh, for instance) – the system is not scalable in any way but up. It does not permit partitioning by continent, hemisphere, zone or nation. It must be managed as a totality or not at all. Therefore, nearly all proponents of the reconfiguration thesis assume high-volume and hyper-global distribution in their socialist or communist system, even if the usefulness of such distributions beyond production for profit remain unclear.

The fundamental opacity of logistical systems to workers has been much remarked upon, and it can indeed be seen as one of its broadly political functions. As Allan Sekula noted, those boxes, uncannily proportioned like dollar bills, are also coffins of labor-power.<sup>25</sup> Yet, for all of the skepticism towards refunctioning this state of affairs should inspire, we can’t simply infer from these blockages to proletarian knowledge that an emancipatory refunctioning (and therefore profound transformation) of these systems is impossible. One should be wary in any case of treating this primarily as an issue about the mappability of the system for the individual, when it is really a question of devising forms of collective control, which might include – especially at larger scales of social mediation – considerable quotas of opacity. In this regard, short of the unviable idea that a post-capitalist society must be local, and that its politics needs involve the transparency of the small community or commune, I think the world market remains, in however arduous a way, a presupposition (not a framework!) for

any transition out of capitalism. Most things of worth and interest are beyond the cognizability of single individuals (scientific developments, cultural traditions, how technology works, what have you) but this only poses a problem as such if we think disalienation is a matter of personalization, of making us “at home in the world” (a cast of mind that some recent radical theory shares with the palliative spectacles of ethical consumption it would undoubtedly castigate). I struggle to see why this would either be emancipatory or attractive. I also don’t think that, as Bernes suggests, logistics is a view from nowhere of Capital-as-subject: it is a deeply incoherent, contradictory, conflicted, and competitive domain; a strategic field of fierce competition sitting uneasily with state and security coordination, as well as inevitable processes of standardization. Process mappings, while striving towards homogeneity of spaces and codes, remain strategic weapons in the hands of capitalist agents, not overviews by “capital.” Ideas of full visibility as integral flexibility are part of the ideology (and fantasy) of logistics, which in many ways is just a later iteration of other ideologies of capitalist efficacy: Taylorism, Toyotism, etc. The value-dynamics and spaces of logistics are deeply contradictory, in ways I will explore further below with reference to Lefebvre; they are more likely to be gummed up – for the time being – by internal impasses than by resolute political intervention.

Bernes is rightly wary of those “reconfigurationists” who see the problems of building a post-capitalist society resolved by a digital magic bullet – communist algorithms of distribution and other such hopeful schemes. But faced with such technological fixes, it is worth recalling that<sup>26</sup> paucity of solutions has never been an argument for the non-existence of problems. Bernes also takes me to task for asserting, in keeping with some of David Harvey’s observations in *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*, that social processes and spaces have built-in hierarchies and opacities, and that a sober if intransigent anti-capitalist politics would require, by analogy with Marcuse’s distinction between surplus and necessary repression, to think, practically, through something like “necessary alienation.” What I meant by this was the (perhaps banal) point that the reproduction of social life in general, even outside of the mediation of value, will involve certain asymmetries of authority, partial delegations of control, opacity, and so forth. Post-capitalism, or communism, is not the

absence of social form or social synthesis but *another* form or synthesis, another mode of regulation – as Raymond Williams noted, a *more complex* one.

Here I think Bernes takes back with one hand what he's abandoned with the other. On one side, he writes about those who through blockades and communes, "occupations," may try to undo the rule of capital: "To meet their own needs and the needs of others, these proletarians would have to engage in the production of food and other necessities, the capacity for which does not exist in most countries." I agree, and would add, that, as such, there is nothing particularly attractive about the devastation of capitalist everyday life, in all its alienations, in favor of some kind of re-ruralization, where the social form is based on comradeship, friendship, or some kind of band of brothers bond (communism too needs to think through "unsociable sociability"). But then he says that: "The absence of opportunities for 'reconfiguration' will mean that in their attempts to break from capitalism proletarians will need to find other ways of meeting their needs." To which I think a sober material analysis will simply answer: they won't (even if, which I think would be a big problem, we maintain "needs" as defined in a rather biological way). This entails that in many cases (perhaps most – but again this is not an *a priori* matter) "delinking" is simply not an option.

The rhetoric of communist abundance has most likely seen its day, but not for that should it be replaced by some kind of communism of penury or emergency – and in this sense I think the "delinking" point is somewhat "terroristic" in form (in the noble sense of a Sartrean terror-fraternity, not of the PATRIOT Act): a communism of survival in a besieged enclave forced by the fact that existing in a global capitalist system involves irrevocable compromises. This other formulation, on the other hand, I find much more plausible, and, strategic differences aside, would endorse: "one might also develop a functional understanding of the infrastructure of capital, such that one then knew which technologies and productive means would be orphaned by a partial or total delinking from planetary flows, which ones might alternately be conserved or converted, and what the major practical and technical questions facing a revolutionary situation might look like." The "inventory" would certainly be a part of anything I would consider as refunctioning. As would of course the problem of what to do with the unrefunctionable dead labors (both in terms of the social

relations they bear, and the material problems they pose, the waste they perpetuate). Planned communist obsolescence perhaps? This too would be the object of some pretty trenchant struggles, for which we have some interesting preludes in the big disputes in the 1920s over whether the urban form as it existed was compatible with communism (here I'm more with Mike Davis than with Amadeo Bordiga's urban abolitionism in his bracing screed "Space Versus Cement,"<sup>27</sup> much as I'm exceedingly fond of the latter).

Bernes, reflecting on the experience of Oakland – which he's largely right in seeing as a high point of the Occupy moment, transcending a certain fetishism for democratic participation, while rediscovering forms of struggle adequate to our present – puts much emphasis on the blockade, but I have questions as to whether its status as tactic and strategy has been duly clarified here. In particular, I remain unclear about what the criteria of political "efficacy" are in this instance. Presumably, they are not a matter of workplace bargaining power – of the kind recently seen in Long Beach or the Hong Kong container port, or in that sadly missed opportunity that was the Spanish air traffic controllers strike. Is "power" here measured principally by providing an emblem (logistics as a kind of symbolic insurrectional adversary, rather than a lever for traditional workers' politics), as a point of political condensation? Is it marked by the losses incurred by capital (usually nugatory in the broader scheme, even in strong struggles)? What kind of political spaces and durable organization (in the widest sense of the term) can we see coalescing around the blockade as a form of contemporary struggle?

## **Social forms of dead labor**

As I've noted, Bernes's argument against the presupposition that devices and systems crucial to capital accumulation could be refunctioned in a non-capitalist guise is a healthy reminder of the fact that we're never dealing with mere materiality or technology, but with certain often invisible social forms that animate given configurations of matter. Yet if we concur that technological contents or forces can't simply slough off their forms and find themselves happily relocated within other relations of production and reproduction, we should likewise, while remaining cognizant of the material and energetic preconditions for certain forms, not fetishize them. This, it seems to me, is one of the pitfalls of the "interruptive strain" in the

politics of circulation – which sees the blockage as a kind of *material revelation* (this is a problem which haunts *The Coming Insurrection* much more than Bernes’s essay). In this respect, there is a left version here of the notion of frontstaging the urban backstage which has recently been ably criticized by Stephen Graham<sup>28</sup> – where state phobias and practices of disruption (like military strategy of “shutting cities down”) are simply mirrored in activist discourses, where disruption is not sufficiently linked to *control*.

One of the theoretical limits of the philosophy of interruption, whether spontaneous or reflexive, that marks much contemporary radicalism lies then in its insufficient consideration of the polysemy of “circulation.”<sup>29</sup> The hypostasis of the blockade tactic can suggest that all varieties of circulation may be targeted at the “choke points” of logistics. But even if we remain only within the bounds of the Marxian canon, circulation can take an at times bewildering and slippery variety of guises. It can denote flows of material and resources (such as would exist in any mode of production); the sphere of exchange (that domain ruled over by freedom, equality and Bentham, and from which most of our misprisions about liberalism are deemed to derive); it can denote circulating as opposed to fixed capital (meaning the capital consumed in process of production, be it raw materials or the exertion of living labor-power); but it can also mean “capital of circulation,” which takes different guises in its travels through the market – leading to Marx’s crucial reflections on “circulation time,” which the annihilation of space through time is constantly driving to diminish. We can even think of circulation in keeping with the circuits in which Marx maps the formal metamorphosis of value, which are also the sites, at the level of theory, of capital’s contradictions.

In 1928, Isaak Illich Rubin pioneered the discussion of Marx as a thinker of “social form.” Rubin stressed how Marx’s critique of classical political economy hinges on distinguishing between “material categories” concerned with “technical methods and instruments of labour,” on the one hand, and “social forms” concerned with specifically capitalist relations, on the other. The blind spot of political economy is precisely its inability, evidenced by the theory of commodity fetishism, to think about why these particular value-forms are generated in bourgeois society, wrongly supposing that it is in transhistorical “material categories” – a physiological understanding of labor rather than labor-power, exchange separate from capital,

and so on – that one can look for the clues to the structure and development of a mode of production.

Contrariwise, it is “the social function which is realized through a thing [that] gives this thing a particular social character, a determined social form, a ‘determination of form’ (*Formbestimmtheit*), as Marx frequently wrote.”<sup>30</sup> Marx’s remonstrations against those political economists who, in Rubin’s terms, cannot see the “social forms” lying “beneath” the “technical functions in the process of material production” are legion. Historical materialism is predicated on the rejection of the spontaneous materialism of the political economists. This is the impetus behind such seemingly anti-materialist declarations as this famous passage from Volume 1 of *Capital*: “The value of commodities is the very opposite of the coarse materiality of their substance, not an atom of matter enters into its composition.”<sup>31</sup> The critique of “materialism” is also a key methodological postulate in Volume 2, for instance in Marx’s sardonic attempts on those who think that fixed capital, for instance, should be “fixed” in a common-sensically material sense of the term. This is how political economists go astray:

Firstly, certain properties that characterize the means of labor materially are made into direct properties of fixed capital, e.g. physical immobility, such as that of a house. But it is always easy to show that other means of labor, which are also as such fixed capital, ships for example, have the opposite property, i.e. physical mobility. Alternatively, the formal economic characteristic that arises from the circulation of value is confused with a concrete [*dinglich*] property; as if things, which are never capital at all in themselves, could already in themselves and by nature be capital in a definite form, fixed or circulating.<sup>32</sup>

What’s more, those ships (say the new mega-containers lumbering their way onto the market and demanding huge outlays of public finances on the construction of the corresponding ports) may themselves be best understood as financial assets and not just physical capitals or commodities. What happens then if we consider the question of circulation less literally? And what would it mean to struggle not simply against material flows but against the social forms that channel them? Can we think of different types of struggle in terms of how they map onto the various meanings of circulation mentioned above?

On the one level, the notion that capital not in motion is no longer capital, or, as Marx rather stunningly puts it, that “continuity is a productive force of labour,” has important political resonances – though these are far more palpable in the creeping devastation of deindustrialization than in the successful blockade. On the other, the nature of capital is such that the arms race to lessen circulation times by deploying (and securitizing) vast circulatory apparatuses necessarily involves the hypertrophy of constant capital, dwarfing variable capital (proletarians) and revealing potentially paralyzing quanta of fixity as the price for accelerated circulation. I have recently tried to argue, in another piece for *Mute*, how in the real-estate politics and energetic difficulties plaguing the seemingly ethereal rise of high-frequency trading we could witness such a revenge of matter and space upon financial ideality – a revenge we can only understand in terms of certain social forms that are specifically capitalist.<sup>33</sup> In an economic field whose drive to instantaneousness seems to obliterate spatial difference, this corroborates, in the financial arena, a well-known observation from Marx’s *Grundrisse*:

The more production comes to rest on exchange value, hence on exchange, the more important do the physical conditions of exchange – the means of communication and transport – become for the costs of circulation. Capital by its nature drives beyond every spatial barrier. Thus the creation of the physical conditions of exchange – of the means of communication and transport – the annihilation of space by time – becomes an extraordinary necessity for it.<sup>34</sup>

For the costs of financial circulation “physical conditions” are paramount – as manifested in the fierce competition over “co-located” server space, proximity to trading venues and access to data, and in related phenomena like the rush to acquire and develop real-estate for data centres. As mentioned above, Marx had already argued in volume 2 of *Capital* that transport is itself a domain of production, in which the commodity, as he puts it, “is the change of place itself” – revisiting this thesis in the light of financialization and the logistics revolution makes a politically overdetermined schematism separating production and circulation, the factory and the port, all the more difficult to sustain.

But I have as yet only glancingly dealt with a or perhaps *the* key player in the politics of circulation: the state. One of the strategic dangers of a politics of interruption is to think of the blockade as a kind of unmediated confrontation with or negation of the social form of value, of capital as a social relation, in which the state is either ignored or reduced to the mesmerizing metonym of the cop. I'd like instead, simply by way of opening up another geographical and materialist avenue of inquiry, to sketch out how the very thinker who pioneered the analysis of the production of space also gave us some tools to think through the imbrication of logistics and the state – something easily verified, for instance, by the strategic panics and confusions regarding how to secure the flows of capital witnessed after 9/11. This is what Deborah Cowen has presented, in her illuminating work on logistics, as *the problem of September 12* – the collapse of cargo flow in the wake of that of the World Trade Center, showing the profound tear in the tactics and strategy of the capitalist state, spanning as they do still contradictory spaces.

### **Contradictions in the logistical state<sup>35</sup>**

On the face of it, Henri Lefebvre's thesis about the emergence of a "state mode of production" (SMP) – as elaborated on the eve of the neoliberal surge in the four volumes of his *De l'État* (1976-78) – would appear to be a threadbare Marxist anachronism, a belated successor to twentieth-century efforts to think the convergence between liberal-capitalist and state-socialist or fascist political systems – Horkheimer's authoritarian state, Burnham's managerial revolution, Rizzi's bureaucratization of the world, or Debord's integrated spectacle. Yet I would like to suggest that attending to the French philosopher's arguments about the spatial contradictions of the modern state can allow us to refine our understanding of the forms of power borne by logistics, the tensions they carry, and how they cannot simply be reduced to a direct expression of Capital.

For Lefebvre, the state is initially identified with a specific production of space, that of the national territory. This state does not have the "chaotic" characteristics of "private space." Moreover, unlike the nightwatchman state, it is a persistent agent of social reproduction; it "does not intervene in an episodic and circumscribed fashion but ceaselessly, through

different organisms and institutions devoted to the management as well as the production of space.”<sup>36</sup> This space is both homogeneous – everywhere subject to the same logic – and broken, shattered – by the logics of property, rent, social conflict, and the ensuing fragmentation. The logistical space of the SMP, like capitalist space broadly construed, is homogeneous-broken [*homogène-brisé*]. Isn’t this a paradox? No, says Lefebvre: “This space is homogeneous because everything in it is equivalent, exchangeable, interchangeable, because it is a space bought and sold and exchange only exists between equivalences and interchangeabilities. This space is broken because it is treated by lots and sections; sold by lots and sections, it is therefore fragmentary.”<sup>37</sup>

Logistical space, as conceived in Lefebvre’s work of the 1970s, is prolonged by energetic space – beyond its specific economic and political investments in railways, roads and aerial space,<sup>38</sup> the state’s relation to the production of energy is intimately linked to the production of a political space, state-space. This space is both a precondition of, and in contradiction with, the fragmented space of capitalist urbanization, and its attendant chaos. In the end, state action does not resolve spatial contradictions, it *aggravates* them, in the guise of synthesis and regulation. Its need to keep the flows smooth does not undo spatial chaos, or at best replaces it with social void. For Lefebvre, the logistical non-places of late capitalist modernity are thus byproducts of the spatial strategies of the capitalist state:

Wherever the state abolishes chaos, it establishes itself within spaces made fascinating by their social emptiness: a highway interchange or an airport runway, for example, both of which are places of transit and only of transit ... Armed with the instrument of logistical space, the State inserts itself between pulverized spaces and spaces that have been reconstructed differentially.<sup>39</sup>

Space is thus the secret of the state in general and the SMP in particular. Lefebvre presented the space of the SMP as an anti-political space, organized to neutralize “users” (*usagers*), their movements, and the creation of differential spaces (these are all key themes in Lefebvre’s writings of the 1970s, crystallized especially in the 1971 *Le manifeste différentialiste*). Two of the key vectors of this antipolitical space, which is the product and precondition of the state mode of production, are its logistical orientation, which reveals it as

a space of catastrophe or potential breakdown, and its “visuality,” which transforms space into a spectacle or series of images, in which the body disappears. Nonetheless, Lefebvre still wishes to maintain a dialectical foothold, allowing one to imagine the appropriation of state space for the sake of differential social practices. As he writes, the space of the SMP is “opposed to possible (differential) space and nevertheless leading towards it.”

At different points in his argument, Lefebvre qualifies this new space as phallic, optical, visual, homogeneous and broken, global and fragmentary, “logical-logistical.”<sup>40</sup> This is also the space in which capitalism organizes its *survie*, its living-on, its afterlife – through the *reproduction of the relations of production*. As Lefebvre would write in *The Survival of Capitalism*: “It is in this dialecticized (conflictual) space that the reproduction of the relations of production takes place. It is this space that reproduction produces, by introducing into it multiple contradictions.”<sup>41</sup> The formula “logical-logistical” crops up at different points in Lefebvre’s notoriously sprawling and often slippery texts. In *The Production of Space*, for instance, he writes that logic and logistics both conceal latent violence.<sup>42</sup> *De l’État* insistently links the two terms together. Without exploring Lefebvre’s complex engagement with logic and language,<sup>43</sup> we can note here that logistics designates in these texts not the military or capitalist practice of managing resources and circulation, but a particular, abstract representation of space – one which, however, is dialectically bound-up with spatial and political practices – namely the state’s oversight of stocks and flows – which are, so to speak, *concretely* logistical.

One possible name for this link between logistical representations and logistical practices is what in *The Survival of Capitalism* Lefebvre calls *aménagement* (a term used in urbanism to denote planning or layout). “To the extent that it is represented by naming it *aménagement*,” he writes, “the production of space is considered logically or logistically.”<sup>44</sup> This *aménagement* is responsible for the reproduction of means of production and of production relations, for organizing the “environment” of firms, for setting out a “puzzle” of cities and regions, for spatially organizing life itself. Elsewhere, Lefebvre refers to this same set of issues under the heading of a “spatiotemporal programming” which requires the knowledge of flows, circulation and terrain.<sup>45</sup> Logistics, broadly construed, is a

critical field for the reproduction of the relations of production, in which the state intervenes as producer of capitalist space. This logistical imperative – to lay out the space of stocks and flows for the optimal reproduction of capitalist relations – involves the state precisely to the extent that reproduction is not a matter of logic, but of *strategy*.<sup>46</sup>

In this regard the “logical-logistical” – as we’ve already noted in our discussion of Bernes – is also a fantasy, albeit a partially realized one, about the possibility to master spatial reproduction for the sake of state and capital.<sup>47</sup> Such is the lure of abstraction: if the science of space “is a science of formal space, of a spatial form,” Lefebvre writes, “it implies a rigid logistics, and this science would consist of nothing but the constraints placed on the contents (the people!).” Behind this theoretical and mental abstraction, however, lies the sedimentation of really abstract social practices: “If space has an air of neutrality and indifference with regard to its contents and thus seems to be ‘purely’ formal, the essence of rational abstraction, it is precisely because this space has already been occupied and planned, already the focus of past strategies, of which we cannot always find the traces.”<sup>48</sup> “Systems of equivalence take on a sensible existence and are inscribed in space.”<sup>49</sup> The persistence of contradictions, which themselves are the product of a logical-logistical imperative, means that the science of space “does not have a logistics of space as its culmination”<sup>50</sup> – where logistics entails an all-encompassing intelligibility and control of a homogeneously coded space, from whence the negativity of practices and struggles has been stripped out.

State space is understood as a space of flows and stocks, logistically organized and controlled for political ends; it reorganizes social relations of production in function of their spatial support. The state tends to oppose a chaos of fragmentary relations – which it has itself created – with a rationality in which space is the privileged instrument, and in which economics is reconceived spatially (in terms of stocks and flows, but also rents and real estate). As Lefebvre writes: “The state tends to control flows and stocks, assuring their coordination. In the course of this process, which has a threefold aspect – growth, namely increase in the productive forces; urbanization, that is formation of giant units of production and consumption; spatialization – a qualitative leap takes place: the emergence of the SMP (state mode of production).”<sup>51</sup> Or, in another illuminating formulation:

In the chaos of relations among individuals, groups, class factions, and classes, the State tends to impose a rationality, its own, that has space as its privileged instrument. The economy is thus recast in spatial terms – flows (of energy, raw materials, labor power, finished goods, trade patterns, etc.) and stocks (of gold and capital, investments, machines, technologies, stable clusters of various jobs, etc.). The State tends to control flows and stocks by ensuring their coordination. ... Only the State can control the flows and harmonize them with the fixed demands of the economy (stocks), because the State integrates them into the dominant state it produces.<sup>52</sup>

Especially as Lefebvre turns to the present, he is sensitive to the state's contradictory trespassing of confines of the national territory in the process of its *mondialisation* – a “globalization” which is not, as commonly understood, beyond the state, but rather *of* the state, in ways that can allow us also to rethink the tendency to take logistics as an instance of the state's loss of predominance.<sup>53</sup> Consider the following:

Through organization and information, there is produced a kind of unification of world space, with strong points (the centres) and weaker and dominated bases (the peripheries). In these latter zones are perpetuated differences that, for better and for worse, resist but do not paralyse the process as a whole. The latter is translated through efficient apparatuses [*dispositifs*] of control and surveillance, linked to informational machines: satellites, radars, beacons, and grids. In this respect, space has a much stronger connection with the State than territory once had with the nation.<sup>54</sup>

This spatialization of the state is not just projective, but endogenous. In other words, as the state becomes increasingly occupied by the logistical problems of stocks and flows, we cannot think of it as concentric, centripetal or centrifugal. Though it is inseparable from effects of centring and centrality, it is capable of considerable dissemination and multiplicity, as well as internal contradiction, if not proper *difference*. In the first volume of *De l'État*, interestingly in the context of an exploration of the place of “intelligence” in the state mode of production (one resonating in the moment of Assange and Snowden), Lefebvre will posit that the state is not a system with a central nucleus but a hierarchically-ordered *network* of institutions and organizations intervening at different levels of society, and thus of space.

## Conclusion

The foregoing discussion of Lefebvre is but a sketch of a reconstruction, whose aim was merely to complicate the political meanings accorded to logistics in contemporary radical thought and practice. To rethink logistics not just as a spatio-political fix for a potentially stagnating capitalism, but as a contradictory strategy of state power – a task that would obviously require a radical updating and revision of Lefebvre’s unruly intuitions – could help us to move beyond both the naïve perspective of its integral refunctioning as well as the untenable prospect that it will be the privileged site of a revolutionary interruption of value-in-motion. Technology, as a social relation of production, distribution, and circulation, is by no means innocent of capitalist value-imperatives and of the strategic expediencies of exploitation. But neither is the reproduction of the social forms of value endangered by the notion that the interruption of capital’s motion is directly political. Lefebvre’s scattered insights on the logistical and strategic space of the state can help situate the contemporary surge of struggles at the point of circulation within a broader historical and geographic horizon, spurring us to investigate what the state itself has become in the age of the “logistics revolution,” and thus what strategies may be adequate to struggles in and against it.

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1. I have presented versions of this paper, under the titles “The Politics of Circulation” and “Logistical Revolts,” at *e-flux* in New York City and the Historical Materialism conference in London. I thank the audience at these events and my co-panelists (Tim Mitchell, Kanishka Goonewardena, and Alex Loftus) for their engagement with the arguments. Many thanks also to Jason E. Smith for his perceptive comments on a draft. I would also like to thank Jasper Bernes for sending me his article on logistics and the communist prospect in advance of publication, and for beginning a critical dialogue which I look forward to

pursuing.

2. “[Strike Club reflects growing labour unrest](#),” 22 April 2013. I was alerted to the existence of this improbably and impeccably named firm specialising in insurance against logistical class struggle by Sergio Bologna, arguably the most incisive contemporary analyst

of the logistic industry. See “[Scioperi nella catena logistica: i porti](#),” *Commonware*.

3. Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (London: Verso, 2011), 20.
4. “[Los Angeles and Long Beach port clerical workers on strike](#),” *World Socialist Website*; Micah Uetricht, “[Wave of Low-Wage Worker Strikes Hits LA Ports](#),” *In These Times*.
5. “[Hong Kong dock strike cripples world’s third busiest port](#),” *CNN*.
6. [Warehouse Workers for Justice](#).
7. “[Sciopero logistica, caos al Nord Italia](#),” *Corriere della Sera*.
8. “[Spanish airports reopen after strike causes holiday chaos](#),” *The Guardian*.
9. Alberto Toscano, “[Logistics and Opposition](#),” *Mute* 3.2 (2011).
10. The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009), 111–112.
11. See, for example, “[Blockading the Port is the First of Many Last Resorts](#),” *Bay of Rage*. See also Joshua Clover’s ongoing reflections on the blockade within the context of the riot-form of contemporary politics, the object of a forthcoming book. Versions of his argument can be found [here](#), and, as an audio file from the 2013 Historical Materialism conference in NY, [here](#).
12. Furio Jesi, *Spartakus: The Symbolology of Revolt*, ed. A. Cavalletti, trans. A. Toscano (Calcutta: Seagull, 2014).
13. Lewis Mumford, *The City in History* (New York: Harcourt, 1961), 541-2.
14. *Endnotes 3: Gender, Race, Class, and Other Misfortunes* (September 2013). As I will not summarize Bernes’s rich argument here, the reader might be well served by consulting his article before continuing with mine: “[Logistics, Counterlogistics, and the Communist Prospect](#).”
15. See Deborah Cowen, *The Deadly Life of Logistics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 20.
16. Mike Davis, “Who Will Build the Ark?,” *New Left Review* 61 (2010), 29-46.

17. Fredric Jameson, "Utopia as Replication," in *Valences of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2010).
18. "The War Against Pre-Terrorism," *Radical Philosophy*, 154 (2009), 2-7.
19. "The race to gigantism is a razor's edge contest between asset values; it is a way to weaken the adversary, always raising the bar not so much in terms of capacity but in terms of technological innovation." Sergio Bologna, *Banche e crisi. Dal petrolio al container* (Roma: DeriveApprodi, 2013), 139.
20. This attempt to convert the military aerospace firm Lucas Industries to socially-useful production by its militant workforce is discussed in the book by one of the engineers and union organizers behind the plan, Mike Cooley, *Architect or Bee? The Human/Technology Relationship* (Boston: South End Press, 1982).
21. See Chris King-Chi Chan, *The Challenge of Labour in China: Strikes and the Changing Labour Regime in Global Factories* (London: Routledge, 2010), 141.
22. Cowen, *The Deadly Life of Logistics*, 2.
23. Cowen, *The Deadly Life of Logistics*, 24. See also 40.
24. It is worth noting that business logistics includes its own explicit theory of economic cartography, "process mapping." "Process mapping might be understood as a rescaled motion study in the interests of transnational efficiency," which leads a logistics company report to declare "The mapping enables managers to see the total picture." See Cowen, *The Deadly Life of Logistics*, 109.
25. I explore this relation between cognitive mapping and logistics at length in Chapter 6 of Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle, *Cartographies of the Absolute* (Winchester: Zero, 2015), "The Art of Logistics."
26. The concept of necessary alienation is introduced with a different inflection, having to do with Hegel's theory of time, in par. 161 of Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*.
- Thanks to Jason E. Smith for bringing this to my attention.
27. Amadeo Bordiga, "[Spazio contro cemento](#)."
28. See "[Frontstaging the Urban Backstage? The Politics of Infrastructure Disruptions](#)."
29. This problem has been very pointedly dealt with by Théorie Communiste, in an appraisal of the theoretical lessons to be drawn (or not) from the practices of social antagonism in Greece, in terms of "the confusion between circulation and transports." As

Théo Cosme writes: “circulation doesn’t have the same meaning for capital as for the gendarmerie. The confusion between circulation as a specific moment of the process of reproduction, which thus alternates with the phase of production, and circulation as the general form of the process of reproduction. In any case it is true that commodities and labor power must materially move from one point to another (exchange, in a strictly economic sense, in the capitalist mode of production, has little to do with this question) and that it is indispensable to the reproduction of capital. In fact, in the theory of capital as circulation, the strategy of the blockade rests on a theoretical foundation that does not correspond to its effective practice. This is not a serious problem so long as one is concerned with actions, but it becomes one when theories regarding the definition of productive labor and value are grafted onto these confusions. Blocking the traffic hinders the production of value because it necessarily has repercussions on it, not because it is in itself blocking the production of value. It would even be more accurate to say that it is not a blockade of the circulation, but of the production in the sense that transports are an extension of the immediate production process. The strategy of ‘blocking the traffic’ neither necessitates nor justifies any

theoretical *aggiornamento*.” Théo Cosme, “[The Glass Floor](#).”

30. Isaak Illich Rubin, *Essays on Marx’s Theory of Value*, trans. M. Samardzija and F.

Perlman (Montréal-New York: Black Rose Books, 1973), 37.

31. Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, trans. S. Moore and E. Aveling (London: Lawrence &

Wishart, 1983), 54.

32. Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume 2*, trans. D. Fernbach (London: Penguin, 1992), p.

241.

33. Alberto Toscano, “[Gaming the Plumbing: High-Frequency Trading and the Spaces of](#)

[Capital](#),” *Mute*, 16 January 2013.

34. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. M. Nicolaus (London: Penguin, 1973), 536.

35. This concept of the “logistical state” is being promoted by some Brazilian political scientists as a vision beyond the developmental or the neoliberal state. It is also present in some stimulating historical speculations in Alain Joxe’s *Empire of Disorder*, where it is

juxtaposed to the “predatory state.”

36. Lefebvre, *De l’État*, vol. 4, 271.

37. Lefebvre, *De l’État*, vol. 4, 290

38. Volume of 1 of *De l’État* testifies to a sustained engagement with the revisionist history of the US state in the work of Gabriel Kolko, in particular his books *Railroads and Regulation, 1877-1916* (1965) and *The Triumph of Conservatism: A Reinterpretation of American History, 1900-1916* (1963). It would also be possible, following some remarks in the first volume of *De l’État*, to posit a prehistory of this logistical state in the “management of vast hydraulic spaces” (5) exercised by the Asiatic state postulated by Wittfogel, in

his *Oriental Despotism*.

39. "Space and the State," in *State, Space, World*, 238, 249.
40. See, for instance, "Space and the State" (1978), in *State, Space, World*, 238. Consider also Lefebvre's claim that logistical space "devastate" perspectival space in a manner analogous to how perspectival space "catastrophically devastated" symbolic space. *State, Space, World*, 248.
41. Henri Lefebvre, *La survie du capitalisme. La re-production des rapports de production*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Anthropos, 1973), 24.
42. Henri Lefebvre, *La production de l'espace* (Paris: Anthropos, 1974), 414.
43. See, among others, Henri Lefebvre, *Logique formelle, logique dialectique* (Paris: Éditions Sociales, 1947) and *Le langage et la société* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966).
44. Lefebvre, *La survie du capitalisme*, 35.
45. Henri Lefebvre, "Reflections on the Politics of Space" (1970), in *State, Space, World: Selected Essays*, ed. N. Brenner and S. Elden, trans. G. Moore, N. Brenner and S. Elden (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 171.
46. Lefebvre, *La survie du capitalisme*, 36. Strategy is a crucial prism through which Lefebvre understands the state, for instance when he argues that, to the extent that the economy is *étatisée* in becoming a war economy: "Today, the economy functions strategically." *De l'État*, vol. 1 (Paris: UGE, 1976), 69.
47. At times, Lefebvre does suggest that these tendencies can really evacuate use-values and neutralize agency, as in the remarkable essay "Space: Social Product and Use Value" (1979), where he writes: "capitalist and neo-capitalist space is a space of quantification and growing homogeneity, a commodified space where all the elements are exchangeable and thus interchangeable; a police space in which the state tolerates no resistance and no obstacles. Economic space and political space thus converge toward the elimination of all differences." *State, Space, World*, 192.
48. Lefebvre, "Reflections on the Politics of Space," 169-70.
49. Lefebvre, "Space and Mode of Production" (1980), in *State, Space, World*, 213. On Lefebvre and abstraction, see the excellent discussion in Chapter 3 of Lukasz Stanek, *Henri Lefebvre on Space: Architecture, Urban Research, and the Production of Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2011).
50. Lefebvre, "Reflections on the Politics of Space," 172.

51. Henri Lefebvre, *De l'État*, vol. 4 (Paris: UGE, 1978).

52. Henri Lefebvre, "Space and the State," in *State, Space, World: Selected Essays*, ed. N. Brenner and S. Elden, trans. G. Moore, N. Brenner and S. Elden (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 226, 239.

53. See for instance Cowen, when she writes that "Whereas the national border (the privileged spatial barrier within a territorial model of security) was governed directly by the geopolitical state, the security of the corridor cartography of the supply chain is delegated to the components of the system." *The Deadly Life of Logistics*, 87. I think that we could apply Lefebvre's state-theory to think of these components as still *of the state*, in an extended sense. On the whole issue of *mondialisation* in Lefebvre, see Brenner and Elden's fine editors'

introduction to *State, Space, World*.

54. Henri Lefebvre, "Space and Mode of Production," 213-14.

**Alberto Toscano teaches at Goldsmiths, University of London, where he co-directs the Centre for Philosophy and Critical Thought. He is the author of *Fanaticism: On the Uses of an Idea*, and *Cartographies of the Absolute* (with Jeff Kinkle). He is a member of the editorial board of *Historical Materialism* and is series editor of *The Italian List* at Seagull Books.**