

# Critique and the Real Thing

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Thank you very much, Duncan and David, for this extraordinarily enjoyable opportunity to reflect on what is for me one of Duncan's most inspirational and eye-opening texts.<sup>1</sup> What I can offer today, in the interest of time, are but brief insurrectionary snippets of thought that do not address any of the four Duncan's genealogies of critical theory *per se*, but rather suggest a modest rethinking of such mapping exercise, so as to tease out not only the critical tensions between these genealogies but also that which might be their potentially common epistemic limit. I would like to do so by highlighting the ontological aspects of Duncan's text, albeit for the purposes of probing the limits of the knowable in certain strands of social scientific thought that Duncan maps and engages with. I do so, in Duncan's lingo, as a paranoid poststructuralist antinomianist who is an ontological agnostic and therefore, at best, a 'wild Marxist' inasmuch as both anthropological and philosophical structuralism is presumed as a *sine qua non* of a certain Marxist intellectual tradition—Marx, Lacan and Lévi-Strauss included.

My focus on ontology is partly informed by my profound discomfort with any attempts at a universalised sociology à la Weber and the one-structure-fits-all anthropology à la Lévi-Strauss, both relying on a single all-encompassing ontology irrespective—to use again Duncan's critical language—of how one might theorise the relationship between the presumed social whole and its parts and, also, regardless of the fact that the core of such social whole might be hollow. If ontology is not one but many, or even if there can exist human and non-human worldings that are ontologically disparate or distant from one another, then what we are left with at best are Strathernian 'partial connections', rather than a singular ontology informing our methodological orientations: a science of meaningful miscommunications rather than an overarching rationality; an endeavour co-constitutive of its semantic limits rather than, perhaps, performing within the superstructure of an *über* social *langue*.

I am guided, at the outset, by Duncan's proposal that "[t]he real", by definition, is that which exceeds, can't be grasped by, unpredictably disrupts any attempt to reduce it to what can be represented in the *langue* in question'.<sup>2</sup> That is, I want to interrogate that which Duncan variably identifies as 'the unconscious', 'the inexpressible', 'the thing beyond the

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<sup>1</sup> Kennedy 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid: 1179.

horizon', which I call the unknowable. This spectral thing, I propose, is haunting academia—an apparition liminal and subversive, lurking in the darkness beyond knowledge. What could be framed as an ontological question proper about that-which-is-unknowable yet forming a constitutive element of *being human* has resurfaced in anthropology and has found renewed salience in continental philosophy, whilst its application to political theory holds the promise of resisting the notion that politics is (ever) an ontology. In each of these fields of inquiry, the unknowable (pre)figures as a condition of reality—*it's a thing* in that it is thinkable as thing or, for some, as things. And, just as is the custom with spectres, it has come back to us in turns. Let me, therefore, in the remainder of my intervention, engage with the three heterodox turns in anthropology, continental philosophy and political science that address the unknowable and are, as such, in my mind, important companions to Duncan's critical endeavours.

In anthropology, the unknowable makes a most notable comeback within the purview of the so-called ontological turn. Here the unknowable appears not as a thing, but as things—and things to *think with* at that. The editors of a seminal anthology, entitled *Thinking Through Things*,<sup>3</sup> thus call for a renewed attention to things with a view to divesting them from any preconceived anthropological knowledge of what they might *be*. The proposed move is distinctly ontological in that it insists on replacing 'thing-as-analytic' with 'thing-as-heuristic':<sup>4</sup> the ethnographer is invited to suspend the familiar meanings of things so as to make space, cognitive and otherwise, for the unfamiliar meanings of things—those imparted by the ethnographer's interlocutors—to *be* on their own terms. At issue, of course, is the problem of representation—that what comes through anthropological interpretation of things, people, cultures... through an always-already Euro-American ontological matrix. To counter such epistemic violence and allow for other worldings—the worldings of the observed others—to appear *meaningfully*, the ethnographer is to concede at the outset that much of such ways of being-in-the-world is to remain unobservable, unknowable, ontologically disparate. Thinking through things, it seems, implies thinking things through whilst realising, even perhaps *a priori*, the limits of one's (anthropological) knowledge.

In philosophy, the ontological domain of the unknowable has reappeared within the various strands of continental materialism and realism that make up the so-called speculative turn. Of those, the most intriguing seems to me to be one that finds its origin not in a philosophical project *per se* but that of Jacques Lacan's structuralist psychoanalysis. Its colourful proponent, none other than Slovenian transcendental materialist Slavoj Žižek,<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Henare, Holbraad & Wastell 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid: 5.

<sup>5</sup> I tend to agree with Adrian Johnson (2008) that such designation of Žižek's (never quite non-ambiguous) philosophical leanings makes sense *particularly* for the purposes of the present analysis, that is, for discerning certain aspects of Žižek's ontology.

relies on Lacan's life-long preoccupation with the Real (*le réel*), which, along with the Symbolic and the Imaginary, forms the very topology of 'human reality' (*réalité humaine*)<sup>6</sup>—a topology that Lacan theorises as interlocking its three constitutive elements into a type of Borromean knot.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the Lacanian Real is that-which-is-unknowable in/*qua* both the symbolic and the imaginary registers of human psyche,<sup>8</sup> that-whose-presence ultimately serves to confirm reality's own limitation. Or, as Žižek puts it, 'it is not part of reality but a kind of inexistent point of reference with no place in reality which, *in its absence*, structures reality'.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, in political theory, the Real as the spectre of the unknowable could be understood as an antidote to *Realpolitik* inasmuch as it introduces an external to the political (*le politique*) and, by extension, to that what might be called everyday politics (*la politique*). The result, as averred by Susan Buck-Morss: 'politics is not an ontology' or, even more provocatively, 'the ontological is never political'.<sup>10</sup> To arrive at this conclusion, Buck-Morss retraces the transformation of Karl Marx's initial ontological philosophy towards an engagement with the nascent social sciences—including anthropology, psychology, sociology and economics—understood as sciences of history proper.<sup>11</sup> A critical potential immanent in this turn meant for Buck-Morss not a return of the kind of political philosophy that presumes an ontological primacy—the return of the political—but the birth of 'social theory done reflectively—that is, critically':<sup>12</sup> the advent of critical theory. Hence, argues Buck-Morss, 'when Marx said thinking was itself a practice, he meant it in this sense. He did not then ask: What is the ontological meaning of the *being of practice*? Instead, he tried to find out as much as he could about the socio-historical practices of human beings in his time'.<sup>13</sup> For Buck-Morss, the ontological divorce between the two differently-gendered forms of politics opens up a space for experimentation—a Benjaminian *Spielraum*—in which, ultimately, 'the world can be otherwise'.<sup>14</sup> The spectre of the unknowable is no longer just dreadful and abject—it recuperates some of the Lacanian possibility that the reality of

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Lacan & Granoff 1986.

<sup>7</sup> Greenshields 2017: 203–263.

<sup>8</sup> Lacan proposes the metaphor of the table to illustrate this point. The imaginary table is a kind of repository of the functions of the thing known as 'table': one can eat on it, put a vase on it, and so on. The symbolic table is the word 'table' that finds its meaning in discourse, in expressions such as *à table!* or *faire table rase* or *table des matières*. The Real is constituted of the rest, that is, what one doesn't know about the table.

<sup>9</sup> Žižek 2016: 67 (emphasis mine).

<sup>10</sup> Buck-Morss 2013: 57.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*: 60.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid* (emphasis in original).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*: 75.

human psyche, inclusive of that which is constitutively external to it, can be not always-already traumatic.

Each of these three disciplinary endeavours grapples with critique, either as its preferred *modus operandi* or an estranged praxis—the latter sometimes being described as a ‘post-critical’ stance<sup>15</sup> or even an antithesis to critique. Let me, therefore, say a few more words about each of these turns’ complex relationship with critique, albeit still from the perspective of the unknowable—my ‘critical object’ proper.

### **The Unknowable and the Ontological Turn in Anthropology**

With its tripartite focus on reflexivity, conceptualisation and experimentation as analytical practices, the main claim of the ontological turn still seems to be that it is strictly *methodological*, i.e. its concern is decidedly not with ‘what the “really real” nature of the world is’ but, rather, with posing ‘ontological questions to solve epistemological problems’.<sup>16</sup> If this appears confusing that is just fine because, according to Holbraad and Pedersen’s *The Ontological Turn: An Anthropological Exposition*,<sup>17</sup> a recent addition to the ever-growing literature on this turn, ‘it so happens that epistemology in anthropology has to be about ontology, too’.<sup>18</sup> However, an ontology is not even gestured at in their book, for to do so would be to acknowledge that a ‘really real’ of sorts exists as such. Instead, one is guided towards a set of techniques aimed at ‘freeing thought from all metaphysical foundationalism—whether substantive or methodological, normative or pluralistic’.<sup>19</sup> This remarkable objective, if at all feasible, should help the fieldworker not so much to see differently as to see different *things* in the field, for it is no longer *through* them but *from* them that thinking should be done. Having ‘de-theorised’ the thing by getting rid of its any presupposed analytical connotation—a move proposed by *Thinking Through Things*—one is now presumably ready to follow *The Ontological Turn*’s instruction in filling the thing back up, albeit only contingently, ‘according to its own ethnographic exigencies’.<sup>20</sup> The point is to allow the thing to *become* the empirical source of ‘conceptualisation’—to let it, as it were, differentiate *itself*. But if the thing, so self-differentiated, *can be* free ‘from any ontological determination whatsoever’,<sup>21</sup> as Holbraad and Pedersen would have it, then the thing in and

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<sup>15</sup> For a recent exposition of such an approach in literary and cultural studies, see generally Anker & Felski 2017, where ‘post-critique’ is described as ‘less concerned with hammering home a “critique of critique” than with testing out new possibilities and intellectual alternatives’ (ibid: 2).

<sup>16</sup> Holbraad & Pedersen 2017: x.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid: 68 (emphasis in original).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid: 211.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid: 210.

of itself points to its (radical) unknowability. The thing's very 'conceptual affordances' seem to be *coming* from an epistemic abyss where the humanly unknowable reigns. Moreover, although this move is billed as distinctly posthumanist, the (radical) unknowability of the thing is always in relation to humans.

The unknowable also appears front and centre in another important feature of the ontological turn—its reliance on the *inherent* multiplicity of meaning. Having chartered an intellectual map of their turn that includes not only the obvious (e.g. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro) but also somewhat speculative candidates (such as Roy Wagner and Marilyn Strathern—neither of which explicitly centred their work on the ontological), Holbraad and Pedersen provide a detailed exploration of the techniques and terms-of-art used by the (ostensibly) like-minded anthropologists to account for the problem of translation across the different conceptual regimes that the fieldworker and those 'in the field' are likely to inhabit. Invention, obviation, relation, postplural abstraction, perspectivism and other such concepts—all are arrived at by observing what Viveiros de Castro calls 'equivocation': an inevitable series of 'errors' that befall any attempt to 'successfully' translate between two or more *ontologically* different conceptual regimes. But, neither for Viveiros de Castro nor for Holbraad and Pedersen is this failure to understand necessarily a bad thing: talking past each other, if 'controlled', can result in new conceptualisations, especially if it causes long-held anthropological assumptions to transform by the power of contradicting ethnographic materials.<sup>22</sup> At issue is, however, not only the 'problem' of ontological disparity that confounds translation but so presumed mutual unknowability of people (and things) in conversation, too. If meanings are always already multiple so that cross-ontological understanding is at best unlikely, the unknowable appears as a necessary condition of one's ontologically informed knowledge about the other. And it occupies a spectral position not at all unlike to that of the Lacanian Real: in its paradoxical, constitutive absence-presence it reveals reality's own limitation—at least inasmuch as a *potential* reality can be observed in the field *qua* a conceptual regime.

### **The Lacanian Real and the Speculative Turn in Philosophy**

Needless to say, the becoming of objects (things) in and of themselves has also been a preoccupation of a number of exponents of the so-called speculative turn in continental philosophy, and even the very possibility of an empirically-grounded disparity of things can sometimes take centre stage in thinking 'difference' as such. The most explicit connection between ontological difference and the unknowable *qua* the Lacanian Real is, however, made in Slavoj Žižek's works. For Žižek, the Real—that spectre of reality's never-quite-

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid: 185–188.

completeness—appears precisely as an insurmountable parallax gap. Defined as a discord in the ‘order’ of Being—and of primarily that-what-is-observable-about-Being—ontological difference in Žižek is of a decidedly structuralist nature. This, of course, is not surprising, given Lacan’s own structuralism, which he inherited, for the large part, from the farther of structural anthropology, Claude Lévi-Strauss.<sup>23</sup> Specifically, Lévi-Strauss’ writing in the early stages of the development of his theory of structural transformation presupposes, for example, a ‘psychic unity’ of humankind.<sup>24</sup> Žižek’s theory of the Real thus comes full circle, with Lévi-Strauss’ early structuralism *also* significantly foregrounding the oeuvre of Viveiros de Castro—that ontologically-minded anthropologist *par excellence*.

The foundational feature of Žižek’s theory of the Real—which, at the same time, makes his work anthropologically relevant—is that it constitutes a limit to both the observability of the thing and, *mutatis mutandis*, of the human. Here, to observe is to know and to know is to observe—a proposition not at all unattractive to ontologically-oriented anthropologists who deal in epistemological quandaries. Even if one (so oriented anthropologist) might ask whither the field(work) in Žižek, it is obvious that his observations on reality’s ultimate incompleteness make sense precisely with respect to how ontological limits are understood—in the field, or elsewhere.

However, in anthropology and in continental philosophy alike, structuralism has many critics. For our purposes, it is instructive to recall Judith Butler’s critique of the Real in Žižek as a decidedly post-structuralist (and feminist) attempt to address his *discursive* failure to totalise what she calls ‘the social field’.<sup>25</sup> In fact, writes Butler, any attempt to totalise this field should be read as a symptom, revealing the trauma of the Real in its full potential of ‘disrupting and rendering contingent any discursive formation that lays claim to a coherent or seamless account of reality’.<sup>26</sup> At issue, if you will, is the very order of things and its totalising assumptions—Lacan’s and Lévi-Straussian ‘laws’ of Being and Žižek’s mostly tacit adoption of them.

Butler demonstrates, for example, how the Lacanian proposition ‘*la femme n’existe pas*’ (‘Woman does not exist’), unproblematised by Žižek, reveals that what is traumatic is the non-existence of Woman, ‘that is, the fact of her castration’.<sup>27</sup> If symbolisation is denied precisely at this ‘fissure’—that is, if the Real manifests itself exactly at *this* presupposed limit

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<sup>23</sup> Arguably, Lévi-Strauss’ ‘The Effectiveness of Symbols’ (1968) and ‘Language and the Analysis of Social Laws’ (1951) were particularly meaningful to Lacan, and they feature throughout his *Écrits* (1966a).

<sup>24</sup> Holbraad & Pedersen 2017: 169.

<sup>25</sup> Butler 1993: 192.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*: 203.

of *what could be*—might it not reveal something altogether different: a patriarchal social order that both Lacan and Žižek seem to inhabit unproblematically?

Dangerous, then, is the very operation of ontological structuralism, which vests an outside to the socially intelligible with ostensibly pre-ideological ‘laws’, thereby precluding the possibility of politicising the relation between, say, discourse and the Real. This is because such ‘laws’ of necessity *posit themselves* as resistant to critique. At issue is the fixity of relations within the presumed ontological structure, which leads to ‘a prepolitical pathos that precludes the kind of analysis that would take the [R]eal/reality distinction as the instrument and effect of contingent relations of power’.<sup>28</sup> To call for unfixing of such relations, as Butler does, is not to deny the unknowable, but to make *some* of its discursive deployments politically accountable.

### **The Spectre of Communist Ethics in Political Theory**

Much as with other conceptual regimes,<sup>29</sup> it is difficult for political theory, even at its most experimental, to contemplate an external to itself, that is, an outside to its core element of study. Susan Buck-Morss’ conceptualisation of her ‘commonist’ ethics is all the more remarkable for attempting to do just that: to theorise an outside to both the political (*le politique*) and daily politics (*la politique*), albeit not without an explicit rejection of ontology. What’s peculiar for this rejection is that ‘the multiple ways of political being-in-the-world’<sup>30</sup> are not denied; rather, Buck-Morss’ project seeks to divest political philosophy from an urge to search for the ‘ontological essence’ within empirical political life—precisely because of the likely political consequences of such a mission. The point is that our ways of being-in-the-word, replete as they are with many categories of personhood, ‘do not fit neatly into our politics’—whatever our professed political orientation(s).<sup>31</sup> For the same reason, *Realpolitik* can be rejected as ‘all too real’ precisely for its inability to grasp the above pluralities. One can presume, then, that the unknowable serves to de-essentialise any conceptualisation of the political, for it provides for a (constitutive) spectral externality to such efforts. This, in turn, opens up an experimental space in which, politically, the world *could be* otherwise.<sup>32</sup>

Startlingly, this anti-ontological stance bears an uncanny resemblance with the ontological turn in anthropology, precisely inasmuch as it introduces a crisis of the ontological as a political (and ethical) act (although it could *also* be described as a methodology), intent to dispel *a priori* ontological assumptions. One can presume that this

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid: 207.

<sup>29</sup> For a meditation on an outside to law—*alegality*—and its inherent complexities, see Hamzić 2017.

<sup>30</sup> Buck-Morss 2013: 57

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. *ibid*: 75.

positionality also shares in a Butlerian post-structuralist concern with contingent relations of power in the world, especially since Buck-Morss explicitly tasks critical theory with *doing* social theory *reflexively*.<sup>33</sup> Nothing quite *is* for Buck-Morss prior to thoroughly experimental materialist collective politics, and with it, prior to life's many ostensibly 'ontic' forms. The unknowable, in particular, with its potential for perpetual externalisation, renders ontology politically redundant, if not outright dangerous.

Is it then apt to account for an onto-epistemic 'messiness of life' with respect to all three of our conceptual regimes—anthropology, continental philosophy and political theory—especially since the spectre of the unknowable seems to make relatively similar appearances—and, crucially, perform cognate functions—across these fields?

### Epilogue: Spillages of the Real

It may seem odd that one can think from anywhere/anyone but oneself and that the direction of one's thought, if such can be, is always projecting outside, thereby co-constituting not only the possibility of oneself but the selves and other discernible *things* of the world. Entangled in this existential drama, the self *survives* in its presumed centrality to life. But to think from the other, whether it be recognised as animate or inanimate or something altogether *different*, seems to introduce an additional crisis in one's living, and perhaps one's studies of *what could be* within or other than oneself.

It is doubtful that even the most 'self-externalised' or 'self-pluralised' fieldworker, let alone a philosopher or a political theorist, can so *discipline* oneself in worldings of the other that one's own worldings—one's being-in-the-world and one's knowing-in-the-world—recede into nothingness. Rather, it seems obvious that worldings flood into one another, co-constitute each other further and further, even if they are not *meant* to do so. The 'real world', then, may or may not *be*. Life and one's worldings continue. If this is taken but as a basic premise, it is pertinent to ask each of our three (imagined) disciplinary workers, and perhaps Duncan, too, recalling his observation that '[m]ost of the things in the world are "over the horizon"':<sup>34</sup> just where<sup>35</sup> *is* your field?

Whilst this may be taken as a purely methodological question, such move might obfuscate the drama of mutual worldings. Neither is the anthropologist, whose fieldwork is so often posited as *elsewhere*, nor other workers of the 'social' or the 'political', whose dealings with the self sometimes seem more easily discernible, immune from the crisis that

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid: 60.

<sup>34</sup> Kennedy 2001: 1153.

<sup>35</sup> It would be equally pertinent to ask, for example, *when is* your field, except that this essay does not explicitly deal with the temporality of critique and/or disciplinary temporalities.



entails distinguishing a worlding of the other from that of one's own. It is in this—again, most basic—sense that elsewhere is political.<sup>36</sup> The challenge seems to be not only how or whether to 'represent' and 'translate' the other's worldings, but also how or whether to acknowledge that they have become (and continue to become) part and parcel of one's own being-in-the-world and knowing-in-the-world. Whilst the ontological turn, Butler and Buck-Morss all warn against certain hegemony, whether of representational or post- and super-structural nature, that is likely to manifest in the process, they do not sufficiently attend to what seems to be an elementary occurrence—that worldings spill over and flood the all-too-crude distinction between 'me'-'us' and 'you'-'them'.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, not only one (continuously) *becomes* with the other, but even one's own becoming—as Buck-Morss avers—is not only perpetual but also multidirectional. This is sometimes taken as a certain plurality of existence (of 'worlds' and 'us'-'them' in them), but it does not have to be described as such; it could be that 'perspectives' are different and 'connections' partial,<sup>38</sup> or that there are worldings that are not readily apparent to 'us'.<sup>39</sup> Be that as it may, spillages occur. They can be critical—in terms of the crises of what's knowable that they bring forth—and political—for they can summon some apparently disparate worldings together.

In *Cruising Utopia*, José Esteban Muñoz describes queerness as 'that *thing* that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing'.<sup>40</sup> Note that the thing speaks of itself<sup>41</sup> here and that it speaks to an imagined *us*. It speaks of absence. Who are we? And *how* is this world, since to us it is not enough? The absent something suggests an incompleteness, not just of *this* world but of our worlding in it. So we look for the other in that we search for that someone/something that the thing we know tells us is missing, in a world we don't quite know (for it might not even be 'ours' for all we know). The unknowable, then, spilling from elsewhere, can be critical and political, too.

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<sup>36</sup> For an exemplary study, see Trend 2016. Needless to say, *elsewhere* is always philosophical, too. Suffice it to mention Heidegger's (1927) own take on being-in-the-world (*in-der-Welt-sein*) and its coterminous *Dasein* ('Being-there'), which has its humanly aspect in *Mitsein* ('Being-with'), suggesting that the human being is always already with others (of its 'kind').

<sup>37</sup> Note that it would be even cruder to use the slash (/) to describe this distinction (i.e. 'me'/'us' and 'you'/'them'), in denial of what seems to be a 'dividual' (cf. Strathern 1988: 13) aspect of (at least some) self-conception(s).

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Strathern 2004; Viveiros de Castro 1998.

<sup>39</sup> It is a little suspect that the exponents of the ontological turn in anthropology so often look for the examples of what I termed here as 'ontological disparity' in lands and people that are all-too-often portrayed as physically (and in many other ways) *distant* from an imagined 'us'. It is equally suspect that continental philosophy and, sometimes, political theory rely on a reverse move: abiding by a 'tradition' that is ostensibly 'ours' in ways more than one.

<sup>40</sup> Muñoz 2009: 1 (emphasis mine).

<sup>41</sup> Lacan 1966b: 408.

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