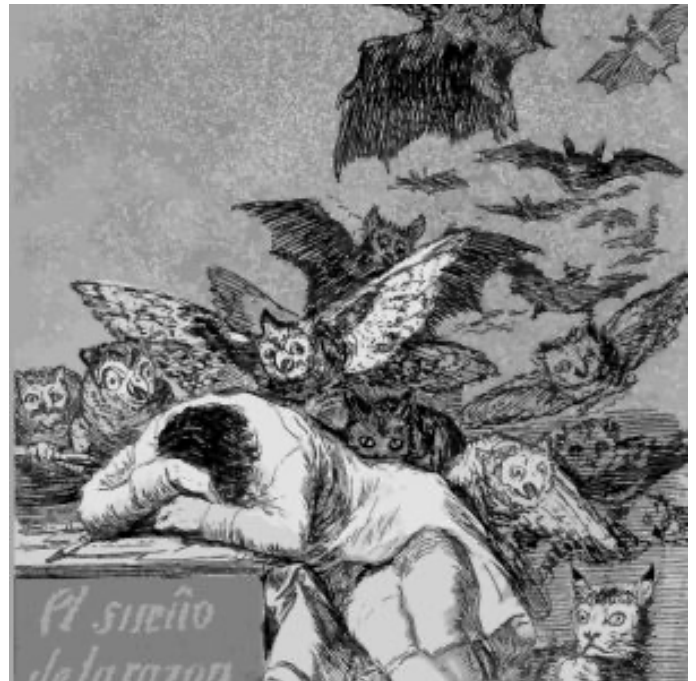


The New Irrationalism

John Bellamy Foster

More than a century after the commencement of the Great Crisis of 1914–1945, represented by the First World War, the Great Depression, and Second World War, we are seeing a sudden resurgence of war and fascism across the globe. The capitalist world economy as a whole is now characterised by deepening stagnation, financialization, and soaring inequality. All of this is accompanied by the prospect of planetary omnicide in the dual forms of nuclear holocaust and climate destabilisation. In this dangerous context, the very notion of human reason is frequently being called into question. It is therefore necessary to address once again the question of the relation of imperialism or monopoly capitalism to the destruction of reason and the ramifications of this for contemporary class and anti-imperialist struggles.

In 1953, Georg Lukács, whose 1923 *History and Class Consciousness* had inspired the Western Marxist philosophical tradition, published his magisterial work, *The Destruction of Reason*, on the close relation of philosophical irrationalism to capitalism, imperialism, and fascism.¹ Lukács's work set off a firestorm among Western left theorists seeking to accommodate themselves to the new American imperium. In 1963, George Lichtheim, a self-styled socialist operating within the general tradition of Western Marxism while virulently opposed to Soviet Marxism, wrote an article for *Encounter Magazine*, then covertly funded by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), in which he vehemently attacked *The Destruction of Reason* and other works by Lukács. Lichtheim accused Lukács of generating an "intellectual



The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters, forty-third etching in Francisco de Goya's satirical *Los Caprichos* (1799). Cover design dedicated to John J. Simon.

¹ ↪ Georg Lukács, *Die Zerstörung der Vernunft* (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1953), English translation, *The Destruction of Reason* (London: Merlin Press, 1980).

disaster” with his analysis of the historical shift from reason to unreason within European philosophy and literature, and the relation of this to the rise of fascism and the new imperialism under U.S. global hegemony.²

This was not the first time, of course, that Lukács had been subjected to such strong condemnations by figures associated with Western Marxism. Theodor Adorno, one of the dominant theorists of the Frankfurt School, attacked Lukács in 1958 when the latter was still under house arrest for supporting the 1956 revolution in Hungary. Writing in *Der Monat*, a journal created by the occupying U.S. Army and funded by the CIA, Adorno charged Lukács with being “reductive” and “undialectical,” writing like a “Cultural Commissar,” and with being “paralysed from the outset by the consciousness of his own impotence.”³

However, the 1963 attack on Lukács by Lichtheim in *Encounter* took on an added significance due to its absolute condemnation of Lukács’s *The Destruction of Reason*. In this work, Lukács had charted the relation of philosophical irrationalism—which first emerged on the European Continent, particularly in Germany, with the defeat of the 1848 revolutions, and that became a dominant force near the end of the century—to the rise of the imperialist stage of capitalism. For Lukács, irrationalism, including its ultimate coalescence with Nazism, was no fortuitous development, but rather a product of capitalism itself. Lichtheim responded by charging Lukács with having committed an “intellectual crime” in illegitimately drawing a connection between philosophical irrationalism (associated with such thinkers as Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche, Henri Bergson, Georges Sorel, Oswald Spengler, Martin Heidegger, and Carl Schmitt) and the rise of Adolf Hitler.⁴

Lukács provocatively started his book by saying “the subject matter which presents itself to us is Germany’s path to Hitler in the sphere of philosophy.” But his critique was in fact much broader, seeing irrationalism as related to the imperialist stage of capitalism more generally. Hence, what most outraged Lukács’s critics in the West in the early 1960s was his suggestion that the problem of the destruction of reason had not vanished with the historic defeat of fascism, but that it was continuing to nurture reactionary tendencies, if more covertly, in the new Cold War era dominated by the U.S. imperium. “Franz Kafka’s nightmares,” Lichtheim charged, were treated by Lukács as evidence of “the diabolical character of the world of modern capitalism,” now represented by the United States.⁵ Yet, Lukács’s argument in this respect was impossible to refute. Thus, he wrote, in terms still meaningful today:

In contrast to Germany, the U.S.A. had a constitution which was democratic from the start. And its ruling class managed, particularly during the imperialist era, to have the democratic forms so effectively preserved that by democratically legal means, it achieved a dictatorship of monopoly capitalism at least as firm as that which Hitler set up with tyrannic procedures. This smoothly functioning democracy, so-called, was created by the Presidential

² ↪ George Lichtheim, “An Intellectual Disaster,” *Encounter* (May 1963): 74–79. Lichtheim was ostensibly reviewing George Lukács’s *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (London: Merlin Press, 1963).

³ ↪ Rodney Livingston, Perry Anderson, and Francis Mulhern, “Presentation IV,” in Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Bertolt Brecht, and Georg Lukács, *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 1977), 142–50; Theodor Adorno, “Reconciliation Under Duress,” in Adorno, Benjamin, Brecht, and Lukács, *Aesthetics and Politics*, 152–54; István Mészáros, *The Power of Ideology* (New York: New York University Press, 1989), 118–19. Adorno claimed that “*The Destruction of Reason*...revealed most clearly the destruction of Lukács’s own” reason. He falsely claimed that in the book “Nietzsche and Freud are simply labeled Fascists”—despite the fact that Nietzsche is approached by Lukács in terms of philosophical irrationalism, which does not of itself constitute fascism, while Freud is barely mentioned in the book at all, and then not negatively. Adorno, “Reconciliation Under Duress,” 152.

⁴ ↪ Lichtheim, “An Intellectual Disaster,” 78–79; Lichtheim quoted in Árápad Kadarkay, “Introduction: Philosophy and Politics,” in Georg Lukács, *The Lukács Reader*, ed. Árápad Kadarkay (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 215. It should be noted that while Kadarkay quotes Lichtheim here and also in his biography of Lukács as referring to *The Destruction of Reason* as an “intellectual crime,” this statement is not actually to be found on the page of the issue of *Encounter* that Kadarkay on both occasions cites, and that others cite via Kadarkay. However, since Lichtheim clearly refers, in another issue of *Encounter*, to Lukács’s work at this stage as an “intellectual disaster” and an “intellectual catastrophe,” the “intellectual crime” statement has a certain ring of truth.

⁵ ↪ Lichtheim, “An Intellectual Disaster,” 76. Despite the impression that Lichtheim leaves, Lukács made no allusion to “Kafka’s nightmares” in his book. The scare quotes around the quoted phrase are Lichtheim’s own, as Lukács made no such statement.

prerogative, the Supreme Court's authority in constitutional questions, the finance monopoly over the Press, radio, etc., electioneering costs, which successfully prevented really democratic parties from springing up beside the two parties of monopoly capitalism, and lastly the use of terroristic devices (the lynching system). And this democracy could, in substance, realise everything sought by Hitler without needing to break with democracy formally. In addition, there was the incomparably broader and more solid economic basis of monopoly capitalism.⁶

In these circumstances, irrationalism and the “piling up of cynical contempt for humanity,” Lukács insisted, was “the necessary ideological consequence of the structure and potential influence of American imperialism.”⁷ This shocking claim that there was a continuity in the relation of imperialism and irrationalism extending over the course of an entire century, from late nineteenth-century Europe, through fascism, and continuing in the new NATO imperium dominated by the United States, was strongly rejected at the time by many of those associated with the Western Marxist philosophical tradition. It was this, then, more than anything else, that led to the almost complete disavowal of Lukács's later work (after his 1923 *History and Class Consciousness*) by left thinkers working in conjunction with the new post-Second World War liberalism.

Nevertheless, *The Destruction of Reason* was not subject to a systematic critique by those who opposed it, which would have meant confronting the crucial issues it raised. Instead, it was dismissed vituperatively out of hand by the Western left as constituting a “deliberate perversion of the truth,” a “700-page diatribe,” and a “Stalinist tract.”⁸ As one commentator has recently noted, “its reception could be summarised by a few death sentences” issued against it by leading Western Marxists.⁹

Still, there was no denying the scale of the undertaking represented by *The Destruction of Reason* as a critique of the

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main traditions of Western irrationalism by the world's then most esteemed Marxist philosopher. Rather than treating the various irrationalist systems of thought of the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries as if they had simply fallen from the sky, Lukács related them to the historical and material developments from which they emerged. Here, his argument relied ultimately on V. I. Lenin's *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*.¹⁰ Irrationalism was,

therefore, identified, as in Lenin, principally with historical-material conditions of the age of monopoly capitalism, the dividing up of the entire world between the great powers, and the geopolitical struggles over hegemony and spheres of influence. This was manifested in an economic-colonial rivalry between various capitalist states, colouring the entire historical context in which the new imperialist stage of capitalism emerged.

⁶ Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason*, 770.

⁷ ↪ Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason*, 792–93.

⁸ ↪ Árápad Kadarkay, *Georg Lukács: Life, Thought and Politics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 421–23; Lichtheim, “An Intellectual Disaster,” 76.

⁹ ↪ Enzo Traverso, “Dialectic of Irrationalism,” introduction in Georg Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason* (London: Verso, 2021), 10. Traverso's introduction to the recently reprinted Verso edition of *The Destruction of Reason* carries forward, rather than distancing itself from, these earlier Western Marxist attacks on the book, making his introduction largely an *anti-introduction*, more characteristic of the early Cold War era.

¹⁰ ↪ I. Lenin, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (New York: International Publishers, 1939). Lenin's argument was not directly analysed in Lukács's book, but nonetheless constituted the material background for the entire argument, as imperialism in Lenin's terms was a constant reference point.

Today this fundamental material reality in many ways persists, but it has been so modified under the U.S. global imperium that a new phase of late imperialism can be said to have arisen, dating back to the end of the Second World War, merging immediately into the Cold War, and perpetuated, following a brief interregnum, in the New Cold War of today. Late imperialism in this sense corresponds chronologically with the end of the Second World War, the emergence of the nuclear age, and the beginning of the Anthropocene Epoch in geological history, which marked the advent of the planetary ecological crisis. The consolidation of global monopoly capital (more recently monopoly-finance capital), and the struggle by the United States—backed by the collective imperialism of the triad of the United States/Canada, Europe, and Japan—for global supremacy in a unipolar world all correspond to this phase of late imperialism.¹¹

For the Western left itself, the history of late imperialism has been primarily marked by the defeat of the revolts of 1968,

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followed by the demise of Soviet-type societies after 1989, which had as one of its primary consequences the collapse of Western social democracy. These events placed the Western left as a whole in a weakened position, ultimately defined by its general subordination to broad parameters of the imperialist project centred in the United States and its refusal to align with the anti-imperialist struggle, thus guaranteeing its

revolutionary irrelevance.¹²

Here it is essential to recognise that the main battleground of the U.S. imperium over the entire period, dating back to the end of the Second World War, has been the Global South. Wars and military interventions—primarily instigated by Washington—have been almost unceasing in response to revolutions and national-liberation struggles, most of them inspired by Marxism, occurring throughout the neocolonial/postcolonial period. Although economic development has emerged in recent decades in parts of the Third World, the intensity of exploitation/expropriation of economies in the periphery of the system, taken as a whole, has increased under globalised monopoly-finance capital by means of the global labor arbitrage and debt peonage, with the result that the polarisation of the world system between rich and poor countries has also increased. The current imperial struggle or New Cold War initiated by Washington, aimed at securing the U.S.-led unipolar world, remains centred on control of the Global South, which today also requires the fatal weakening of the Eurasian great powers of Russia and China that threaten a rival multipolar order, contesting the U.S. unipolar system.

In this dangerous and destructive climate of late imperialism, irrationalism has come to play a growing role in the constellation of thought. This initially took the relatively mild form of a deconstructive postmodernism and poststructuralism, which, in the work of thinkers like Jean-François Lyotard and Jacques Derrida, cast aside all grand historical narratives while embracing a philosophical anti-humanism emanating principally from Heidegger. In contrast, today's new philosophies of immanence—associated with post-humanism, vitalistic new materialism, actor-network theory, and object-oriented ontology—constitute a deeper irrationalism, represented by such putatively left figures as Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Bruno Latour, Jane Bennett, and Timothy Morton. These thinkers draw directly upon an

¹¹ ↪ On late imperialism, see John Bellamy Foster, "Late Imperialism," *Monthly Review* 71, no. 3 (July–August 2019): 1–19; Zhun Xu, "The Ideology of Late Imperialism," — The Jus Semper Global Alliance, November 2021. On the collective imperialism of the triad, see Samir Amin, "Contemporary Imperialism," *Monthly Review* 67, no. 3 (July–August 2015): 23–36.

¹² ↪ See Xu, "The Ideology of Late Imperialism"; Paweł Wargan, "NATO and the Long War on the Third World," — The Jus Semper Global Alliance, April 2023.

irrationalist, anti-modernist intellectual lineage going back to the reactionary anti-modernism of Nietzsche, Bergson, and Heidegger. Lacanian-Hegelian philosopher Slavoj Žižek has ultimately taken sides with the anti-humanist tradition stemming from left-Heideggerianism, generating in his work a carnival of irrationalism. All of these various tendencies are coupled with skepticism, nihilism, and a pessimistic, end-of-the-world outlook.

Writing on “The Irrational System” in the final chapter of *Monopoly Capital* (1966), Paul A. Baran and Paul M. Sweezy explored the destruction of reason that had come to pervade every aspect of monopoly capitalism, from the irrationality of the economic system to its elemental destructiveness of social life. They thus pointed to “the ever-sharpening conflict between the rapidly advancing rationalisation of the actual processes of production and the undiminished elementally

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[and irrationality] of the system as a whole.”¹³ “The crux of the cruxes!” of the “Marxian insight,” Baran wrote in a letter to Sweezy, was that the driving force of class-based revolution was always “the identity of the material interests and needs of a class with...REASON’s criticism of the existing irrationality.”¹⁴ Irrationalism in bourgeois culture therefore had as its main object separating any potentially revolutionary

class from the realm of rational critique, while substituting instinct, myth, and the continual vomiting up of reason, as in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Underground Man* (in *Notes from Underground*). All of this was linked materially and ideologically to imperialism, barbarism, and fascism.¹⁵

In Baran’s conception, analyses that pursued reason divorced from a connection to material reality and class took a

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purely “ideational” form. It followed that the defence of reason—not in a purely ideational sense, but connected to the real material forces below—was an indispensable part of the socialist struggle; one that was more important than ever in the irrational age of monopoly capitalism and imperialism. Hence, exposing the dialectic of irrationalism and imperialism playing out in our time—an era when the development of the productive forces no longer serves to disguise the

destructiveness of the global capitalist system now threatening all of humanity—needs to be a primary goal of the left.

¹³ ↪ Paul A. Baran and Paul M. Sweezy, *Monopoly Capital* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1966), 338, 341.

¹⁴ ↪ Paul A. Baran to Paul M. Sweezy, February 3, 1957, in Paul A. Baran and Paul M. Sweezy, *The Age of Monopoly Capital* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2017), 154.

¹⁵ ↪ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 13; Paul A. Baran, *The Longer View* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1969), 104. The phrase “vomiting up of reason” is taken from Baran’s interpretation of the *Underground Man*’s rejection of the “laws of nature” and “two times two is four,” whereby the protagonist of Dostoevsky’s novel, according to Baran, “vomits up reason.”

Unreason in History

Irrationalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was a well-known current of European philosophy,

than Hitler captured the spirit of unreason present at the time when he declared: “We stand at the end of the Age of Reason.... A new era of the magical explanation of the world is rising, an explanation based on will rather than knowledge. There is no truth, in either the moral or scientific sense.”

drawing inspiration from an emphasis on the will-to-life/will-to-power, instincts, intuition, myths, and vitalistic life principles, as well as a deep social pessimism—in opposition to the earlier Enlightenment emphasis on materialism, reason, science, and progress. It took the form of a deeply reactionary movement that was virulently anti-humanistic, antidemocratic, antiscientific, anti-socialist, and

anti-dialectical, as well as frequently racist and misogynist. Some of the leading figures of the irrationalist turn in the period 1848–1932, included Schopenhauer, Eduard von Hartmann, Nietzsche, Sorel, Spengler, Bergson, Heidegger, and Schmitt.¹⁶

Such philosophical irrationalism was the intellectual generalisation of larger historical influences occurring within the dominant society. Hence, direct causal links with reactionary movements are often lacking. However, the broad connection between these ideational tendencies and the eventual emergence of fascism, and particularly Nazism, in Europe, is undeniable. Sorel professed his admiration for Benito Mussolini.¹⁷ Heidegger and Schmitt were Nazi ideologues and functionaries. None other than Hitler captured the spirit of unreason present at the time when he declared: “We stand at the end of the Age of Reason.... A new era of the magical explanation of the world is rising, an explanation based on will rather than knowledge. There is no truth, in either the moral or scientific sense.”¹⁸ Approaching the problem of irrationalism from a Marxist perspective, Lukács in *The Destruction of Reason* traced its historical roots to the defeat of the bourgeois revolutions of 1848, followed by the emergence of the imperialist stage of capitalism beginning in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, leading to the First and Second World Wars. “Reason itself,” he argued, “can never be something politically neutral, suspended above social developments. It always mirrors the concrete rationality—or irrationality—of a social situation and evolving trend, sums it up conceptually and thereby promotes or inhibits it.”¹⁹ It is immanent critique, based on the scrutiny of changing historical conditions, that constitutes the essence of the Marxian dialectical method in the analysis of the development of thought.

For Lukács, Schopenhauer was the originator of “the purely bourgeois version of irrationalism.”²⁰ His magnum opus, *The World as Will and Idea*, published in 1819, was directed against Hegelian philosophy. Schopenhauer attempted to oppose his subjective idealism of the will to G. W. F. Hegel’s objectivist idealism of reason. In doing so, he went so far as to schedule his lectures in Berlin in the 1820s opposite to those of Hegel’s own, but to no avail, since he was unable to attract an audience. It was only with the defeat of the 1848 revolutions in Germany that the overall climate shifted in his

¹⁶ ↪ On irrationalism see Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason*; Herbert Aptheker, “Imperialism and Irrationalism,” *Telos* 4 (1969): 168–75; Étienne Balibar, “Irrationalism and Marxism,” *New Left Review* 1:107 (January–February 1978): 3–18; Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, vol. 7, Part II, *Modern Philosophy: Schopenhauer to Nietzsche* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1963); “Irrationalism,” [Encyclopedia] Britannica, no date, britannica.com.

¹⁷ ↪ James H. Meisel, “A Premature Fascist? Sorel and Mussolini,” *The Western Political Quarterly* 3, no. 1 (March 1950): 26; H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society* (New York: Vintage, 1958), 162.

¹⁸ ↪ Hitler quoted by Herman Raushning, *Gespräche mit Hitler* (New York: Europa Verlag, 1940), 210, translated in Gerald Holton, “Can Science Be at the Centre of Modern Culture?,” *Public Understanding of Science* 2 (1993): 302. For a slightly different translation, see Herman Raushning, *Voice of Destruction* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1940), 222–23.

¹⁹ ↪ Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason*, 5.

²⁰ ↪ Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason*, 192.

direction. At that point, the German bourgeoisie shifted their allegiance from Hegel and Ludwig Feuerbach to Schopenhauer, who in the last decade of his life achieved widespread acclaim.²¹

Schopenhauer's genius, according to Lukács, was to pioneer the method of "indirect apologetics," later perfected by Nietzsche. Earlier apologetics for the bourgeois order had sought to defend it directly, despite its manifold contradictions. In Schopenhauer's new method of indirect apologetics, the bad side of capitalism (and even its contradictions) could be brought into the open. This was never attributed to the capitalist system but to egoism, instincts, and will, perceiving human existence in deeply pessimistic terms as a vice-ridden process of self-dissolution.²² Schopenhauer's concept of the will, or the will-to-life, which he attributed to all of existence, thus took the form of a cosmic egoism. By reducing everything in the end to pure will, Schopenhauer's philosophy, Lukács wrote, "anthropomorphises the whole of nature." The will, for Schopenhauer, embraced Immanuel Kant's things-in-themselves (noumena), beyond human perception. "I must recognise," Schopenhauer declared, "the inscrutable forces which manifest themselves in all natural bodies as identical with that which in me is the will, and as differing from it only in degree."²³

Schopenhauer's notion of the will was perhaps best revealed by his response to Baruch Spinoza's famous statement that a falling stone, if it were conscious, would think it had free will and that its momentum was a product of its own volition—an argument designed to refute the notion of free will. Schopenhauer inverted Spinoza's meaning and declared: "The stone would be right. The path is the same for the stone as the motive for me, and what is manifested in the stone's case as cohesion, gravity, persistence in the assumed state is, in esoteric essence, the same as that which I recognise in myself as will."²⁴ For Schopenhauer, "crude materialism" simply denied the immanence of those "vital forces" which were identical with the will to life, beyond which there was "nothing."²⁵

The late nineteenth century was a period associated in part with the growth of neo-Kantianism in philosophy, beginning with Friedrich Lange's *The History of Materialism and Critique of Its Present Importance* (1866), which sought to overthrow all materialist tendencies—notably, Karl Marx's historical materialism.²⁶ But even more influential and geared to the new imperialist age was irrationalism as a general philosophical tendency. Schopenhauer's leading follower (outside of Nietzsche, on whom he exercised a considerable influence), and a dominant figure in philosophical irrationalism in the late nineteenth century, was Hartmann, with his massive tome, *The Philosophy of the Unconscious* (1869). A more eclectic thinker than Schopenhauer, Hartmann professed to be bringing together Hegel's optimism with Schopenhauer's pessimism. But it was the deep pessimism and irrationalism of Hartmann's work that most impressed readers at the time, marked especially by his notion of cosmic suicide.

²¹ ↪ Copleston, *Schopenhauer to Nietzsche*, 27; Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason*, 193–98.

²² ↪ Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason*, 204–8.

²³ ↪ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, vol. 3 (London: Trübner, 1883), 164; Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason*, 225. Schopenhauer's attribution of the will to all of existence would have seemed less fantastic to his readers in his day than is the case today. As the great geologist Georges Cuvier critically noted in his famous "Preliminary Discourse" to his *Researches on Fossil Bones* in 1812, some early nineteenth-century scientists, including the mineralogist Eugène Patron, attributed to "the most elementary molecule...an instinct, a will." *Georges Cuvier, Fossil Bones, and Geological Catastrophes*, ed. Martin J. S. Rudwick (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 201.

²⁴ ↪ "From Baruch Spinoza's 'Letter to G. H. Schuller' (1674)," Explanitia (blog), October 3, 2018, explanitia.wordpress.com; Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, vol. 3, 164. Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason*, 225–27.

²⁵ ↪ Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, vol. 3, 159, 165–66, 531–32; Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason*, 225.

²⁶ ↪ Friedrich Lange, *The History of Materialism* (New York: Humanities Press, 1950).

In Hartmann's view, this was the best of all possible worlds, but nonexistence was superior to existence. Hence, he believed that at some point the will, or "Unconscious Spirit," would become so wrapped in the human species "at the height of its development" that it would lead to a cosmic suicide, bringing to a "temporal end" the entire world process, resulting in the "last day." At that point, "the human negation of will" would "annihilate the whole actual volition of the world without residuum and cause the whole cosmos to disappear at a stroke by withdrawal of the volition, which alone gives it existence." Humanity's end would not take the form of a traditional "apocalypse," coming from without, but would emanate from the suicide of the will, extending to the universe as a whole.²⁷

Nietzsche died in 1900. The date was significant, since in Lukács's view, Nietzsche was the "founder of irrationalism in the imperialist period," which was then only commencing. The imperialist or monopoly stage of capitalism in Marxist theory began in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, but, in terms of Nietzsche's life and work, only "the first shoots and buds of what was to come" in that respect were visible. Nietzsche's genius was instinctively to capture a sense of what was to come and to develop the method of irrationalism for the new age of empire as a "mythicising form" of analysis, made more obscure by the frequent use of aphorisms. It is this that accounts for the mesmerising nature of Nietzsche's literary style, which was at the same time a means of perfecting indirect apologetics.²⁸ Everything in Nietzsche is presented in a haze so that, while the whole political-social thrust of his philosophy is not in doubt, it also gives rise to endless discussions arising from its mythic character, inviting imitators, and establishing the dominant form in which philosophical irrationalism is pursued to this day.

Summarising the main character of Nietzsche's philosophy, Lukács wrote:

The more fictive a concept is and the more purely subjectivist its origins, the higher it stands and the "truer" it is in the mythical scale of values. Being, so long as its concept contains even the slightest vestiges of a relationship to a reality independent of our consciousness, must be displaced by Becoming (equals idea). Being, however, when freed from these shackles and viewed purely as fiction, as a product of the will-to-power, may then, for Nietzsche, be a still higher category than Becoming: an expression of the intuitive pseudo-objectivity of myth. With Nietzsche, the special function of such a definition of Becoming and Being lies in supporting the pseudo-historicity vital to his indirect apologetics and in simultaneously dismissing it, confirming philosophically that historical Becoming can produce nothing that is new and outruns capitalism.²⁹

Yet, for all the brilliance—and even attraction—of Nietzsche's philosophy, its systematic reactionary and irrationalist character cannot be denied. At the end of his *The World as Will and Idea*, Schopenhauer had declared that the will-to-life was everything, beyond which there was nothing. Nietzsche, in a play on Schopenhauer, famously pronounced: "This world is the will to power—and nothing besides! And you yourself are this will to power—and nothing besides!"³⁰

In *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), Nietzsche, in opposition to Marxism, wrote:

²⁷ ↪ Eduard von Hartmann, *Philosophy of the Unconscious*, vol. 3 (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, and Trübner, 1893) 131–36; Copleston, *Schopenhauer to Nietzsche*, 57–59; Thomas Moynihan, *X-Risk: How Humanity Discovered Its Own Extinction* (Falmouth, UK: Urbanomic Media, 2020), 273–78; Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason*, 409; Frederick C. Beiser, *After Hegel: German Philosophy, 1840–1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 158–216.

²⁸ ↪ Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason*, 309, 319–21.

²⁹ ↪ Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason*, 388–89.

³⁰ ↪ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (New York: Vintage, 1967), 550.

Life itself is essentially appropriation, injury, overpowering of what is alien and weaker; suppression, hardness, imposition of one's own forms, incorporation and at least, at its mildest, exploitation.... If it is a living and not a dying body...it will have to be an incarnate will to power, it will strive to grow, spread, seize, become predominant—not from any morality or immorality but because it is living and because life simply is will to power. But there is no point on which the ordinary consciousness of Europeans resists instruction as on this: everywhere people are now raving, even under scientific disguises, about coming conditions of society in which “the exploitative aspect” will be removed—which sounds to me as if they promised to invent a way of life that would dispense with all organic functions. “Exploitation” does not belong to a corrupt or imperfect and primitive society: it belongs to the essence of what lives, as a basic organic function; it is a consequence of the will to power, which is after all the will of life.³¹

Here Nietzsche conflates appropriation—which, in classical political theory and in the work of thinkers as diverse as John Locke, Hegel, and Marx meant the process of acquiring property (and which, for Marx, ultimately involved production)—with actual exploitation. Moreover, in Nietzsche's usage, exploitation was no different than expropriation (that is, appropriation without equivalent or reciprocity). Thus, in a sleight of hand, appropriation, which is the basis of life, becomes equated with exploitation/expropriation, which is not essential to existence, thereby shutting off any notion of an egalitarian or humane future. Moreover, Nietzsche ultimately grounds his view here in a biological determinism, which, he tells us, constitutes the “essence” of the “will to power.” In this way, his essentialism with respect to human nature differs from that of Thomas Hobbes only insofar as the latter, in the historical context of the seventeenth century, was a progressive rather than regressive thinker.³²

Nietzsche's writings exhibit endless attacks on socialism and even democracy... “Such phantoms of the dignity of man, the dignity of labour, are the shabby products of a slave mentality hiding from its own nature.”

Nietzsche's writings exhibit endless attacks on socialism and even democracy. “Socialism,” he wrote, was “the logical conclusion of the tyranny of the least and dumbest.”³³ In a twist on Darwinism, which he appropriated in the form of a mere cliché along the lines of social Darwinism, he argued that rather than the survival of the fittest, European society was characterised by the survival of the unfittest. In this view, the mediocre masses or “herd animals” were taking over society by force of numbers from the more “noble” elements, so that it was the noble spirits that needed to be protected by means of force.³⁴ “We shall perish,” he wrote, “because of the absence of slavery.” Detesting bourgeois society, but detesting democracy and socialism even more, Nietzsche declared: “Such phantoms of the dignity of man, the dignity of labour, are the shabby products of a slave mentality hiding from its own nature.”³⁵

Modern society, for Nietzsche, interfered with the natural hierarchy of races, constituting “an age” that “mixes races indiscriminately.”³⁶ This called for the reassertion of the “master-race,” which he depicted in “Aryan” terms, as connected

³¹ ↪ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (New York: Vintage, 1966), 203.

³² ↪ Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason*, 361. On Hobbes, see István Mészáros, *Beyond Leviathan* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2022), 42–44.

³³ ↪ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 25, 77; Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 118.

³⁴ ↪ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 33, 78, 364–65, 397–98; Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 110–11, 115; Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1997), 41.

³⁵ ↪ Nietzsche quoted in Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason*, 327.

³⁶ ↪ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 111.

to the “blond Germanic beast” to be found “at the center of every noble race.” In contrast, “the descendants of all European and non-European slavery, in particular of all pre-Aryan population—represent the decline of mankind.”³⁷

Glorying in the defeat of the Paris Commune, Nietzsche referred to it as the “most primitive form of social structure,” since it represented the interests of the herd. He worried about the tragic fate awaiting “the conquering master race, that of the Aryans” in the democratic and socialist age. Such conquering “Aryan humanity” was characterised as originally blond and “completely pure and primordial,” as opposed to the previous “dark-skinned, dark-haired native inhabitants” of Europe and elsewhere.³⁸ In *The Will to Power*, he openly declared: “The great majority of men have no right to life, and serve only to disconcert the elect of our race. I do not yet grant the unfit that right. There are even unfit peoples”—lacking the right to exist.³⁹

In Nietzsche’s notion of “eternal recurrence,” “noble” spirits and the master race would again experience the triumph of the will in the cyclical swings of history. Yet, eternal recurrence, meant a lack of overall progress, so that the cumulative result was “Nothingness (the ‘meaninglessness’) for ever more!” Although Nietzsche wished to supersede nihilism through the Overman as the personification of the will-to-power, it was to nihilism that everything always eternally returned, as genuine forward progress was foreclosed.⁴⁰

Vitalism, or *Lebensphilosophie*, was, in Lukács’s conception, the dominant philosophy of the whole imperialist period in Germany. However, vitalism had its foremost representative in this period in the work of Bergson in France. Bergson’s philosophy rested on two forms of consciousness: intellect and intuition. The intellect related to the mechanical world of natural science, intuition to metaphysics and thus the realm of philosophy. He believed that, by looking inward into the intuitive realm, it was possible to solve problems like the character of time and evolution in ways that complemented—but went beyond—science and reason. Thus, he challenged, as Lukács put it, “the scientific character of normal scientific knowledge,” creating a “stark confrontation of rationality and irrationalist intuition.”⁴¹

Bergson’s two most important concepts were those of time as subjective duration, and the *élan vital*, or vital impulse. On the basis of these concepts, he proposed a kind of third way in philosophy existing outside of mechanistic materialism and idealism/teleology. “Time,” he stated, “is invention or it is nothing at all.” The moment we confront “duration, we see that it means creation.” Our own lives gave us the clues to unlocking the secret of time, or the ability to endure, since duration was not an attribute “of matter itself, but that of life which reascends the course of matter.”⁴² The *élan vital* was the creative impulse of life, lighting up matter, which explained evolution. On these essentially mystical bases, Bergson went on to challenge Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution as natural selection and Albert Einstein’s conception of spacetime for failing to capture the subjective, intuitive, and creative bases of existence.

³⁷ ↪ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 23–24, 33. Deleuze oddly sees Nietzsche’s concept of the Overman as his final triumph over Hegel’s dialectics. Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 147–94.

³⁸ ↪ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 14–15; Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 41.

³⁹ ↪ The translation here follows that of Michael Scarpitti, “The Perils of Translation, or Doing Justice to the Text,” 38, academia.edu. The Kaufman translation of *The Will to Power* leaves out the last two sentences. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 467. See also Ronald Beiner, *Dangerous Minds: Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the Return of the Far Right* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 4, 137.

⁴⁰ ↪ Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason*, 392; Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 198.

⁴¹ ↪ Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason*, 25, 403.

⁴² ↪ Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution* (New York: Henry Holt, 1911), 340–42.

Bergson was born in 1859, the year of the publication of Darwin's *The Origin of Species*, but he could never accept Darwin's theory of natural selection, arguing that natural science was inadequate in this area, and that there must be some vital, creative impulse, a cosmic *élan vital* underlying all evolution. Utilising arguments that are now employed by advocates of Intelligent Design—for example, that the evolution of the eye could not be explained by natural selection—he attributed “creative evolution” to a vital power independent of matter and organization.⁴³

Bergson's attacks on the Darwinian theory of natural selection, and on reason in general, caused E. Ray Lankester, the protégé of Darwin and Thomas Huxley, a close friend of Marx, and the leading British biologist of his day, to rebel at Bergson's presentation of “intuition as a true guide and the intellect as an erroneous guide.” In assessing Bergson's contribution, Lankester, a strict materialist, wrote: “To the student of the aberrations and monstrosities of the mind of man, M[onsieur] Bergson's works will always be documents of value,” akin to the interest that “a collector may take in a curious species of beetle.”⁴⁴ (Socialist biologists subsequently transcended the debate between mechanists and vitalists via materialist dialectics, in what constituted a major contribution to science.)⁴⁵

Bergson was incensed by Einstein's theory of relativity, which interpreted time (or spacetime) in terms of physics and was gradually receiving general recognition. In a famous face-off in April 1922, Bergson argued in opposition to Einstein that a physical notion of time professed by the intellect was inadequate and that time could only fully be understood when also approached subjectively and intuitively in terms of duration. Einstein responded that, “The time of the philosophers [conflating both psychological time and physical time] does not exist, there remains only a psychological time that differs from that of the physicists.” For Einstein, neither Bergson's *élan vital* nor his duration had any meaning in terms of physical science.⁴⁶

In Lukács's view, there was no such thing as an “‘innocent’ philosophy.” This was clearly the case where Heidegger was concerned, despite its rarefied aspect.⁴⁷ In Heidegger's 1927 masterpiece *Being and Time*, the consideration of individual beings is downplayed in the search for the “fundamental ontology” of metaphysical Being. He proposed that Being can be approached on the basis of an existential analytic focused on *Dasein*, or human existence, which, as he later explained, can be conceived as dwelling in and performing the role of “the shepherd of Being.” Hence, although Being, for Heidegger, cannot be apprehended directly, it can be disclosed in part phenomenologically and existentially by the scrutiny of *Dasein* in the context of its “becoming-with” the world.⁴⁸ All previous philosophies, from Plato to the modern era, were deemed by Heidegger to be superficial and narrowly metaphysical insofar as they did not focus on the fundamental ontological problem of Being.⁴⁹ One consequence of Heidegger's philosophy was to de-centre the

⁴³ ↪ Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, vol. 9, *Maine de Biran to Sartre; Part I: The Revolution to Henri Bergson* (New York: Doubleday, 1974), 216–23. On the relation of Bergson's argument on the eye to that of current intelligence design theorists, see John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark, and Richard York, *Critique of Intelligent Design* (New York: Monthly Review Press), 14–15, 158–61.

⁴⁴ ↪ Ray Lankester, Preface in Hugh S. R. Elliot, *Modern Science and the Illusions of Professor Bergson* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1912), vii–xvii.

⁴⁵ ↪ See B. Sadoski, “The ‘Physical’ and ‘Biological’ in the Process of Organic Evolution,” in Nikolai Bukharin et. al., *Science at the Crossroads* (London: Frank Cass and Co., 1971), 69–80; Joseph Needham, *Time: The Refreshing River* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1943), 241–46.

⁴⁶ ↪ Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 342; Jimena Canales, *The Physicist and the Philosopher* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 46–47; “Einstein vs. Bergson: The Struggle for Time,” Faena Aleph, faena.com.

⁴⁷ ↪ Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason*, 5, 496.

⁴⁸ ↪ Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 53–57, 234; Michael Wheeler, “Martin Heidegger,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, October 12, 2011, plato.stanford.edu.

⁴⁹ ↪ Heidegger made an exception for some of the pre-Socratic philosophers, particularly Heraclitus.

conscious (transcendental) ego, and to shift philosophy from questions of subject-object relations to authenticity and inauthenticity.⁵⁰

Given that the pursuit of Being as such is the main thrust of Heidegger's existential analytic, one might think that it would not have much relation to politics and ethics. Yet, the reactionary, irrational, and vitalistic elements in Heidegger's philosophy, while not present on the surface, seeped out in various ways, exhibiting the true nature of his irrationalist logic. This occurred not simply in his official Nazi period, but also in his later work after the war, and was arguably implicit in his whole philosophical position from the beginning. Thus, in his published lectures on Being and Truth, presented at the University of Freiburg in the winter of 1933–1934, shortly after he joined the Nazi Party and only a few years after the publication of Being and Time, Heidegger declared:

An enemy is each and every person who poses an essential threat to the Dasein [existence] of the people and its individual members. The enemy does not have to be external, and the external enemy is not even always the most dangerous one. And it can seem as if there were no enemy. Then it is a fundamental requirement to find the enemy, to expose the enemy to the light, or even first to make the enemy, so that this standing against the enemy may happen and so that Dasein may not lose its edge.... [The challenge is] to bring the enemy into the open, to harbor no illusions about the enemy, to keep oneself ready for attack, to cultivate and intensify a constant readiness and to prepare the attack looking far ahead with the goal of total annihilation.⁵¹

Heidegger's roles as a Nazi Party functionary, ideologue, and, during his years as rector at the University of Freiburg, the most prominent academic supporter of Hitler are now well known. He helped institute Gleichschaltung, or the bringing-into-line within the German academy, playing a leading role in purging the university of colleagues and students who failed to conform to the dictates of the Nazi regime. He also worked closely with the legal theorist Schmitt, the main author of the notorious Führer principle, promoting Nazi ideology and presiding over symbolic book burnings.⁵² His 1935

Introduction to Metaphysics not only provided a tribute to Nazism but also advanced an argument for the triumph of the "historical Volk [people]...and thereby the history of the West," activating "new spiritual energies." In a conversation with Karl Löwith in Heidelberg in 1936, Heidegger agreed "without reservation" to the suggestion that his "partisanship for National Socialism lay in the essence of his philosophy."⁵³

Heidegger frequently lauded Mussolini and Hitler, presenting Nietzsche as a forerunner of both fascist leaders. In Heidegger's book on Friedrich Schelling, a long sentence from the original lecture was omitted in the 1971 edition but was later reinserted at Heidegger's own request. It said: "As is well known, both of the two men in Europe who have, in the political-national fashioning of their respective Volks, inaugurated countermovements [Gegenbewegungen] to nihilism, namely Mussolini and Hitler, were in turn, each in their own way, essentially determined by Nietzsche; still this was so without Nietzsche's authentic metaphysical domain having come into its own." Nietzsche, Heidegger explained

⁵⁰ ↪ Richard Wolin, *Labyrinths* (Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), 184; Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, 20–21, 26–27.

⁵¹ ↪ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Truth* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 73 (italics added); Beiner, *Dangerous Minds*, 4–5, 137.

⁵² ↪ Emmanuel Faye, *Heidegger: The Introduction of Nazism into Philosophy in Light of the Unpublished Seminars of 1933–1935* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 39–58; Richard Wolin, ed., *The Heidegger Controversy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1993); Richard Wolin, *Labyrinths*, 103–22.

⁵³ ↪ Heidegger quotes from Wolin, *Labyrinths*, 126, 138. See also Wolin, *The Heidegger Controversy*, 30.

in his lectures, had shown that “democracy” led to a “degenerate form of nihilism” and thus demanded a more authentic Volk movement. In a course on logic in 1934, Heidegger declared that “Negroes are men but they have no history.... Nature has no history.... When an airplane’s propeller turns, then nothing actually ‘occurs.’ Conversely, when the same airplane takes Hitler to Mussolini, then history occurs.”⁵⁴ “The sham culture” of Western civilisation, he explained, will be superseded only by the “spiritual world” of the Volk based on “the deepest preservation of the forces of the soil and blood.”⁵⁵

In his infamous Black Notebooks (a philosophical diary that Heidegger asked to be included at the end of his Collected Works), he gave repeated evidence of his deep antisemitism. Thus, he attributed the faults of modernity and Western rationalism to “World Judaism,” a term used in Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* referring to a Jewish conspiracy of world domination. “World Judaism,” Heidegger wrote in the Black Notebooks, “is ungraspable everywhere [because of its dominance of rationalist thought] and doesn’t need to get involved in military action while continuing to unfurl its influence, whereas we [Nazi Germany in the Second World War] are left to sacrifice the best blood of the best of our people.”⁵⁶ Following the publication of the Black Notebooks, as Heidegger scholar Tom Rockmore has noted, “it seems increasingly clear that Heidegger’s philosophy, his turning to National Socialism, and his anti-Semitism are neither separate nor separable but rather inseparably linked.”⁵⁷

It is clear that Heidegger never moved away, or even intended to distance himself, from his extreme reactionary views, which underpinned his whole philosophical effort. In his famous Letter on Humanism, published in 1947, he provided a systematic attack on humanism, disparaging German Enlightenment thinkers such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich Schiller. Unlike today’s post-humanism, however, Heidegger was chiefly concerned with negating the notion of human beings as primarily material or corporeal beings, having an “animal rationale.” For Heidegger, the truth lay in the existential analytic of Dasein, conceiving real human existence as approaching Being. In his usual veiled language, Heidegger heralded a “destiny” still to come, based on a historicity “more primordial”—closer to Dasein—“than humanism.” Humanism, which he identified with rationalism, was at all times to be opposed, “because it does not set humanitas high enough” in promoting the empiricist ontic of mere individual, material beings, as opposed to the fundamental ontology of Being, in which the conscious ego is de-centred.⁵⁸ Heidegger intimated that, due to language, which he saw as at the center of Dasein, there was a close relationship between ancient Greek and German cultures (along what was generally conceived to be the Aryan line) that made Germany unique in furthering the authentic historicity of the West.⁵⁹

In his Letter on Humanism, Heidegger acknowledged the power of Marx’s critique of alienation before proceeding to criticise naïve materialism and reducing Marx’s theory of alienation to the issue of technology. As Lukács stated, there was no doubt what Heidegger was saying here, namely that he saw “Marxism as the chief antagonist.”⁶⁰

⁵⁴ ↪ Briner, *Dangerous Minds*, 105–8; Wolin, *Labyrinths*, 134–35.

⁵⁵ ↪ Heidegger quoted in Wolin, *Labyrinths*, 131.

⁵⁶ ↪ Philip Oltermann, “Heidegger’s ‘Black Notebooks’ Reveal Antisemitism at the Core of His Philosophy,” *Guardian*, March 12, 2014.

⁵⁷ ↪ Tom Rockmore, “Heidegger After Trawny,” in *Heidegger’s Black Notebooks*, ed. Andrew J. Mitchell and Peter Trawny (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 152.

⁵⁸ ↪ Philip Oltermann, “Heidegger’s ‘Black Notebooks’ Reveal Antisemitism at the Core of His Philosophy,” *Guardian*, March 12, 2014.

⁵⁹ ↪ Wheeler, “Martin Heidegger.”

⁶⁰ ↪ Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 243–44; Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason*, 836–37.

The Return of Irrationalism

Lukács identified the growth of irrationalism with the imperialist stage of capitalism. This was conceived in the first place economically, along the lines of Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg, as a system of monopoly capitalism characterised in terms of inter-imperialist rivalry and war in the struggle over colonies and spheres of influence. But it was Lenin, above all, according to Lukács, who translated the economic conception of imperialism into “the theory of the concrete world situation created by imperialism,” focusing on class politics and alignments between nations.⁶¹ Moreover, Lenin recognised that peace agreements in the imperialist stage were “inevitably nothing more than a ‘truce’ in periods between wars,” within a larger geopolitical struggle inherent to monopoly capitalism.⁶² The political aspects of imperialism thus permeated the culture of whole nations, generating what Raymond Williams in another context was to call “structures of feeling.”⁶³ It was this that led to the interface of imperialism and irrationalism in the history of Europe from 1870–1945.

Late imperialism, beginning in 1945, can be seen as divided thus far into three periods:

- (1) The immediate Cold War from 1945 to 1991, in which the United States as the hegemonic power of the capitalist world economy sought to gain dominance over a Global South engaged in anticolonial revolts, while at the same time waging a global struggle against the Soviet Union and China.
- (2) The period from 1991 to 2008, in which Washington attempted to consolidate a permanent unipolar world in the vacuum left by the removal of the Soviet Union from the world stage and the opening up of China to the world economy.
- (3) From 2008 (the Great Financial Crisis) to the present, marked by the reemergence of China and Russia as great powers and Washington’s official designation of these two countries as its chief enemies, leading to a New Cold War, marked by conflict between the U.S.-centred unipolar world and an emerging multipolar world order.

During all of this time, the Western left has occupied a weakened position within monopoly capitalism at home while

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having an ambiguous approach to imperialism abroad, with the related submergence of the class struggle. It also suffered a major defeat in 1968. With the advent of the New Cold War, the hybrid war of the collective imperialism of the triad on the Global South, including the major emerging economies, has come fully to light.

Under these circumstances, bourgeois irrationalism has come to define the dominant intellectual climate of late imperialism, reflecting the continuing destruction of reason. Today it is widely recognised that German reactionary thought, associated with “the Nietzsche-Heidegger-Carl Schmitt connection,” along with the revival of Bergsonism, is present in the works of post-Marxists, postmodernists, and post-humanists from Derrida to Deleuze to Latour.⁶⁴ In the words of Keti Chukhrov, a “fascination with negativity and nihilism,” characteristic of the irrationalist philosophies of the

⁶¹ ↪ Georg Lukács, *Lenin* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1971), 41–43.

⁶² ↪ Lenin, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, 119.

⁶³ ↪ Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (Cardigan, UK: Parthian, 2012), 69.

⁶⁴ ↪ Wolin, *Labyrinths*, 1.

late nineteenth and early twentieth century, can be seen in the work of Deleuze “and Guattari or the accelerationist dystopia and post-humanist theories of the present.”⁶⁵

In Deleuze’s *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, we are told that the “resolutely anti-dialectic” character of Nietzsche’s thought, his concepts of the “will to power,” the “eternal return,” and the dream of the Overman, represented a triumph over Hegel’s dialectic, leading to “the creative identity of power and willing” as the consummation of the will to power.⁶⁶ There is a “secret link” connecting various thinkers opposed to the state philosophy. This secret link, Deleuze tells us, includes Spinoza (reinterpreted as a vitalist), Nietzsche, and Bergson, all of whom are to be seen as philosophers of immanence, representing a “nomadic” tradition opposed not only to European rationalism in general, but standing in direct opposition to Hegel and Marx.⁶⁷ Bergson’s position in his debate with Einstein is championed by Deleuze in his 1966 book *Bergsonism* in an effort to privilege once again the subjective, intuitive notion of time separated from physics and also from historical time.⁶⁸

The irrationalist and reactionary reversals that we are seeing within what still remains a putatively left analysis are many. As Chukhrov observes:

*In Capitalism and Schizophrenia, Deleuze and Guattari find capital monstrous, but at the same time a desirable terrain from which subversion and its emancipatory potential might stem. [Nevertheless,] the acceptance of vicious capitalist contemporaneity is inevitable given the condition of the impossibility of its sublation.... A very important aspect of such an aberration lies in the following: the capitalist undercurrent of these emancipatory and critical theories functions not as a program to exit from capitalism, but rather as the radicalization of the impossibility of this exit.*⁶⁹

This revealing in the impossibility of exit can be seen in Deleuze and Guattari’s main confrontation with Marx. At the beginning of their influential 1972 work, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, they posit an “industry-nature” relation resulting in “relatively autonomous spheres that are called production, distribution, and consumption.” These separate spheres, they claim, were demonstrated by Marx to be only a product of the capitalist division of labor and the false consciousness that it produced. But from there, they leaped to the transhistorical proposition:

*We make no distinction between man and nature: the human essence of nature and the natural essence of man [Marx’s phrase] become one within nature in the form of production or industry, just as they do within the life of man as a species.... Industry is then no longer considered from the extrinsic point of view of utility, but rather from the point of view of its fundamental identity with nature as production of man and by man.... Man and nature are not like two opposite terms confronting each other...rather they are one and the same essential reality, the producer product.*⁷⁰

⁶⁵ ↪ Keti Chukhrov, *Practicing the Good* (Minneapolis: e-flux/University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 20.

⁶⁶ ↪ Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 8–10, 198.

⁶⁷ ↪ Gilles Deleuze, “I Have Nothing to Admit,” *Semiotexte* 2, no. 3 (1977), 112; Brian Massumi, introduction in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), x.

⁶⁸ ↪ Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 79–85.

⁶⁹ ↪ Chukhrov, *Practicing the Good*, 20.

⁷⁰ ↪ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 3–5.

On this basis, nature and humanity are seen as an inescapable ideal unity—what Marx, who is being quoted here, called

The entire concept of alienation, or the self-estrangement of humanity, as the central material reality of capitalism (which Marx had presented as a tragic “flaw” to be superseded), is thus removed at the outset.... Nietzsche’s reactionary irrationalism triumphs over Marx’s revolutionary praxis.

“the human essence of nature and the natural essence of man.” This is the inevitable result of industry, as an abstract, transhistorical phenomenon, which, rather than being conceived as alienated under capitalism, as in Marx, is the direct, immediate means of the unification of nature and humanity. The entire concept of alienation, or the self-estrangement of humanity, as the central material reality of

capitalism (which Marx had presented as a tragic “flaw” to be superseded), is thus removed at the outset.⁷¹ Nature and humanity, for Deleuze and Guattari, are “one essential reality,” generated by industry in the abstract.

Having effectively eliminated the historic phenomenon of alienation, Deleuze and Guattari move immediately to the characterisation of production as an “immanent principle” of desiring-machines, leading to a universal schizophrenia. “Schizophrenia” in this sense is defined as “the universe of productive and reproductive desiring-machines, [representing] universal primary production as ‘the essential reality of man and nature.’”⁷² Marx’s alienation, resulting from estranged social relations, is thus replaced by a universal system of desiring-machines or a “machinic unconscious” producing a larger schizophrenic reality of which capitalism is a mere manifestation. This schizophrenic-desiring reality lies on the plane of immanence, superseding humanity itself.⁷³ We are thus confronted with a universe of libidinal energy, vital life forces, and desiring-machinic drives from which there is no escape.⁷⁴ Nietzsche’s reactionary irrationalism triumphs over Marx’s revolutionary praxis.

A similar reversal can be seen in Derrida, again revealed in relation to Marx, in Derrida’s famous *Spectres of Marx*. In this and other works, Derrida advanced a left-Heideggerian poststructuralist perspective. The immediate, public response to *Spectres of Marx*, written shortly after the demise of the Soviet Union, was that it had reaffirmed Marx. Yet this occurred in the form of an indirect apologetics that stressed “Marx’s spectrology.” Here, Derrida focused on the famous opening line of *The Communist Manifesto* in which Marx and Engels had written: “A spectre is haunting Europe, the spectre of Communism.”⁷⁵ Marxism, he argued, still continued to haunt Europe, if only in a ghostly sense, in which it played an indispensable role in continuing to challenge the capitalist monolith. Yet, Derrida’s Marx—or the Marx he wished to retain—was, in the words of Richard Wolin, a “Heideggerianised Marx,” one impoverished by the notion that the main enemy is now simply techno-scientific modernity. Here the “ontological prejudices of philosophical anti-humanism, a Heideggerian inheritance” rule out all of the substance of Marx’s theory, including the social forces behind revolutionary praxis. Indeed, “Marx’s spectrology,” Derrida explained, was not limited to Marx himself “but blinks and sparkles behind the proper names of Marx, Freud, and Heidegger.” Hence, Marx continues to haunt capitalism but not simply as the apparition of himself, but as the ghost of Heidegger as well, whose “epochal thinking...cancels historicity.”⁷⁶

⁷¹ ↪ Karl Marx, *Early Writings* (London: Penguin, 1974), 349–50 (quoted in accordance with Deleuze and Guattari, op. cit.), 398–99.

⁷² ↪ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 5.

⁷³ ↪ Félix Guattari, *The Machinic Unconscious* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011); Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1964), 1.

⁷⁴ ↪ In Deleuze’s vitalistic philosophy, essences are immanent in mobile, material things, and thus seen as distinguished from essentialism in the sense of fixed, transcendent ideas.

⁷⁵ ↪ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (London: Routledge, 1994), 219–20. If Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* seeks to deconstruct Marxian praxis, other works have used Marx’s figure of the spectre to reconstruct revolutionary praxis. See especially China Miéville, *A Spectre Haunting: On the Communist Manifesto* (Bloomsbury: Head of Zeus, 2022).

⁷⁶ ↪ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 93, 219; Wolin, *Labyrinths*, 238–39.

The new philosophies of immanence have thus produced all sorts of seemingly radical but in fact reactionary theories. This is evident in post-humanist treatments of ecological crisis, particularly in the form of what is called a “new materialism.” Much of this is informed by Deleuze’s questionable re-appropriation of Spinoza as a vitalistic theorist, primarily through the latter’s concept of conatus, which is interpreted as imputing motive, mind, even joy to objects themselves, for example a stone.⁷⁷ This has opened the way to a vast outpouring of new vitalistic (so-called “new materialist”) works by figures such as Bennett and Morton, often in the name of ecology, in which a universal animism is the outcome. In this view, a lump of coal, a microbe, Adorno’s set of plastic dinosaurs, a stone, etc., all are treated as having “vital powers,” placing them on a flat ontological plane with humanity.⁷⁸ Like Schopenhauer (in his response to Spinoza), Bennett argues that a falling stone, if it were conscious, would be right to think that it had will and moved of its own volition.⁷⁹ The result is the demolition of any meaningful distinctions between human and nonhuman nature.

A common strategy to be found in Latour, Bennett, and Morton is to negate Marx’s famous critique of commodity fetishism by simply standing it on its head, presenting all things/objects as vital agents or actors. This amounts to a universalisation of commodity fetishism and reification (the thingification of the world), and the diminishing thereby of any notion of the human subject. It constitutes the elimination of the classic conception of critique.⁸⁰

Latour’s well-known rejection of “the modern” sought to deny, in left-Heideggerian fashion, all validity to the concepts of nature and humanity, presenting them as a false duality introduced by Enlightenment modernity. He made this rejection of the nature-society dualism the heart of his “political ecology,” which replaced human actors with assemblages of “actants.”⁸¹ But once he belatedly felt the need to consider the actual planetary ecological emergency represented by the new Anthropocene Epoch in geological history, Latour found himself devoid of all reference points—since even ecology had been thrown into question in his philosophy—and he reverted to mystifying concepts like Gaia and what he called the Earthbound (a reworking and personification of the notion of terrestrial). More importantly, given the nature of the planetary destruction, he was confronted with the question to how to conceive of this from the standpoint of the political order. He thus turned to Schmitt’s *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum*, written in Nazi Germany. Schmitt’s works sought to root law in the earth (not in the sense of ecology, but rather territorialisation), conceiving this as the basis of the permanent state of war that grounded international law.⁸²

Lukács’s evaluation of the Schmitt of this period is naturally much harsher than that of Latour. The Nazi legal theorist Schmitt, Lukács argued, had quickly shifted to the new imperial climate following the fall of the Third Reich. “It does not matter to him—Carl Schmitt—whether it is Hitler, Eisenhower or a newly arisen German imperialism that sets up the absolute dictatorship of monopoly capitalism.”⁸³

⁷⁷ ↪ Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics* (London: Penguin, 1996), 75 (III, prop. 6); “From Baruch Spinoza’s ‘Letter to G. H. Schuller’ (1674)”; Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1988), 97–104.

⁷⁸ ↪ Jane Bennet, *Vibrant Matter* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), xiv–xv, 1–4; Timothy Morton, *Humankind* (London: Verso, 2019), 33, 55, 61–63, 71, 97, 166–71. See John Bellamy Foster, “Marx’s Critique of Enlightenment Humanism,” — The Jus Semper Global Alliance, February 2023.

⁷⁹ ↪ Bennet, *Vibrant Matter*, 1–4.

⁸⁰ ↪ Foster, “Marx’s Critique of Enlightenment Humanism,” 10–12.

⁸¹ ↪ Bruno Latour, *The Politics of Nature* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004), 75–80; Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 54–55; Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

⁸² ↪ Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia* (Cambridge: Polity, 2017), 220–54, 285–92; Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018).

⁸³ ↪ Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason*, 839–40.

Irrationalism is now thoroughly in fashion again. A further “radicalisation of the impossibility of...exit” is evident as the world in late imperialism faces two forms of exterminism: nuclear war and the planetary ecological emergency.

Still, basing his analysis on Schmitt, Latour tells us that the answer lies in “a new state of war” on behalf of the Earthbound. He ends his 2015 *Facing Gaia* by praising the spirit of Christopher Columbus.⁸⁴ Despite his criticism of “the moderns,” Latour allied himself, at least for a time, with the capitalist ultra-ecomodernists of the Breakthrough Institute,

asking people to “Love Your [Frankenstein] Monsters.”⁸⁵

Irrationalism is now thoroughly in fashion again. A further “radicalisation of the impossibility of...exit” is evident as the world in late imperialism faces two forms of exterminism: nuclear war and the planetary ecological emergency. In a conference and book addressing the antisemitism and Nazism in Heidegger’s *Black Notebooks*, representing a desperate effort to salvage Heidegger’s philosophy in some way despite the revelations that Nazism was integral to his entire outlook, it was Lacanian-Hegelian philosopher Žižek who was given the final word, no doubt due to his reputation as a left thinker. Žižek sought to defend the importance of Heidegger for philosophy, despite his Nazism, on the grounds of the significance of his fundamental ontology of “ontological difference,” or the relation of beings to Being, out of which Heidegger’s analysis of *Dasein* and his deconstruction of the conscious ego had arisen. This, then, is seen as separable from the specifics of Heidegger’s political path. Even if he did not move away from his far-right views, failing to repudiate his Nazi past, Heidegger, we are told, is still to be commended for the fundamental ontology of his Being and Time and his criticisms of scientific-technological civilisation, viewed as distinguishable from his complicity with the Third Reich.⁸⁶

In Žižek’s work *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*, Heidegger is praised even more strongly. Not only is Heidegger presented here as a figure operating “against the grain” within a practice that is “strangely close to communism,” but we are also told that Heidegger “of the mid-1930s,” when he was a member of the Nazi Party, can be seen as “a future communist”—even if he himself never arrived at that destination. Heidegger’s Nazism, Žižek apologetically declares, “was not a simple mistake, but rather a ‘right step in the wrong direction.’” Thus, “Heidegger cannot be simply dismissed as a German *volkisch*-reaction.” In his Nazi period, Heidegger, Žižek postulates, was opening up “possibilities which point...toward a radical emancipatory politics.” To be sure, this was written before the publication of the *Black Notebooks*—although well after many of Heidegger’s Nazi writings had appeared. But as we have seen, the *Black Notebooks*, with their virulent antisemitism, did little to alter Žižek’s overall defense of Heidegger’s philosophy.⁸⁷

Žižek’s loyalty to Heidegger’s anti-humanist project is evident in his current post-humanist stance in which he argues (while commending Bennett) that nature and ecology, along with humanity, are no longer meaningful categories. Even the Indigenous defence of the earth is, in this perspective, to be belittled. In an article focused on a discussion of Marx’s concept of metabolic rift, Žižek responded to the socialist and Indigenous Bolivian president Evo Morales’s call for a defence of Mother Earth with the quip that, “To this one is tempted to add, that if there is one good thing about capitalism it is that under it, Mother Earth no longer exists.” What was meant by this, as in much of Žižek’s writing, was

⁸⁴ ↪ Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 285–92.

⁸⁵ ↪ Bruno Latour, “Love Your Monsters,” Breakthrough Institute, February 14, 2012, org. Latour took a more progressive and less irrationalist step in his final, posthumous book, but it is not a radical one. See Bruno Latour and Nikolaj Schultz, *On the Emergence of an Ecological Class* (London: Polity, 2022).

⁸⁶ ↪ Slavoj Žižek, “The Persistence of Ontological Difference,” in *Heidegger’s Black Notebooks*, ed. Mitchell and Trawny, 186–200.

⁸⁷ ↪ Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2013), 6, 878–79.

not immediately clear, but it fits with his other statements, reflecting a similar disdain for ecological problems, and an indirect apologetics for the system, such as his declaration that “ecology is a new opium for the masses.”⁸⁸

Indeed, both the denaturalisation of nature and the dehumanisation of humanity are built into Žižek’s general anti-humanist outlook, which conforms to the principle of the radicalisation of the impossibility of exit. Thus, he declares in a nihilistic way: “The power of human culture is not only to build an autonomous symbolic universe beyond what we experience as nature, to produce new ‘unnatural’ natural objects which materialize human knowledge. We not only ‘symbolise nature’; we [also], as it were, denaturalise it from within.... The only way to confront ecological challenges is to accept fully the radical denaturalisation of nature.” But this also implies the radical dehumanisation of humanity, since, as he also states: “There are human beings only insofar as there is an impenetrable inhuman nature (Heidegger’s ‘earth’).” The problem for all discussions of humanity’s “embeddedness in nature” and analyses of the metabolic rift, he claims, is that they tend to regress into “dialectical-materialist general ontology,” referring to the dialectical naturalism of Engels and Lenin.

In accordance with Žižek’s own idiosyncratic, idealist, and irrationalist approach to “dialectical materialism,” which

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purports to “return from Marx to Hegel and enact a ‘materialist reversal’ of Marx himself” via pure idealism, both naturalism-materialism and critical humanism must be rejected, in general conformity with left-Heideggerianism.⁸⁹ Material reality thus gives way to the abstract Real. Such views lead to a withdrawal from any

meaningful praxis, a deep pessimism, and a dialectic of irrationalism. Without ever seriously addressing the global ecological crisis or the class-based struggle against capitalism necessary to avoid crossing planetary tipping points, Žižek blithely declares that “We must assume the catastrophe as our destiny.”⁹⁰

Such irrationalism in relation to the environmental crisis of capitalism is also evident in Žižek’s response to the current

Such irrationalism in relation to the environmental crisis of capitalism is also evident in Žižek’s response to the current growing threat of a nuclear conflict between NATO and Russia in the context of the Ukraine War.

growing threat of a nuclear conflict between NATO and Russia in the context of the Ukraine War. Indeed, today we see a further destruction of reason, the product of a confused anti-humanism mixed with nationalist fervor. This is evident in Žižek’s insistence that NATO should continue to support the war in Ukraine and walk away from peace talks, despite the

⁸⁸ ↪ Slavoj Žižek, “Ecology Against Mother Nature,” Verso Blog, May 26, 2015; Slavoj Žižek, “Censorship Today: Violence, or Ecology as a New Opium for the Masses,” 2007, lacan.com; Slavoj Žižek, *Absolute Recoil: Toward a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2016), 7–12. Although critical of new materialism, Žižek sympathizes with its virulently antihumanist, antirealist perspective.

⁸⁹ ↪ Slavoj Žižek, “Where Is the Rift?: Marx, Lacan, Capitalism, and Ecology,” *Los Angeles Review of Books* 20 (January 2020); Žižek, *Less than Nothing*, 207. Žižek claims that there are four relevant forms of materialism today: (1) reductionist vulgar materialism (cognitive psychology, neo-Darwinism), (2) atheism (Christopher Hitchens), (3) discursive materialism (Michel Foucault), and (4) “new materialism” (Deleuze). Marxism is deliberately excluded from his list. The only route to a viable “dialectical materialism,” he claims, contra Engels and Lenin, is through a “materialism without materialism” via Hegelian idealism taken to its limits and reinterpreted by means of Jacques Lacan and Heidegger. His “new foundation of dialectical materialism” as a nihilistic philosophy of “less than nothing” finds its final justification not in Hegel or Marx, but in Heidegger. Slavoj Žižek, *Absolute Recoil*, 5–7, 413–14.

⁹⁰ ↪ Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 983–84, 207; Žižek, *Absolute Recoil*, 31, 107. Žižek presents the projection of catastrophe as destiny as a “radical solution,” in terms of a philosophical move. Yet, it cannot be seen as either “radical” or a “solution,” but simply a projection of cosmic suicide as fate, given that no attempt is made, in his analysis, to point to a way of countering this “destiny.” For a critique of Žižek’s idiosyncratic and idealist approach to dialectics, see Adrian Johnston, *A New Dialectical Idealism: Hegel, Žižek, and Dialectical Materialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018); see also Adrian Johnston, “Materialism without Materialism: Slavoj Žižek and the Disappearance of Matter,” in *Slavoj Žižek and Dialectical Materialism*, ed. Agon Hamza and Frank Ruda (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 3–22. As Johnston says, Žižek’s work constitutes a “betrayal, rather than reinvention, of dialectical materialism.” Johnston, “Materialism without Materialism,” 11.

growing dangers of a global thermonuclear exchange that would almost certainly annihilate all of humanity, simply in order to “save face.” Others like Noam Chomsky, who have raised the issue of the relation of the growing global exterminist threat, are wrongly dismissed by Žižek as supporters of Putin’s Russia. Instead, he calls for a stronger, global NATO able to fight both Russia and China. We are told that the same “logic” as that governing Russia’s insistence that Ukraine not be brought into NATO and that nuclear weapons not be stationed on Ukraine’s soil, which would present an “existential crisis to the Russian state...dictates that Ukraine, too, should have arms [supplied in its case by the West]—and even nuclear weapons—to achieve military parity” with Russia.⁹¹

Here we see Hartmann’s “cosmic suicide” as the supreme manifestation of the intellect and the will suddenly reemerging in our time. Once again, the irrationalism, cultivated at the highest intellectual levels, that dominated the outlook of the West at the beginning of the First World War, is choking off all rational alternatives. To offer uncritical support for the goals of the imperial triad of the United States/Canada, Europe, and Japan, or to support a global NATO in the late imperialist context, is to identify with the irrational will to power at the imperial center of the world economy, leading either to the eternal return of exploitation/expropriation, or else Hartmann’s cosmic suicide.

Today, Reason demands that both exploitation and expropriation, and the related exterminist tendencies of our time, be overcome. That can only be accomplished, as Baran noted in the 1960s, on the basis of “the identity of the material interests of a class [or class-based social forces] with... Reason’s criticism of the existing irrationality.” The source of such an identity of “material interests with a class” currently lies primarily in the Global South, and with those revolutionary-scale movements everywhere seeking to overturn the entire capitalist-colonial-imperialist system for the sake of humanity and the earth.

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⁹¹ ↩ Slavoj Žižek, “The Ukraine Safari,” Project Syndicate, October 13, 2022; Slavoj Žižek, “Pacifism Is the Wrong Response to the War in Ukraine,” Guardian, June 21, 2022; “Ukraine and the Third World,” Kurtay Academics, March 4, 2022, kurtayacademics.com; Jonathan Cook, “A Lemming Leading the Lemmings: Slavoj Žižek and the Terminal Crisis of the Anti-War Left,” MintPress News, June 23, 2022. On the nuclear dangers of the New Cold War, see John Bellamy Foster, John Ross, and Deborah Veneziale, *Washington’s New Cold War* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2022).

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❖ **About this paper:** This paper was originally published in English by Monthly Review in February 2023.

❖ **Quote this paper as:** John Bellamy Foster: The New Irrationalism — The Jus Semper Global Alliance, September 2023. This paper has been published under Creative Commons, CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0. You are welcome to reproduce the material for non-commercial use, crediting the author and providing a link to the original publisher.

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