

The Loose Mass, The Open Society, and the Co-operative Commonwealth:

Altermodernities Between the Wars

By Randi Koppen

In their book *Commonwealth* from 2009, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri look forward to a commonwealth of the future, a true democracy of the multitude; reconceptualized forms of sociality and conviviality; a new culture and new modes of life, whose realization will require nothing less than “anthropological transformation.”¹ While this new democracy is yet to come, for Hardt and Negri it has antecedents in a partially submerged history of *altermodernity*: a critical tradition in political modernism that proposes different alternatives to capitalist modernity while attempting to circumvent the negative dialectic of modernity/antimodernity. The “altermodern” propositions of three social commentators of the interwar years – Henri Bergson, Walter Benjamin and Leonard Woolf – can be considered in light of this history. Each wrote in utopian terms of a society resembling Hardt and Negri’s democracy of the multitude, yet with distinct conceptualization of the multitude-form and of the productivity (the productive or creative force) by means of which the desired transformation was meant to occur. These theoretical and political differences came to a head in Woolf and Benjamin’s historical materialist critique of Bergson in the years leading up to the Second World War.

For Hardt and Negri, Benjamin has an obvious place in the submerged terrain of altermodernity; they draw on his concept of poverty for one of the two terms—poverty and love—that would be functional to building a common world. The position of Bergson in this tradition, however, is more precarious, and Hardt and Negri would undoubtedly protest at any

designation of his work as “altermodern.” Yet the recent scholarly attempts to revive Bergson as “our contemporary” do so precisely with the rationale that he offers a critical alternative to capitalist modernity and the politics of modernism that allows us to move beyond a current impasse in post-modern political critique.² The Benjamin scholar Claire Blencowe engages with such readings when she points to lines of continuity and convergence between Bergson and Benjamin, arguing that Benjamin makes a “direct and critical contribution to the contemporary attempt to deploy Bergsonism in political critique and to render vitalism sociological.”³ Like Blencowe, I am interested in the conjunctions between Benjamin and Bergson’s utopian projects, a perspective that can be meaningfully extended to take in the thought of the political theorist, commentator, and activist Leonard Woolf. The least well known of our three “altermoderns,” his work, too, has been subject to renewed interest in recent years, in part for the same reasons that motivate the current interest in Bergson: his critique of the oppressive structures and politics of modernity and his idealist propositions for global frameworks of collaboration and peace.⁴ Reading these “altermodern” propositions together, I contend, brings into renewed focus an area of convergence but also the lines of an urgent historical debate that continues to resonate as recent scholarship, while seeking to ground Bergson’s affective ethics in history, continues to sidestep the questions that Benjamin and Woolf’s historical, materialist critique brought out with considerable clarity. It should be noted that my objective in this article is not to rehearse a familiar critique of Bergson as “reactionary” or “antimodern” but, as I have indicated, to revisit a point in time when different “altermodernities” were in the balance in a critical debate centered on the social and economic power relationships that defined modernity and modern societies and on the possibilities for personal and collective transformation that might be activated in a situation of urgent political challenges. Thinking about this historical juncture allows us to reflect on some

abiding tensions in our present relations with modernity and ultimately on what is at stake in a politics of revivalism and return seeking to resurrect and reanimate old political concepts.

Interwar Idealism

The idealist and utopian strains of the interwar period—especially its hopes for global frameworks for collaboration and peace—have recently been given renewed attention by scholars. Thus, over the past decade or so, the work of two thinkers as different as Bergson and Woolf has been the subject of a revival of interest in this light. Both are now being read for their commitment to international institutions of peace and global governance and for offering templates for non-repressive and truly inclusive forms of community and conviviality. This revival of interest has taken place in different fields, and so far, attempts have not been made to read their work together. In philosophy, critical attention has centered on Bergson as a political philosopher, especially his previously understudied work, *The Two Sources of Morality* (1932), which is now read as a continuation of Bergson's practical work with the League of Nations and a source for the Declaration of Human Rights.⁵ In the fields of history and political studies, Labour Party historians and international relations scholars have turned their attention to Woolf, widely considered one of the chief architects of imperial and foreign policy for the British Labour Party between 1914 and 1945, as well as an important early theoretician of the discipline of international relations. Exemplifying what used to be referred to in negative terms as the utopian or idealist phase of international relations thinking, Woolf is now recognized for his theoretical and practical contributions to what would be called global governance, which also included an early involvement with the League of Nations as a framework for a new pacific internationalism of a different order than that on the

Wilsonian liberal capitalist agenda (Wilson, “Leonard Woolf”; Sylvest, “Interwar Internationalism”).

The thought of both Bergson and Woolf was fundamentally shaped by the experience of the First World War, marked by the urgency with which they sought to avoid another catastrophe of similar dimensions. At the same time, their work is the product of the optimistic period of internationalism; the belief in the development of an internationalist psychology and a global politics of peaceful collaboration that defined the years after the war. Both continued these lines of thought into the very difficult and pessimistic period of the 1930s, which seemed no time for ideals of this kind, developing their critique of capitalist modernity and modernist progressivist theory while pointing to ways out of the negative dialectic—the struggle between opposed interests and forces—that marred modern societies. Both thought of human societies as a dialectics of opposed tendencies which Bergson calls “open” and “closed,” Woolf “civilized” and “barbarian.” Both attempted to move beyond this dialectical impasse to new forms of life and new modes of productivity and creation distinct from capitalist mass-production and the oppressive power relations of modernity.

Any reading of Bergson and Woolf as altermoderns, however, has to focus on their differences as much as, or more than, their similarities. Woolf was outspoken about what he saw as the reactionary potential in Bergson’s vitalism. In a highly polemical 1935 attack, Woolf placed Bergson on the side of a reactionary antimodernity, a revolt against Enlightenment reason whose logical outcome was the totalitarian regimes of Nazis and fascists.⁶ Woolf’s argument anticipates Benjamin’s critique in “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” (1939). For Benjamin, Bergson’s nostalgia for a *durée* outside and unchanged by history was politically ineffectual and potentially dangerous, analogous to antimodern

attempts to reactivate tradition as a force of community and continuity, as evidenced in the fascists' endeavors to restore the communal energies of an organic *Gemeinschaft* by means of spiritual renewal.⁷ In Bergson's theory, the transition to an "open" society depended on a creative force based in the *durée* and a principle of love attached to the example of the exceptional individual (the mystic). For Woolf and Benjamin, the real risk was that the community to emerge from Bergson's vitalist program would not be the open society, not genuine multiplicity, but the unthinking mass. As we shall see, their conceptualizations of a transformative productive force were based in the material conditions and available technologies of existing communal and collective practices. Woolf grounded his reconceptualized community in the redefined relations of production and creation he found in the international co-operative movement, while Benjamin looked to the solidarity of the international proletariat and to the productive force inherent in new structures and technologies of perception.

The Renewed Interest in Bergson's Contribution to Global Community

The revitalization of Bergson studies in recent decades owes much to the work of Gilles Deleuze. Thus, if we look up Bergson in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, we find the concept of multiplicity foregrounded, via Deleuze, as Bergson's most enduring contribution, a concept many philosophers today think of as "revolutionary . . . because it opens the way to a reconception of community."⁸ Bergson's *durée*, understood as a qualitative, as opposed to quantitative, multiplicity, unifies two contradictory principles—heterogeneity and continuity—and allows us to think the existence of at least a virtual form of heterogeneity without juxtaposition. In this sense Bergson's concept of duration informs Deleuze's "becomings," and the idea of a genuine multiplicity informs his thinking on the

people and community “to come” (*Stanford Encyclopedia*, “Henri Bergson”). Bruce Baugh ties Deleuze and Guattari’s political philosophy specifically to *The Two Sources of Morality* and the concept of the “open” as opposed to the “closed” society developed in that book. In Bergson’s theory, life exhibits two tendencies, both of which are products of evolution. On the one hand, there is the necessity of self-preservation, reproduction, and stability producing the solidarity and discipline of the group: the closed community that defines itself by boundedness and exclusion. On the other hand, equally necessary from an evolutionary standpoint, there is dynamism, indeterminacy, and change. This second tendency exhibits the open-endedness and inclusiveness that would found the “open society”: a “society of creators” participating in the creative impulse of the *élan vital*. For Deleuze, when the people become a society of creators, the result is a society open to the future, creativity, and the new: an open “fraternity of ‘anarchist individuals’ . . . members are not defined by any actual qualities or interests (family, property, nation, class) but only by their common aspirations to reconnect with ‘the creative effort manifested by life . . . a non-exclusionary . . . ‘community’ [of] individuals in the process of becoming” (Baugh, “The Open Society,” 357, 360).

Some recent readings of Bergson, specifically of *The Two Sources*, acknowledge their debt to Deleuze while taking a different, more historicist approach to the question of Bergson’s contemporary relevance. These readings insist that *The Two Sources* needs to be reread in light of the philosopher’s practical commitment to peace and human rights during and after the First World War, a contextualization that enriches Bergson’s connection to Woolf.

Alexandre Lefebvre’s monograph *Human Rights as a Way of Life: On Bergson’s Political Philosophy* (2013) and *Bergson, Politics, and Religion* (2012), an anthology of essays edited by Lefebvre and Melanie White, both draw attention to such lines of continuity and what they might mean for Bergson’s contributions to practical philosophy as well as to urgent political

challenges. Lefebvre argues that Bergson offers a substantial contribution to the philosophy of human rights even if he is virtually unknown in contemporary human rights discourse, while the premise of the essays in *Bergson, Politics, and Religion* is that Bergson's last book, ostensibly a treatise on morality and religion, "frames a series of political problems" whose point of convergence is war.⁹ Such historical reappraisals of Bergson's practical and political significance find support in Bergson's biographers, Philippe Soulez and Frédéric Worms, who emphasize Bergson's position between idealism and realpolitik, insisting that Bergson was "an effective political actor" on the international scene precisely "because he [was] a philosopher" who embodied, and worked to realize, a philosophical ideal (Lefebvre and White, "Introduction," 2).

Bergson's 1914 depiction of the war between the nations as one of life against matter—lust for material dominance versus the ideals of freedom and justice—resonated widely, striking at "the very heart of the problem of the future of humanity" and thus bringing to light "the moral and political bearing" of his philosophy, as Wildon Carr put it in his introduction to the English translation of "The Meaning of the War: Life and Matter in Conflict" (1915).¹⁰ In 1916 and 1917, Bergson was assigned to several diplomatic missions by the French government, most importantly to the United States, where he was to persuade the Americans to enter the war. As Lefebvre and White have it, drawing on Soulez and Worms, Bergson was selected for this mission precisely because he was a philosopher, "because he could, in a sense, stand above the political fray and reflect back to Wilson his own (i.e. Wilson's) idealized vision of the end of war and the founding of an international community" (Lefebvre and White, "Introduction," 2). Having successfully liaised with the Americans in the post-war years, Bergson continued to work with the Wilson administration to establish the League of Nations and in 1922 was appointed president of the League's International Commission for

Intellectual Cooperation. A precursor to UNESCO, the primary purpose of this institution was to promote the ideals of peaceful internationalism through scholarly collaboration, for instance international exchange of publications and scientific results, or by means of public events such as the famous exchange between Freud and Einstein, “Why War?” in 1932.

According to Lefebvre, drawing on the historian Clinton Curle, Bergson also had a profound influence on John Humphrey, who was the principal drafter of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). From Humphrey’s journal, writes Lefebvre, it is apparent that he came to view the declaration in terms of *Two Sources*.¹¹ Supported by these biographical findings, then, one may read Bergson as a political philosopher whose practical and philosophical work is connected. The political significance of *Two Sources* can be unlocked by seeing it as organized around the question of war and how to prevent it: a text that is theoretically and practically engaged with the transnational humanism promoted by the League and other institutions in the interwar years, offering an explanation for its failures while pointing a way forward.

For Bergson the First World War, whose horror “was beyond anything we believed possible,” represented the ultimate negation of the modern story of civilization as told by Durkheim, Mauss, and Lévi-Strauss: the narrative of development from a primitive, egoistic, and predatory morality to the modern European state as the highest approximation of humanitarian ideals.¹² Thinking of war as a state of exception in a gradually evolving social morality, for Bergson, did not explain why war occurs or how it can be deterred. Nor, he argued, could a sociological analysis of ethics, such as Émile Durkheim’s *Moral Education*, properly explain how, or why, a cosmopolitan, universal humanism would eventually come into being. “Our sympathies are supposed to broaden out in an unbroken progression, to expand while remaining identical, and to end by embracing all humanity,” writes Bergson in *Two Sources*,

with reference to Durkheim's progressivist theory, but we do not "come to humanity by degrees": "Never shall we pass from the closed society to the open society; from the city to humanity, by any mere broadening out. The two things are not of the same essence" (Bergson, *Two Sources*, 27; 223–24). For the Bergson of *Two Sources*, then, the modern narrative of civilization is based on a failure to distinguish between two distinct moral tendencies between which there can be no gradual evolvment or transition: the closed and the open. The evolutionary function of closed morality is social cohesion, which explains why feelings of love and care are compatible with hatred and the instinct for war. Qualitatively distinct from this socially founded moral obligation, however, exists an ethics founded on the creative impulse of the *élan vital*, embodied in historical examples of individuals whose love exceeds the partial and preferential love prescribed by the closed society. For Bergson, the examples of Socrates, Jesus Christ, Joan of Arc, and other "mystics" direct us towards the same potential in ourselves: the capacity to break out of the circle of self-preservation and hostility, to love without exclusion, and to participate in the open tendency of life: dynamism, indeterminacy, change. This, as Lefebvre and White point out, is evolution's answer to the problem of war as laid out in *Two Sources*: "The circle, intended by nature, was broken by man the day he became able to get back into the creative impetus, and impel human nature forward instead of letting it revolve on one spot" (Lefebvre and White, "Introduction," 9; Bergson, *Two Sources*, 166). In place of the quantitative model of social morality, then, Bergson offers an alternative model: the leap into a radically different world; in place of rational ethics, he offers an ethics of affect, love, and human transformation.

What has prompted this reconsideration of Bergson, beyond Deleuze? Drawing on the contributions to Lefebvre and White's anthology, we may sum it up in three points: Firstly, Bergson appeals to a capacity for love that is neither "abstract" nor "sentimental." On the

contrary, it is grounded in evolution and, in Bergson's account, provides the impetus for major contemporary political institutions such as human rights and democracy (Lefebvre and White, "Introduction," 9–10), institutions that in principle can divert war, but for various reasons have ossified in a closed morality. Secondly, Bergson's love involves a form of anthropological transformation that is fully compatible with evolutionary biology. Thus, for Lefebvre and White, "Bergson's originality is to devise an argument whereby human beings transcend the species without departing from animality or biology. The transfiguration of humanity is entirely immanent to life's powers, a fact reflected in the human species becoming creator" (10). Thirdly, Bergson's ideas are apposite because they seem to offer a solution to an intellectual and practical impasse in transnational humanism and human rights discourse. For Suzanne Guerlac, as for Lefebvre, Bergson's affective ethics provides an alternative to the liberal tradition in human rights whose rational ethics, for instance the principle of a universal humanity, so often dissolves under the pressure of powerful interests.¹³ Equally, however, Bergson offers an alternative to a poststructuralist rejection of moral universals by asserting that the open morality and the capacity for non-discriminatory, non-exclusionary love (as much as the closed morality and exclusionary love) are biologically founded. For Bergson's supporters, then, it is his position between or beyond modernism and postmodernism that makes his work pertinent. As Suzanne Guerlac puts it: "Bergson [is] at once nonmodern and contemporary (that is, contemporary precisely in as much as he is nonmodern). . . . [He presents an] intellectual challenge to the politics of modernism that . . . reveal themselves to be entirely inadequate to the challenges of the present moment" (Guerlac, "Bergson," 51).

Lines of Intersection: Benjamin and Woolf on Bergson

We have seen that Woolf and Benjamin's distinct critiques converge on the reactionary and antimodern elements of Bergson's vitalism. In 2005, on the occasion of the first publication in English of Max Horkheimer's historical-materialist critique of Bergson, "On Bergson's Metaphysics of Time" (originally published in Horkheimer and Adorno's *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, 1934), the editors observe "a noteworthy characteristic of the new Bergsonism," namely "that it has proceeded more or less as if earlier criticisms of Bergson's philosophy did not exist."¹⁴ Horkheimer's essay was written on the publication of Bergson's book, *La pensée et le mouvant* (1934), and begins by expressing the author's indebtedness to Bergson's work, which he insists "towers above most philosophical phenomena of the present" and as such "deserves to be taken seriously" (10). However, while Bergson's historicizing approach to the abstractions of mechanical natural science has brought him "to the threshold of dialectics," his inability to recognize the historical foundations of his own metaphysical principles prevents him from placing his research in a fruitful theoretical and social context and thus from recognizing the "historical dynamic" that, in Horkheimer's reading, "changed the meaning of the activist *Lebensphilosophie* and transformed it, often against the intentions of its initiator, from a progressive power of social critique into an element of contemporary nationalist ideology. This transformation of the meaning of principles escapes the author" (10, 12–13).

If Bergson's relevance for twenty-first century moral philosophy and human rights debate rests on his assumed position as an altermodern who connects idealism and realpolitik, we need to consider how far these recent attempts to ground his affective ethics in historical events and practical work in fact serve to render his ethico-political theory ethically and

politically viable. In considering this question, it may be helpful to turn once more to Benjamin's thoughts on Bergson's *Lebensphilosophie* as they appeared just before the Second World War, especially as Benjamin's own writing on modernism can be seen as both inflected by and critical of Bergson's theory of memory and time. Apart from some references to Bergson in *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin's explicit discussion of Bergson's philosophy is limited to the essay "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" (1939), where Benjamin writes of Bergson's *Matière et mémoire* (in words that echo Horkheimer's above) that it "tower[s] above" other philosophical attempts to lay hold of the "'true' experience [*Erfahrung*], as opposed to the kind that manifests itself in the standardized, denatured life of the civilized masses" (314). Benjamin also concurs with Bergson's view that "[e]xperience is indeed a matter of tradition, in collective existence as well as private life. It is a product less of facts firmly anchored in memory [*Erinnerung*] than of the accumulated and frequently unconscious data that flow together in memory [*Gedächtnis*]" (314). Benjamin's critique (which again aligns quite closely with Horkheimer's) is directed at the way Bergson circumvents "any historical determination of memory," thus sidestepping "that experience from which his own philosophy evolved, or, rather, in reaction to which it arose . . . the alienating, blinding experience of the age of large-scale industrialism" (314). What Bergson fails to see, in Benjamin's assessment, is that in capitalist, industrialist modernity, communal and communicable experiences (*Erfahrungen*) have been replaced by a series of unmediated, subjective, and individually fragmented experiences (*Erlebnisse*), relegating the durational to the realm of the unconscious and making of Bergson's project of recovering a fabric of duration little more than a nostalgic dream. For Benjamin, the implication of Bergson's circumvention is a philosophy of experience that ignores socio-historical conditions, and a conception of "action" (or creative force) cut off from politics (336).

While scholars take different views on the nature of Bergson's influence on Benjamin, they agree on two points: Firstly, that the target of Benjamin's critique of Bergson is the latter's lack of historical awareness. Secondly, that whatever insights Benjamin drew from Bergson, such insights were made to serve, rather than detract from, Benjamin's materialist analysis.¹⁵ For Karyn Ball, Bergson's function in Benjamin's Baudelaire essay is to "introduce a pivotal thesis about a vulnerable perceptual faculty under siege by industrialism's proliferating sensory pressures," and to spotlight "a 'complementary' visual experience 'in the form of its spontaneous afterimage'" ("In Search of Lost Community," 151). While Bergson's philosophy remains, in Benjamin's assessment, a significant "attempt to specify this afterimage and fix it as a permanent record," it is "the self-conscious historicity of Baudelaire's lyric" that allows poetry to "self-ironically mirror a historically determined attenuation of perception that an 'ahistorical' Bergson naively enacts" and, through the *correspondances* to gesture past isolated experience, towards *Erfahrung* as a "community-sustaining force" (149–50; 151–53). Probing more deeply into what he calls "Walter Benjamin's Bergsonian image of the past," Andrew McGettigan demonstrates how Benjamin secretly "recruits" Bergson's image, along with the "topology of historical time" set out in *Matter and Memory*, in his own "Copernican Revolution in historiography," whose key operational concepts are *Jetztzeit* (now-time) and past as "image" ("As Flowers Turn Towards the Sun," 28; 25). McGettigan argues convincingly that Benjamin draws on Bergson for his understanding of the relation between past and present and of how the past attains legibility; returns as an "image" in the present under particular conditions of collective experience. At the same time, he is careful to point out that invoking Bergson "should not be seen as contributing to a 'de-Marxification' of Benjamin": "Rather, it specifies the apparatus Benjamin develops to theorize the return of past time in remembrance; as a key to

understanding his concern for revolutionary consciousness within communist political engagement” (28).

Claire Blencowe, in a direct intervention into current neo-Bergsonism, is also careful to insist on Benjamin’s historicist and materialist approach to Bergson, arguing that Benjamin makes a “direct and critical contribution to the contemporary attempt to deploy Bergsonism in political critique and to render vitalism sociological” (“Destroying Duration,” 139). For Blencowe, this contribution comes with Benjamin’s concept of *Erfahrung*, which, she maintains, extends Bergson’s concept of the *durée* and thus “[p]rovides a materialist explanation for the utility of Bergson’s conception of creativity” (139). Like Bergson, Benjamin posits a creative force that is an actualization of qualitative multiplicity: for Bergson, this is the mystical and transhistorical *élan vital*, while for Benjamin, historically new forms of *Erfahrung* are to be found in “new forms of technologically aided perception and association by which the qualitative multiplicity of *durée* will be directly constituted in human experience” (154). Thus, for Blencowe,

The influence of Bergson is clear in Benjamin’s writing on politics. Both posit a creative force that transforms humanity and that is progressive, in the fully normative (though not deterministic) sense of that term. . . . For both, this creative force is an actualization of qualitative multiplicity, constituting a movement from closed to open relationality . . . Both write in utopian terms of an imminent virtual radical transformation of the spiritual and social conditions of humanity . . . The source, mechanism and direction of the aspired for transformation is, however, radically divergent. (152)

The analogies and intersections Blencowe identifies between Bergson and Benjamin's projects of transformation can be meaningfully extended to Woolf's work: all share an analogous conception of human creation, transformation, and community. Their projects evolve from the same historical moment while exhibiting different forms of attention to its material and technological conditions. Woolf shares with both Benjamin and Horkheimer the view that Bergson's theories need to be considered with reference to specific historical contexts and material structures of experience. In *Quack, Quack* (1935) and *Barbarians at the Gate* (1939), Woolf criticizes Bergson's mystical knowledge and the method of the mystic, which in his analysis aligns on the one hand with a dangerous antimodern critique of Enlightenment reason, on the other with the techniques and objectives of propaganda understood as a modern technology of obedience: antidemocratic forces whose destination is the "community" of the unthinking mass. For the contributors to Lefebvre and White's anthology, Bergson's mysticism, in Paulina Ochoa Espejo's words, "cannot be reduced to an ideology appropriated by a leader."¹⁶ Philippe Soulez addresses the question directly: "Who is the mystic then from the point of view of political philosophy? The question arises because by setting the moral level, the mystic exerts undeniable political influence." Soulez's answer is that "the mystic is not the 'leader.' He very much resembles what Rousseau calls 'The Lawgiver.'"¹⁷ Espejo tackles the same question in another chapter of the anthology:

At first it may seem that Bergson grounds democracy on the irrational demagoguery of a charismatic leader. However, a careful reading of *Two Sources* shows that the second source [creative emotion] is not a specific moral doctrine that such a leader could use . . . The second source always resists such exhaustion, because it is an intuited emotion rather than rationally constructed discourse. For this reason, the source cannot be reduced to an ideology appropriated by a leader. ("Creative Freedom," 170–71)

Woolf's polemical attack on Bergson was made at a time when the socio-technological conditions were in place for such appropriation to occur. On the teaching of mystics, Bergson writes that their "method consisted in supposing possible what is actually impossible in a given society, in imagining what would be its effect on the soul of society, and then inducing some such psychic condition by propaganda and example" (*Two Sources*, 65). The method of the mystic and the idea of mystical knowledge is what Woolf aims his critique at, a critique that needs to be understood in view of his commitment during the 1920s (as publisher, educationalist, social commentator, and political analyst) to strengthening democratic citizenship and public opinion, with the aim of transforming liberal democracy into a truer democracy built on socialist or communitarian ideals. Woolf's critique also grew out of his deep concern with the implications of what has been called "the performative turn" in European culture: the valorization of ritual, symbol, ceremony, image, intuition, deep subjectivity, and embodied or somatic knowledge that defined many manifestations of modernist art, literature, and culture.¹⁸ If the modern romance with ritual and mass spectacle (seen for instance in Max Reinhardt's mass productions and the reopening of the Olympic Games in 1896) started out as dream of rekindling *Gemeinschaft* in the modern *Gesellschaft*, the darker implications of such hopes were beginning to enter the public consciousness with the performative interpellation and deployment of bodies by the new totalitarian regimes during the buildup to the Second World War. For Woolf, writing in 1935 and 1939, Bergsonism was a symptomatic manifestation of a broader intellectual and cultural valorization of "body" over "mind" but also, due to its presence as a prominent cultural phenomenon in the British context throughout the 1910s and '20s, a significant contributing factor.

The extent of Woolf's first-hand knowledge of Bergson's metaphysics is uncertain. We know that Bergson's philosophy was a topic of Bloomsbury intellectual and artistic conversations, and that Woolf's knowledge was in part mediated by his sister-in-law Karin Stephen, whose book, *The Misuse of Mind: A Study of Bergson's Attack on Intellectualism* (1922), he cites at length in *Quack, Quack*. Published with a prefatory note written by the philosopher himself, Stephen's book was a sympathetic and insightful elucidation of Bergson's metaphysics, and a staunch defense of Bergson against his detractors. While Mary Ann Gillies may be correct in asserting that Bergsonism as a cultural phenomenon had fallen out of fashion by the 1930s, Woolf's concern in *Quack, Quack* and *Barbarians at the Gate* is with its lasting impact not only on modernist art and literature but also on intellectual and social formations.¹⁹ In Woolf's analysis, Bergson's methods of attaining knowledge (intuition and a deep subjectivity) align him with a broader attack on reason, intelligence, and knowledge—a political and intellectual attack—that Woolf furiously and polemically traces through the works of Thomas Carlyle, Friedrich Nietzsche, J.G. Fichte, Arthur de Gobineau, and Oswald Spengler: intellectuals who in different ways have denied the obligation of intellectual morality and have provided the theoretical basis for policies of war, violence, intolerance, and persecution (*Quack, Quack*, 108–94). The most extreme expression of this attack on reason Woolf finds in the European totalitarian regimes, which suppress knowledge, truth, and information; where reason is a criminal offense; where the rulers appeal to instincts and emotions and to unreasoning loyalty as a defense against the enemy. In Woolf's argument, Bergson's mysticism also aligns him with the techniques of modern propaganda, from the seemingly innocuous means of manufacturing assent that define the mass media of liberal democracies to the "political magic" of the fascist grand spectacle, which draws on a wide repertoire of ceremonies, rituals, and symbols that appeal to instincts and emotions. To demonstrate his point, Woolf analyses the visual and aural impact of contemporary spectacles

and broadcasts of fascist and Nazi propaganda, speeches by Hitler and Mussolini, and the broadcast of the Nuremberg rally in September 1934, showing how their primitive yet sophisticated manipulation of iconography and performance (uniforms, gestures, facial expressions, the swastika, the flag, the beat of drums, and marching boots) function in the interpellation and creation of the unthinking mass (*Quack, Quack*, 37–50). For Woolf, Bergson places himself “on the side of” Mussolini and Hitler in maintaining “that the strength of an unprovable belief shows that it contains an absolute truth,” on the side of “those who hate scepticism and tolerance,” “those who prefer force to persuasion and the authority of an absolute truth to the duty of convincing by argument, those who fear and therefore in the end persecute reason” (*Quack, Quack*, 192). In saying this, however, Woolf does not want to imply that Bergson is consciously on the side of barbarism or fascism:

M. Bergson probably dislikes as much as I do many of the manifestations of the present revolt against reason. But that makes his position all the more significant. In a time like the present, when there is a struggle in the very heart of civilization [the civilized must] stand firm for reason, tolerance, skepticism . . . It is only when civilized men begin to yield often unconsciously to the wave of unreason that the end is near. (*Quack, Quack* 193)

Bertrand Russell’s scathing critique of Bergson’s “irrationalism” in 1912 was widely influential in establishing the view that Bergson’s philosophy in general devalued the place of the intellect at the cost of elevating intuition and non-rational modes of inquiry, a view that the publication of *The Two Sources*, where love and creative emotion are given priority in morality and politics, seemed only to confirm.²⁰ While Woolf’s Cambridge training placed him very much in the British rationalist tradition, it is important to note that his critique of

Bergson, or cultural Bergsonism, is differently positioned, historically as well as politically, from the early denunciations by Russell and others. Woolf's assessment comes from someone who has a fundamental respect for Bergson as a philosopher committed to peace and humanitarian ideals and who keeps Bergson's "The Meaning of the War" in his library until he dies. Like Bergson he is committed to preventing war by discovering its reasons in individual and group psychology. Like Bergson, too, he writes from an idealist stance of the possibility of a radical human and social transformation that would move humanity beyond the impoverished state of a present materialist existence and the dominance of the war instinct. The drive towards war, as Woolf explains it in *Barbarians at the Gate* and other works, is rooted in individual and group psychology but can be turned aside by means of conscious repression and sublimation (*Barbarians*, 159). Where for Bergson, the war instinct manifests itself in the closed society, for Woolf, the drive to war is institutionalized in a social formation he names "barbarian." As in Bergson's theory, the transition to the "civilized" (open) society requires more than a gradual broadening of sympathy, more than Durkheim's rationalist ethics and progressive expansion of civilization. For Woolf, a social transformation from "barbarian" to "civilized" is premised on the renunciation of class privilege and the development of forms of solidarity and cooperation (*Barbarians*, 141–219).

The terms Woolf uses here, corresponding roughly to Bergson's "open" and "closed" tendencies, would seem to indicate a Manichean perspective on history as a struggle between civilization and barbarism. It is important to grasp, however, that Woolf (like Bergson) does not subscribe to a narrative of modernity that understands this struggle in diachronic or progressivist terms (as in the narratives by Durkheim, Lévi-Strauss, or Mauss). Woolf's rhetoric needs to be understood in the context of Marxist tradition, where barbarism exists, not as in the classical Greek concept of the babbling, less than human other without, but as an

internal possibility, an uncanny other within civilization itself. When Woolf speaks of “civilized” and “barbarian” in the years leading up to the Second World War, he aligns himself with Rosa Luxembour’s usage during the previous war when she presents the present moment (1916) as a choice between two directions: either *Barbarei* (imperialism and world war, the destruction of all *Kultur*) or socialism (the conscious active struggle of the international proletariat against imperialism and its method of war).²¹ Woolf’s usage is also in line with Benjamin’s designation of fascism and capitalism as *Barbarei* and his call in 1933, shortly after the Nazi rise to power in Germany, to counter the negative with a positive barbarism, *Barbarentum*, which would create new communal experiences out of *Erfahrungsarmut*—the ruins and waste of commodity culture.²² For Luxembour, Benjamin, and Woolf, then, “barbarian” and “civilized” involve the idea of choice between opposed yet coexisting tendencies, where the possibility of transition from one to the other—from a barbarian to a civilized society—depends on the creative intervention of individuals invested in new forms of sociality.

In short, Woolf’s thoughts on civilization and barbarism shares much with Bergson’s on open and closed societies. This is not to simply rehearse a familiar critique of Bergson’s “irrationalism” or “antimodernism,” but to revisit a point of intersection among three cultural critics at a time of historical crisis. In *Quack, Quack* and especially *Barbarians at the Gate*, Woolf supplements Marxism with a Freudian framework to demonstrate how, throughout history, the dominance of primitive instincts (hatred, fear, and self-preservation) as well as class interests prevent the extension of civilization and human rights to all. The class structure of what purports to be civilized society (for instance the European liberal democracies) by itself represents the negation of its ideals and standards of value, their policies of imperialism and war even more so. Faced with another world war, the choice seems more urgent than

ever. The barbarians are at the gate, in the form of master-slave societies of Nazis and fascists. But, writes Woolf, these societies are anachronisms and will not survive for long. The real threat to the project of civilization is that it is left as an incomplete project: that it is not realized in accordance with its ideals. The community he imagines—against the economic barbarism of capitalism and the ideological barbarism of Stalin’s Russia—is a socialist or communist democracy, which can only come about through communal work: if not anthropological transformation, then at least continual psychological investment in the form of sublimation and repression of those primitive instincts that can only be compatible with an order founded on hatred and exclusion.

Multiplicity and Creativity: The Loose Mass and the Co-operative Commonwealth

Bergson, Benjamin, and Woolf share a hope for progressive political transformation that, for each of them, rests on different conceptions of productive force. When Benjamin and Woolf point to the dangers of appropriation inherent in Bergson’s theory of creativity, it is because they are beginning to see real evidence, in the fascist and Nazi rituals and spectacles, that the forms of sociality called into being by mysticism are not those of the (qualitative) multiplicity but rather of the unthinking mass. Woolf and Benjamin’s thoughts on what Hardt and Negri refer to as the “monsters of anti-modernity”—irrationalism, myth, and barbarism—are in some ways connected to the thoughts of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in the 1940s, when they were struggling to make sense of the mixture of rationality and barbarism in the Nazi regime (*Commonwealth*, 95–96). There is an important difference between the two moments, however: Horkheimer and Adorno, who had “no doubt that freedom in society is inseparable from enlightenment thinking,” “perceived with equal clarity . . . that the very concept of that thinking, no less than the concrete historical forms, the institutions of society

with which it is intertwined, already contains the germ of the regression [its reversal] which is taking place everywhere today.”²³ Thus, to their perspective, as Hardt and Negri point out, even the working-class “projects of freedom and rational social organization” appeared “inevitably functional to the creation of a total, administered society,” hence trapped in modernity’s dialectical relationship to its other, destined to betray modernity’s ideals (*Commonwealth*, 96). By contrast, Benjamin and Woolf both indicated ways out of this impasse. Thinking of modernity as a power relation open to intervention and change, they looked to the material (technological, economic, and sociological) conditions available for such intervention to occur.

The impact of urban modernity, especially the transformative role of technology, on structures of experience and perception, was one of Benjamin’s lasting concerns. In his essay on Baudelaire, he writes of the power of new technologies (traffic lights, telephones, factory machinery) to “subject the human sensorium to a complex kind of training,” and in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” he writes about modern reproductive technologies as at once symptomatic of, and instrumental to, “profound changes in apperception” (“On Some Motifs,” 328).²⁴ Benjamin’s writing of the 1930s, as Robert Lehman points out, demonstrates a pronounced interest in the topic of anthropological transformation: “transformation of the species through the transformation of technology” (*Impossible Modernism*, 142). This interest finds expression in readings of the utopian science fiction author Paul Scheerbart, of whom Benjamin writes, in “Experience and Poverty” (1933), that “Scheerbart is interested in inquiring how our telescopes, our airplanes, our rockets can transform human beings as they have been up to now into completely new, loveable, and interesting creatures” (Lehman, *Impossible Modernism*, 142; Benjamin, 733). More generally, though, the interest in the material conditions for human transformation

informs Benjamin's enquiries into forms of sensory reception that may be grouped under the term *Zerstreuung* (distraction/dispersal): a decentered, distracted reception that is conditioned by modern technology but is also "a covert measure of [the ability] to perform new tasks of apperception" ("The Work of Art," 268). The activities of the gambler, the *flâneur*, and the collector—Benjamin's physiognomy of types—would be exemplary of such reception in distraction.²⁵ So would the "progressive reaction" of "the masses" to a Chaplin film (264).

Focusing on forms of productive force that actualize "community" as a qualitative multiplicity subordinates the forms of perception and experience modelled by the "physiologies" and the utopian novelist to what Benjamin has to say about the relation between technology, perception, and "the masses."²⁶ "The masses are a matrix from which all customary behaviour toward works of art is today emerging newborn," writes Benjamin in "The Work of Art": "Quantity has been transformed into quality: *the greatly increased mass of participants has produced a different kind of participation*" (267). First of all,

the destruction of the aura . . . is the signature of a perception whose 'sense for sameness in the world' has so increased that, by means of reproduction, it extracts sameness even from what is unique. Thus is manifested in the field of perception what in the theoretical sphere is noticeable in the increasing significance of statistics. The alignment of reality with the masses and of the masses with reality is a process of immeasurable importance for both thinking and perception. (256)

Moreover, "reception in distraction—the sort of reception which is a symptom of profound changes in apperception—finds in film its true training ground" (269). What predisposes film for this kind of reception is, among other technological effects, the shock effect of montage.

Equally important, however, is the opportunity it offers for simultaneous collective reception: “Nowhere more than in the cinema are the reactions of individuals, which together make up the massive reaction of the audience, determined by the imminent concentration of reactions into a mass. No sooner are these reactions manifest than they regulate one another” (264). Simultaneous collective viewing provides the “masses” with the “means of organizing and regulating their response. Thus, the same public which reacts progressively to a slapstick comedy inevitably displays a backward attitude toward Surrealism” (264–65).

In “Experience and Poverty,” Benjamin turns to the “barbaric” productivity of the poor found in the ruins of war and destruction. Here Scheerbart, with his interest in a technologically driven anthropological transformation, figures with Brecht, Klee, and other modernists as exponents of a barbaric art that rejects the image of a “noble” humanity to turn to “the naked man of the contemporary world who lies screaming like a newborn babe in the dirty diapers of the present” (733): “For what does poverty of experience do for the barbarian? It forces him to start from scratch; to make a new start; to make a little go a long way; to begin with a little and build up further, looking neither left nor right” (“Experience and Poverty,” 732). The poverty of experience Benjamin calls *Erfahrungsarmut* is the consequence of large-scale industrialism and, more than anything, the shock of the Great War, which rendered the idea of communal experience or experience as tradition meaningless (731). And yet, in the “desert of the real” resides a potential for new forms of collective experience, new forms of perception and creativity, as seen in the progressive response of the proletarian masses to a Mickey Mouse film, a Chaplin movie, or a play by Brecht: technologically mediated, anti-auratic, and non-canonical cultural practices that allow for fundamentally democratic forms of interpretation, co-creation, and critique. The productivity of the new barbarian, as Benjamin makes clear, depends on new forms of sociality as much as new forms of mediation and

perception, more precisely the form of the multitude that Benjamin terms “the loose mass.” Blencowe ties Benjamin’s distinction between the “compact” and the “loose” mass to Bergson’s “quantitative” and “qualitative” multiplicities, pointing out that for both thinkers, creativity is grounded in a qualitatively distinct form of collectivity: a relation that may be designated as “loose” or “open” (148–49). Thus, for Benjamin, the loose collectivity composed by the class-conscious proletariat is qualitatively differentiated, unlike the compact, quantitatively differentiated, mass of the petite bourgeoisie:

The class-conscious proletariat forms a compact mass only from the outside, in the minds of its oppressors. At the moment when it takes up its struggle for liberation, this apparently compact mass has already begun to loosen. It ceases to be governed by mere reactions; it makes the transition to action. The loosening of the proletarian masses is the work of solidarity. In the solidarity of the proletarian class struggle, the dead, undialectical opposition between individual and mass is abolished; for the comrade, it does not exist.²⁷

Where Benjamin looks to the “barbaric” productivity of the poor to make a common world, Woolf turns to a different form of collectivity and the kinds of agency and production inherent in that: the forms of solidarity and social production that were already active in the worker’s cooperative movement. With this starting point, he proceeds to imagine a community that has made the transition from production in the service of property to what we may call (with Hardt and Negri) biopolitical production in the service of the commonwealth, a reconceptualized production, moreover, that also radically rethinks the role of the consumer. As Peter Wilson asserts in his book on Woolf’s International Theory, Woolf gave a great deal of weight to economic factors in the development of communal ideas about democracy,

liberty, and the state, as well as in building democratic and pacific alternatives to power politics. During the 1920s, as Wilson writes, Woolf acquired a reputation as one of the leading theorists of consumers' co-operation, with works such as *Co-operation and the Future of Industry* (1919), *Socialism and Co-operation* (1921), *International Co-operative Trade* (1922), and a long essay on the relationship between co-operation and peace, "The Way of Peace" (1928). Woolf's basic thesis was that capitalism was based on "the psychology of competition," ruthless competition of class against class, individual against individual, nation against nation, which made it incompatible with the aims of democracy and international peace.²⁸ For Woolf, the problem with the different socialist solutions, forms of producer control or state ownership, was that they substituted one type of producer control, one "regime of property" (in Hardt and Negri's terms) for another. Thus, "[The Marxist, syndicalist, etc.] regard the socialist commonwealth as a community of producers and look forward to a new world in which the control of the economic life of the community would be vested in the organized producers as representing the whole community."²⁹ But, objects Woolf, "industrial workers can never be more than a large majority," a majority, moreover, in which men outnumber women and where children and the old are excluded. On the other hand, "every one, man, woman, and child, is in the nature of things a consumer. In a sense therefore . . . consumers represent the whole community in a way in which the capitalists or the workers could never represent it."³⁰ Further, where producer control is inevitably caught up in the psychology of competition, each producer collective seeking to maximize their own interests against other producers and against the community of consumers, the psychology of the co-operative consumer, as Woolf sees it, is economically pacific (Wilson, *The International Theory*, 146).

For Woolf, then, the key to democratic control of industry and the economy resides with the consumer, or rather the practices and models of action established through consumers' co-operative societies. At the time Woolf was writing, in the 1920s, The Co-Operative Society had a membership of over four million and was on the way to becoming the country's largest commercial concern. For Woolf, they provided a template for a redefinition of the role of the consumer and the model for a truly representative democracy: government for the whole people by the whole people. Unlike capitalism and producer socialism, co-operation gave consumers control of what was to be produced, in what quantities, to what standards, and at what price. Co-operators also had control of investment decisions through the annual meetings of their respective societies; they decided who they wanted as managers and elected their delegates to the Co-operative Wholesale Society (158–59). To be a co-op consumer, for Woolf, was not to be inflamed by the desire for consumption instilled by commercial advertising nor to take the passive role of the recipient. On the contrary, it involved taking active part in democratic decision-making, to act in the interest of a community rather than the special interests of a class or a distinct group. As such it was fully in line with the condition of a democracy of the future and with "the democratic mind," which implied:

a belief in and a desire for co-operation in common interests, a desire neither to rule or be ruled, but to act together, as men often do in various forms of sport, on an equality for a common end; a desire to express one's own individuality freely combined with a very large tolerance of the free expression of their individuality by other people; and finally a conception of society as composed not of competing individuals and classes, but of citizens making individually or collectively their distinctive contributions towards the common life. (Woolf, *Socialism and Co-Operation*, 30)

To some degree, Woolf's thoughts on the role of the consumer resonate with more recent theories focusing on the micro-culture of everyday life as an arena for alternative and resistant practices, in particular Michel de Certeau's redefinition of consumption as a form of production, set against the traditional view of the consumer as a passive recipient, a non-creator and non-producer. With the concept "consumer production," de Certeau draws attention to the "procedures" and "tactics" involved in consumers' use of cultural representations and products, "ways of operating" *on* and *with* products and commodities, objects, and spaces that amount to hidden "schemata of action." In de Certeau's theory,

[t]he "making" in question is a production, a *poiesis*—but a hidden one, because it is scattered over areas defined and occupied by systems of "production" (television, urban development, commerce, etc.), and because the steadily increasing expansion of these systems no longer leaves "consumers" any *place* in which they can indicate what they *make* or *do* with the products of these systems.³¹

de Certeau's theory allows us a clearer perspective on Woolf's specific take on "consumer production." As we have seen, Woolf is not concerned with micro-cultural forms of resistance that take the form of "poaching" on the territory of a "centralized production" (de Certeau, *Everyday Life*, xii). He is concerned with the models of action provided by organized practices that *take place*, which may have originated in consumer "tactics" in de Certeau's sense but which have evolved into organized, collective practices with the potential to change (industrial, centralized) production as much as consumption.

In Woolf's theory, the co-operative movement is important not only as a model for collective action but also as an embryonic example of "that psychology of consumption and production

without which it is hopeless to expect a civilized society” (*Socialism and Co-Operation*, 111). Against the “irrational psychology and philosophy of production” that defines modern industrialized societies, where production is regarded “as an end in itself,” where “class is determined by production or non-production and by the social value of the commodity produced,” the co-operative movement has developed a system that is beginning to regard industrial production “solely from the angle” of communal consumption and the common life, of “a minimal consumption compatible with the comfort and real activities of the community” (61). The “real activities” referred to here may be understood as a biopolitical production beyond labor, a surplus production (of knowledges, languages, art, etc.) that create the commonwealth. Once industrial production is regarded from the angle of communal consumption, writes Woolf, a change will occur in the relations between work and leisure, infusing both with aesthetic and social value. In the domain of work, the value of production will come to depend upon “the social or aesthetic value of the product or upon the mental attitude of the producer towards his work.” Similarly the domain of leisure—no longer understood as a period of respite from a system of production—would become a site for social and aesthetic production whose value would feed into the ongoing project of creating a civilized and democratic commonwealth. The outcome of this activity would be an “outburst” of creativity and a complete transformation of human life:

Art, literature, music, science, learning, the drama, recreations, would . . . be completely divorced from industrialism and commercialism, and, since for the first time in the world’s history the whole community would have the leisure necessary for their development and enjoyment, one might look for an outburst of scientific and artistic activity, and a concentration of effort upon activities which make for a humane and pleasurable existence. (*Socialism and Co-operation*, 95–96)

In short, looking to the changed psychology of production and consumption he finds in embryo in the co-operative movement, Woolf imagines a production that is minimal, sustainable, communal—based on actual needs. In the tradition of Ruskin and Owen, he brings an ethical and aesthetic element to bear on the relation between the laborer and his work as well as between the product and the consumer. Production and consumption based on these principles—communal interests, ethics, aesthetics—he believes will release a creative force, a mode of praxis beyond labor that will feed into the ongoing project of a civilized modernity. This is a concept of production that allows the individual to make their mark on the object world—not as a form of domination but as a surplus, an excess of pleasure and play that perhaps recalls the spirit of the Bloomsbury modernists, as it infused both their decorative schemes and their practice of everyday life.

For Woolf, then, the co-operative movement is “the embryo” of anthropological transformation and “a new world” (112). Treating it as such would involve a policy of expanding international co-operative trade, a policy that would be in keeping with the already existing growth in “everyday internationalism”—the development of cosmopolitan (nonstate) organization, the increasingly inclusive and transnational bodies and groups he had studied in *International Government* (Wilson, “Leonard Woolf,” 539; *The International Theory*, 40–41). The world as a vast, complicated network of associations of consumers, decentralized, without exploitation, was what Woolf imagined, an organization based on common interests “not as an abstract and vaguely diffused ideal, but in every part of society and the machinery of society.” In his theory, “such a Commonwealth would be practical, rational, human, and humane” (Woolf, *Socialism and Co-Operation*, 65, 109).

Concluding Remarks

Woolf's policy for a co-operative commonwealth did not materialize, nor did the new worlds proposed by Benjamin and Bergson. Yet, as we have seen, their utopian moment continues to be intermittently revisited by scholars and made to serve in different forms of critical and political inquiry, which brings us back to the question of what such returns might entail and where to draw the distinction between learning from history and reviving the past. There is no doubt that the utopian strains of the interwar years are a source of continued fascination and inspiration, and that the three attempts at altermodern thinking represented here speak to many of the concerns we have today. Nonetheless, each set of propositions comes with its problems; none of them offers a templates for a current theory or politics of altermodernity—least of all Bergson's. Benjamin's and Woolf's critical interventions remind us of the dangers of an affective ethics that lacks a proper historical and material grounding and so lays itself open to co-option by reactionary and oppressive forces.

Each thinker proposes alternative forms of sociality, community, and collaboration that, as Blencowe writes about Benjamin and Bergson, would constitute a “qualitative multiplicity”: an open, non-exclusionary relationality founded on a concept of love, fraternity, or solidarity that suspends the opposition between individual and mass without compromising singularity and difference. Bergson points to a conception of fraternity that is born with Christianity and that translates into *agissant*—an “active,” non-exclusionary love “that would address . . . nothing” or no one in particular and that is tied to the example and persuasive force of the exceptional individual (Guerlac, “Bergson,” 49). Benjamin's barbarian, as observed by Hardt and Negri, is the product of a changed concept of poverty, located in the experience of those who witnessed the destruction of the First World War (*Commonwealth*, xi). And yet the open

relationality of Benjamin's loose mass seems to depend on the solidarity of the proletarian class struggle and as such, in the terms of Hardt and Negri, is still bound by the logic of property. This is the logic Woolf attempts to circumvent when he looks to the forms of self-determination and horizontal organization of consumers who, in principle at least, would constitute an inclusive category beyond gender, age, and class, acting together in mutual interest for the benefit of all.

The thoughts of our three altermoderns also converge on the question of a reconceptualized creative force that expands and extends the range of people's productivity beyond wage relations. For all of them, the transition to a different sociality and conviviality rests on forms of production and creativity that redefine aesthetic praxis along with the relations between production and consumption that dominate in capitalist modernity. As such, their thinking may be understood as inflected in different ways by the tensions between creation, production, and consumption that energize modernist thought and praxis in general. For Bergson, in the destructive contest between life and matter, matter signifies mechanism, materialism, lust for luxuries, lust for domination, while "life's domain" is "endlessly continued creation." As all people are in principle capable of being creators, of participating in the creative power of a deep subjectivity, our everyday contact with familiar objects may be "aestheticized" and "heightened," and so the realm of aesthetics expands to include any experience that enables a participant to see "life" more clearly (Gillies, *Henri Bergson*, 20). If Bergson's philosophy entails an aestheticization of everyday life and a democratized creativity, however, it is difficult to see what that means or how it works. Benjamin is more historically and materially specific when he identifies the creative potential in the barbarian's poverty of experience and in new, technologically mediated cultural practices, even if this is a creative potential that has yet to materialize. Woolf, as we have seen, redefines production

along aesthetic as well as ethical lines—a changed praxis, he believes, that will release a productivity beyond labor and a creativity that will build a common wealth, a common world.

“Just when everyone has stopped believing in them, they begin to speak to us in a new voice.” Nietzsche’s words about great texts serve as a point of entry in Guerlac’s “attempt to reinvigorate Bergson’s challenge to the modern intellectual framework” (Guerlac, “Bergson,” 40). “But,” she continues, “we have to listen carefully.” Of the three thinkers I have considered, Woolf’s voice is by far the least familiar. In setting his work alongside that of Bergson, I am not proposing that we look to Woolf’s interwar ideals for political concepts to grasp the conditions and possibilities in the contemporary world. What I do want to suggest, however, is that Woolf’s work serves to remind us of certain principles that ought to inform any political altermodern project. Identifying the transformative potential of the multitude in “everyday internationalism” and cooperative praxis, Woolf makes rational ethics and practical politics align with idealism and utopian thinking. Further, insisting that the intellectual force of independent rational judgment is instrumental to dispelling prejudice and indifference, his work exemplifies a mode of activism and critique that carries on the ideal of Enlightenment thinking in what Hardt and Negri would designate as the tradition of the “minor Kant”: where the injunction *sapere aude*, “dare to know,” is “no longer the foundation of duty that supports established social authority but rather a disobedient rebellious force that breaks through the fixity of the present and discovers the new” (*Commonwealth*, 17).

Notes

¹ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 2009), 117.

² See for instance Alexandre Lefebvre, *Human Rights as a Way of Life: On Bergson's Political Philosophy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013); Alexandre Lefebvre and Melanie White, eds., *Bergson, Politics, and Religion* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); Bruce Baugh, "The Open Society and the Democracy to Come: Bergson, Deleuze and Guattari," *Deleuze Studies* 10, no. 3 (2016): 352–66; Alexandre Lefebvre and Nils F. Schott, eds., *Interpreting Bergson: Critical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

³ Claire Blencowe, "Destroying Duration: The Critical Situation of Bergsonism in Benjamin's Analysis of Modern Experience," *Theory, Culture & Society* 25, no. 4 (2008): 139–58, 139.

⁴ See for instance Peter Wilson, *The International Theory of Leonard Woolf: A Study in Twentieth-Century Idealism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Peter Wilson, "Leonard Woolf, the League of Nations and Peace Between the Wars," *The Political Quarterly* 86, no. 4 (2015): 532–39; Casper Sylvest, "Interwar Internationalism, the British Labour Party, and the Historiography of International Relations," *International Studies Quarterly* 48, no. 2 (2004): 409–32; Elleke Boehmer, ed., "Leonard Woolf's *The Village in the Jungle*," special issue, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 50, no. 1 (2015).

⁵ See Lefebvre, *Human Rights*; Lefebvre and White, *Bergson*; and Philippe Soulez and Frédéric Worms, *Bergson* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2002).

⁶ Leonard Woolf, *Quack, Quack* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1935), 108–94. Woolf recapitulates and expands on his critique in *Barbarians at the Gate* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1939).

⁷ Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," in *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 313–55; Walter Benjamin, "Theories of German Fascism: On the Collection of Essays *War and Warrior*," edited by Ernst Jünger," *New German Critique* 17 (1979): 120–28.

⁸ *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, “Henri Bergson,” accessed December 14, 2021, plato.stanford.edu/entries/bergson/.

⁹ Alexandre Lefebvre and Melanie White, “Introduction: Bergson, Politics, and Religion,” in *Bergson, Politics, and Religion*, 1–21, 3.

¹⁰ Herbert Wildon Carr, introduction to Henri Bergson, “The Meaning of the War: Life and Matter in Conflict” (London: T. Fischer Unwin Ltd, 1915; Project Gutenberg, 2005), 12, 3, gutenberg.org/ebooks/17111.

¹¹ Clinton Curle, *Humanité: John Humphrey’s Alternative Account of Human Rights* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 6. Cited in Alexandre Lefebvre, “Bergson and Human Rights”, in *Bergson, Politics, and Religion*, 193–214, 193.

¹² Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, trans. R. Ashley Audra and Cloudesley Brereton (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1935; Auroville: Auro e-Books, 2014), 239. See also Lefebvre and White, “Introduction,” *Bergson, Politics, and Religion*.

¹³ Suzanne Guerlac, “Bergson, The Void, and the Politics of Life,” in *Bergson, Politics, and Religion*, 40–60.

¹⁴ Max Horkheimer, “On Bergson’s Metaphysics of Time,” *Radical Philosophy* 131 (2005): 9–19, 9.

¹⁵ See for instance Peter Fenves, *The Messianic Reduction: Walter Benjamin and the Shape of Time* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010); Karyn Ball, “In Search of Lost Community: The Literary Image between ‘Proust’ and ‘Baudelaire’ in Walter Benjamin’s Modernization Lament,” *Humanities* 4 (2015): 149–80; Andrew McGettigan, “As Flowers Turn Towards the Sun: Walter Benjamin’s Bergsonian Image of the Past,” *Radical Philosophy* 158 (2009): 25–35. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, in *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016) point to the Neo-Kantian philosopher Heinrich Rickert as a likely source for Benjamin’s critique of

Bergson. Rickert, whose lecture course on Bergson's metaphysics Benjamin attended during the summer of 1913, "was ultimately critical of Bergson's ahistorical philosophy of life; this criticism is echoed in Benjamin's 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire'" (685n22). However, we also know that Benjamin was dependent on Horkheimer and Adorno's acceptance (as editors of the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*) for the publication of both his essays on Baudelaire. It may be speculated that the proximity between Horkheimer's and Benjamin's critical assessment of Bergson may be accounted for at least in part by Benjamin's need to write something that would be acceptable for publication. See Eiland and Jennings, *Walter Benjamin*, 624; Robert S. Lehman; *Impossible Modernism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016): 156–57. I thank my anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this point.

¹⁶ Paulina Ochoa Espejo, "Creative Freedom: Henri Bergson and Democratic Theory," in *Bergson, Politics, and Religion*, 159–73, 171.

¹⁷ Philippe Soulez, "Bergson as Philosopher of War and Theorist of the Political," in *Bergson, Politics, and Religion*, 99–125, 106.

¹⁸ Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual: Exploring Forms of Political Theatre* (London: Routledge, 2005).

¹⁹ Mary Ann Gillies, *Henri Bergson and British Modernism* (Montreal: McGill-Queen University Press, 1996), 27.

²⁰ Bertrand Russell, "The Philosophy of Bergson," *The Monist* 22 (1912): 322–47.

²¹ Rosa Luxemburg, "The Junius Pamphlet," Ch. 1, accessed January 21, 2020, marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1915/junius/ch01.htm.

²² Walter Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," *Selected Writings*, vol 2, ed. Howard Eiland, Gary Smith and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 1999), 731–36.

²³ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), xvi. Cited in Hardt and Negri, *Commonwealth*, 96.

²⁴ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility [Third version],” in *Selected Writings*, vol. 4 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 269.

²⁵ Howard Eiland, “Reception in Distraction,” *Boundary 2*, 30:1 (2003): 51–66, 62.

²⁶ Lehman writes that Benjamin “develops his physiognomy of types as a challenge to a regnant model of lived experience . . . that of life under industrial capitalism,” positing “games of chance, flânerie, collecting” as “activities pitted against spleen.” As Lehman rightly observes, however, “capitalism does not so readily admit of an outside. [In consequence], the alternative forms of life and experience modelled by the different types are bound to appear both tenuous and contradictory” (*Impossible Modernism*, 167–68).

²⁷ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility [Second version],” in *Selected Writings*, vol. 3 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 129; See also Blencowe, “Destroying Duration,” 148.

²⁸ Peter Wilson, *The International Theory of Leonard Woolf: A Study in Twentieth-Century Idealism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 145, 155.

²⁹ Leonard Woolf, *Socialism and Co-Operation* (London: Leonard Parsons, 1921), 32.

³⁰ Leonard Woolf, *Co-operation and the Future of Industry* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1919), 36. Cited in Wilson, *International Theory*, 158.

³¹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), xi–xii.