

Auguste Blanqui, heretical communist

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Within the history of French socialism there is an invisible, heretical, marginalized and suppressed current. It constitutes an orientation obscured by the dominant tendencies on the left from the end of the nineteenth century until today – tendencies represented by the rival and complementary pairings of Jaurès and Guesde, Blum and Cachin, Mollet and Thorez, Mitterrand and Marchais. If we envisage the history of socialism in terms of a divide between a ‘first’ and a ‘second’ Left – one centralist, statist, anti-capitalist; the other more social, reformist, democratic – it would form a much more radical ‘third Left’ that has always remained outside of the political, parliamentary and ministerial game.

It cannot be considered a group or an organized tendency, still less a party; at most it is an intellectual and political constellation in which the brightest stars are Auguste Blanqui, Georges Sorel, Charles Péguy and Bernard Lazare. In attempting to rediscover this ‘hidden tradition’ of French socialism, concealed as much by the silence of some as by the attempts at ‘recuperation’ of others – such as the ‘second’ Left’s (short-lived) appropriation of Sorel – we have no intention of proposing a new orthodoxy in place of those that already exist. This would be impossible in any case, in so far as these thinkers have between them as many differences as they do similarities.

Nor are we overlooking the serious limitations all of our four authors have in their own way: Blanqui’s putschist impulse, Péguy’s and Lazare’s nationalist impulse, Sorel’s brief yet nefarious flirtation with *Action française*. These ambiguities illuminate, without legitimizing, fascism’s and Pétainism’s respective attempts to seize Sorel and Péguy at the expense of an astounding falsification of their thought.

To avoid any misunderstanding, let us also be clear that it is not a question of presenting this constellation as an alternative to Marx. Against recent received wisdom [*la dernière mode du ‘prêt-à-penser’*], which seeks to reduce the author of *Capital* to a corpse buried beneath the rubble of the Berlin Wall, we are

convinced that Marxism remains (to reaffirm Sartre’s famous expression) ‘the unsurpassable horizon of our time’. The aspirations to ‘go beyond’ Marxism – or to cobble together a doubtful ‘post-Marxism’ – always end up falling short of, and not beyond, Marx with the good old Adam Smith (and his invisible and no less criminal hand), with Locke (and his fool’s contract) and with Bentham (and his well understood notion of utility).

It is, then, as critical Marxists that we are rereading the ‘dissident socialists’, convinced that they can contribute to the enrichment of Marxism and cleanse it of a certain amount of dross. Despite their obvious diversity, heterogeneity and particularity, it seems to us that the four cited authors share, to varying degrees, certain characteristics which allow them to be considered as a whole:

- the rejection of positivism, of scientism, of mechanistic determinism;
- the critique of the ideology of ‘progress’, of an evolutionist philosophy of history and its linear temporality;
- the acute perception of the damage caused by modernity;
- the irreconcilable opposition to capitalism as inherently unjust;
- a rebellious sentiment resulting in the rejection of reformism, of parliamentary cretinism and accommodations to ordinary politics;
- an anti-authoritarian and anti-statist tendency;
- a romantic sensibility critical of mercantile modernity and attracted to past forms of community – if Péguy hesitates between juvenile revolutionary romanticism and conservative romanticism (after his conversion [to Catholicism]), Blanqui, who is inspired more by Stoic and Roman antiquity, is resolutely anti-romantic;
- a ‘prophetic’ style, in the biblical sense of the term, proceeding with conditional predictions and calls to action to avert the risk of catastrophe;

- a ‘mystic’ and intransigent (profane and secular) vision of politics as an action inspired by faith, passion, morals, in opposition to the petty and limited horizon of routine politics;
- an ‘open’, non-linear, non-cumulative conception of events, allowing for alternatives, bifurcations and ruptures.

This entire Decalogue is not necessarily found in each author: such and such an aspect occupying a central position in one may be absent in another. Nonetheless, they share the majority of these basic principles, interlinked by subtle ‘elective affinities’ that give their writings the quality, the vigorous style of thought, the tone that contrasts with the majority of their contemporaries. This little-known socialist constellation appears to bring a unique and valuable contribution – despite all its ambivalences and contradictions – suppressed within the history of the French Left, shaped as it was by its dominant currents under the dominant influence of republican positivism.¹

Auguste Blanqui, prophetic communist and regulated anarchist

The political reproaches often directed against Blanqui are sufficiently well known that it is not worth going over them: putschism, revolutionary elitism, Germanophobia, and so on. And yet his image continues to haunt us: he personifies not only the victim of all the (nineteenth-century) reactions – Orléanists, Bonapartists, Versaillais, conservative Republicans [*républicains d'ordre*] all took turns in imprisoning him – but also the message of his ‘rallying sound’ (Walter Benjamin) that reverberated well beyond his own century.

If one were to sum up Blanqui’s politics, one could say that it is above all, and most significantly, a revolutionary voluntarism, at once the source of his strength and weakness, of his greatness and limitation. Contrary to the Saint-Simonians and, above all, the positivists – those rogues who distinguish themselves only by ‘their respect of force and their care to avoid contact with the vanquished’, who systematically tend to liken society to nature – Blanqui does not believe in alleged political ‘laws’. For him the word ‘law’ only has meaning in relation to nature; what we call a ‘law’ or a fixed rule is incompatible with reason and will. Where man acts there is no place for law.² If this voluntarism sometimes led Blanqui to failure – the armed uprisings of 1839 and 1870 being the best such examples – it nevertheless

saved him from the straitjacket [*marais gluant*] of ‘scientific’ determinism.

This faith in reason and will is doubtless a legacy of the Enlightenment philosophy which pervades Blanqui’s thought. The cry for ‘Enlightenment! Enlightenment!’ reappears throughout the pages of *Critique sociale*, closely linked with part of the illuminist illusion characteristic of and continually repeated by the socialist movements of the period: communism will be ‘the infallible result of universal instruction’. For enlightenment to appear, and inevitably with it community, one need only expel the schools of the ‘Black army’ (the Church) and universalize instruction.³ Blanqui, however, distinguishes himself radically from the sole legacy of the Enlightenment in his scathing critique of the ideologies of progress. Some of his formulations on this subject are surprisingly acute. They undoubtedly caught the attention and aroused the interest of Walter Benjamin, who repeated them almost word for word.⁴

Blanqui in no way underestimates the progress made by science and industry. But he nonetheless remains convinced that in contemporary society all scientific and technical developments ‘become a terrible weapon in the hands of Capital against Work and Thought’.⁵ (And also against nature, as we shall see later.) More generally, Blanqui does not perceive the past as a gradual and linear accumulation of enlightenment or liberties: we cannot forget, he writes, ‘the never-ending series of disasters that span human history’. Rejecting the conformist, positivist and narrow historicism that forever legitimizes the victor in the name of ‘progress’, he pillories this ‘mixture of cynicism and hypocrisy’ for which the victims of the past are ‘dead leaves’ that are ‘used as animal litter’. For these ideologues,

History is sketched out with broad strokes in the most beautiful cold blood and with piles of corpses and ruins. No butchery can raise an eyebrow on these emotionless faces. The massacre of a people, evolution of humanity. The invasion of the barbarians? Infusion of young and new blood in the old veins of the Roman Empire. ... As for the populations and the cities that the cataclysm flattened on its path ... necessity ... inevitable march of progress.

It is hard to know if Benjamin had this passage from *Critique Sociale* in mind when he described, in his ninth thesis ‘on the philosophy of history’, the fruits of progress as a piling up of catastrophic debris that grows skyward, but the similarity with Blanqui’s images is immediately apparent.⁶

The historical process is not, for the founder of the Society of the Seasons, a predetermined evolution, but an open movement that at every critical moment assumes the form of a decision, of a fork in the road. According to the beautiful metaphor formulated by his biographer, Gustave Geffroy, 'Blanqui placed at a crossroads of Revolution the clear and appealing flag of his uncertainty.'⁷ Human history can thus lead to both emancipation and catastrophe.

Humanity is never stationary. It advances or goes backwards. Its progressive march leads it to equality. Its regressive march goes back through every stage of privilege to human slavery, the final word of the right to property. Of course, before returning to that point European civilization would have perished. But through what catastrophe?

This is already the idea that Rosa Luxemburg will formulate half a century later, the idea of the alternative: 'socialism or barbarism'.⁸ In a discussion with Théophile Silvestre in 1862, Blanqui once again insisted on his rejection of any linear conception of historical time:

I am not amongst those who claim that progress can be taken for granted, that humanity cannot go backwards. ... No, there is no fatality, otherwise the history of humanity, which is written hour by hour, would be entirely written in advance.⁹

That is why Blanqui categorically opposes 'the sinister theory of progress no matter what, of continual health' advocated by the positivists, the 'fatalists of history', the 'worshippers of the *fait accompli*'. Positivism is, for him, history told from the perspective of the oppressors: 'All the atrocities of the victor, the long series of his attacks are coldly transformed into constant, inevitable evolution, like that of nature. ... But the sequence of human things is not inevitable like that of the universe. It can be changed at any moment.'¹⁰ For Benjamin, Blanqui's greatness is that he did not believe in progress but in the resolution to end present injustice. Of all the revolutionaries he was the most determined to 'snatch humanity at the last moment from the catastrophe looming at every turn'.¹¹

That is precisely what we call his prophetic role – in the Old Testament sense defined above. It is during 1848 that this prophetism [*prophétisme*] manifests itself in the most striking way. As early as May – a few weeks before the bloody June Days – he was watching for 'the precursory symptoms of catastrophe' and insisted on the forces of reaction's intention to carry out, thanks to the troops of the line, 'a Saint

Bartholomew [massacre] on the Parisian workers'.¹² Incarcerated soon after, he could not take part in the desperate fighting of June – one of the founding events of modern bourgeois society – but his lucidity was not forgotten, notably by Marx in *The Class Struggles in France*: 'the proletariat rallies more and more round *revolutionary socialism*, round *Communism*, for which the bourgeoisie has itself invented the name of *Blanqui*. This Socialism is the *declaration of the permanence of the revolution*.'¹³

Imprisoned in the fortress of Belle-Île-en-Mer, on 25 February 1851 Blanqui sent to his friends exiled in London a toast that became one of his most famous tracts. Translated by Marx and Engels, it was widely circulated in Britain and Germany. It expresses both a brutal critique of the 'bourgeois disguised as tribunes' in 1848 (Ledru-Rollin, Lamartine, etc.) and a prophetic – though conditional – warning for the future: 'Woe betide us if, on the day of the next popular triumph, the forgetful indulgence of the masses allows a single one of these men who forfeited their mandate to return to power!' As for socialist doctrines, 'they would only lead to lamentable failure if the people ... ignored the only practical and reliable factor': force, arms, organization. The keyword of this document is 'if': it is not a question of predicting the inevitable but of revealing a danger and demanding a decision. The toast concludes with these words: 'Let the people choose'.¹⁴

Blanqui's text had an explosive effect in the milieu of French exiles and provoked, as was to be expected, protest and criticism. Putting pen to paper once again, the Prisoner [*l'Enfermé*] explained himself in a declaration ('A propos des clameurs contre l'avis au peuple', April 1851) in which he claimed the title of a 'prophet' for the first time. Recalling his 'accurate predictions' in 1848, he observed:

How many times, amongst the ranks of the people, has 'Blanqui was right!' been exclaimed? ... It has often been repeated: he said it! and this late realization [*détrompement*], this expression of regret and repentance was a rehabilitation, it made amends. But now the prophet is taking the floor again. Is it to show an unknown horizon, to reveal a new world? No, it is to ruminate on the sermons of his club. ... In the face of the dangers that threaten to reappear exactly as before, he raises the alarm: Proletarians, be on your guard [*garde à vous*]!¹⁵

In Blanqui's mind the image of the prophet is no doubt biblically inspired, though in an entirely profane and secular way. There is, moreover, a form of ancient prophecy that he rejects: the jeremiad. True

prophecy is not a complaint but a call to redemptive action. Here is the conclusion of his famous *Instructions pour une prise d'armes* (1868):

It is the stupid practice of our times to complain instead of acting. Jeremiads are the fashion. Jeremiah is found in all attitudes. He cries, he lashes, he dogmatizes, he dictates, he rages, himself the scourge of all scourges. Let us leave the elegizing clowns, these gravediggers of liberty. The duty of a revolutionary is to always struggle, to struggle no matter what, to struggle to extinction.¹⁶

One of Blanqui's most impressive prophecies has hitherto escaped the attention of commentators. Closely linked to his critical view of progress and capital's use of science, it exposes a new danger: capitalist civilization's destruction of the natural environment. The civilized world

says: *Après moi le déluge*, or, if not stated, it thinks and acts accordingly. Can we conserve nature's amassed treasures, treasures that are not inexhaustible and not reproduced? We hideously waste coal on the pretext of unknown deposits, future reserves. We wipe out the whale, a powerful resource that will disappear, lost for our descendants. The present devastates and destroys at random for its needs or whims.

In another passage from the same text, following a reference to the annihilation of the so-called 'primitive' peoples during the European conquest, he writes:



For nearly four centuries, our detestable race has pitilessly destroyed everything in its path: men, animals, vegetation, minerals. The whale is going to die out, wiped out by blind pursuit. Forests of cinchona are falling one after the other. The axe fells, nobody replants. There is no concern for the future's ill health [*l'avenir ait la fièvre*].¹⁷

This warning from 1869–70, which is without parallel in nineteenth-century socialism – and still uncommon for twentieth-century socialism right up until the past twenty years! – has lost none of its actuality 123 years later; one need only replace coal with oil and the axe with the bulldozer to find an accurate description of some of the ecological catastrophes that threaten us on the threshold of the twenty-first century. Blanqui was no doubt mistaken on the time frame – a shortcoming shared by numerous prophetic spirits! – but he foresaw the worrying threat well in advance.

Like all revolutionary prophets, Blanqui has a 'mystic' (in the péguyste sense) view of politics as an action inspired by faith, ethics and passion. This revolutionary faith is radically opposed to the petty and calculating egoism of bourgeois clericalism and its (un)reasons of state. If religion remains his mortal enemy, the revolutionary respects sincere faith, whatever its form or content, in so far as it distinguishes itself from worshiping a golden calf:

The people, whether in their ignorance and ablaze with religious fanaticism or enlightened and allowing themselves to be carried by enthusiasm for liberty, the people are always great and generous; they do not yield to lowly monetary interests but to the most noble passions of the soul, the inspirations of a higher morality.¹⁸

In a letter from 1852 to his friend Maillard, Blanqui does not hesitate in speaking of 'faith' – freed of any religious connotation – to show the importance of socialism for the oppressed classes: the socialist idea, despite its diversity and the contradictions of its multiple doctrines,

has taken hold of the spirit of the masses, it has become their faith, their hope, their standard. Socialism is 'an electric spark that runs through and ignites populations. They only act, they are only set alight by the scorching blaze of these doctrines ...', of these powerful ideas that have the privilege of impassioning the people and hurling it into the storm. Make no mistake about it, socialism means revolution – and only that. Do away with socialism and the popular flame extinguishes, silence and darkness engulf Europe.¹⁹

Is it an idealist view of history that denies the role of material interests in the action of the exploited? Far from being opposed to materialism and the need for material well-being, this revolutionary 'religion' – the term is Blanqui's but conceived in a resolutely atheistic and profane sense – is the conscious expression of it:

Mazzini furiously rants on about the materialism of socialist doctrines, the advocacy of desires, the call to egoist interests. ... What is the revolution for if not to improve the lot of the masses? And what nonsense these invectives against the doctrine of interests are! Individual interests are nothing, but the interests of an entire people elevate to the greatness of a principle; those of humanity as a whole become a religion.

In other words: the 'mysticism' of the prophetic socialists does not rule out a materialist dialectic – quite the opposite.²⁰

The ethical dimension of socialism as a struggle against injustice is also crucial in Blanqui's eyes. One of his principal criticisms of positivism concerns its lack of critical/moral distance from facts:

Positivism denies the idea of justice. It only accepts the law of continual progress (no matter what), of inevitability. Everything is excellent and timely since it takes its place in the succession of improvements (the filiation of progress). Everything is always at its best. No criterion to evaluate good or bad.²¹

Blanqui has, however, the reputation of being an authoritarian thinker. Indeed, his plans of a 'revolutionary dictatorship' or a 'Parisian dictatorship' ('for ten years'), charged with the pedagogical enlightenment of a people still plunged into darkness through the 'general dissemination of enlightenment' – an approach typical of the eighteenth-century encyclopaedists and their nineteenth-century socialist disciples – are worrying. Yet in the same text he nevertheless condemns all authoritarian attempts to establish communism from above: 'Far from imposing itself by decree, communism must anticipate its advent from the free resolutions of the country.'²²

In reality, one finds at the heart of Blanqui's writings an unstable equilibrium between authoritarian Illuminationism and a profound libertarian sensibility, with the latter expressed, for example, in his praise of the diversity and pluralism of the socialist movement:

Proudhonists and communists are equally ridiculous in their reciprocal diatribes, and they

cannot understand the immense benefits of having diversity in doctrines. Every shade of opinion, every school has its mission to fulfil, its part to play in the great revolutionary drama, and if this multiplicity of systems seems damaging to you, you overlook the most indisputable of truths: 'Enlightenment only springs from discussion.'²³

Another surprising feature is Blanqui's attitude towards the enemy: as much as he preaches class war, passionately denounces the exploiters and calls for popular vengeance, he is repelled by the use of terror, the guillotine and firing squads. The worst punishment he proposes for counter-revolutionaries, particularly the clergy, is expulsion from France. On this point he is closer to the Athenian democracy of Antiquity than the Jacobinism of 1794 (of which he is a fierce critic). As for capitalists – 'the race of vampires' – the complete instruction of the people will render them impotent and they will end by 'resigning themselves to the new milieu'. It is not a question of using the guillotine against them: 'Make no mistake, fraternity means the impossibility of killing one's brother.'²⁴

Blanqui is not a utopian, however; he refuses to outline sketches of the future, and he considers the utopian doctrinaires as 'fanatic lovers of narrow confines', 'building over and over again social edifices in which to enclose posterity'. Convinced that future generations must be allowed the freedom to choose their own path, he assigns the Revolution only the role of clearing the terrain, thus opening up 'the routes, or rather the multiple paths, that lead to the new order'. On this last point, he limits himself to evoking the most general principles of communism: universal instruction, equality, association (and not distribution, which reproduces private property). He conceives this communist future in a libertarian spirit of a society of human beings 'nervous like wild horses' for whom 'none of that execrable and execrated thing called government can raise its head'; a community of free individuals who will accept 'not a shadow of authority, not an iota of constraint'. In a more explicit manner, he proclaims in a manuscript from November 1848 (that remained unpublished during his lifetime): 'regulated Anarchy [*Anarchie régulière*] is the future of humanity. ... The government par excellence, the last form of society, is the absence of government.'²⁵

Is it no coincidence that, half a century later, Walter Benjamin was inspired by Blanqui to breathe a new revolutionary spirit into a Marxism reduced by its epigones to a pitiful automated puppet?

Auguste Blanqui, or history against the grain

A transitional figure between republican Babouvism, the conspiratorial Carbonari and the modern socialist movement, from as early as the 1830s Auguste Blanqui exemplifies the realization of the limits of republicanism. Some of his statements seem to foreshadow the transformation of Marx himself from liberal humanism to socialist class struggle. More ruthlessly than Marx, Blanqui rejects the 'burlesque utopia' of the Fourierists who courted Louis-Philippe, as well as the positivist clericalism of Auguste Comte. He anticipates the cross-fertilization [*transcroissance*] of mere political emancipation into social and human emancipation and names the propelling force – the proletariat – even though to a large extent the word still pre-dates the object as it would emerge from large-scale industry. Yet Blanqui remains a revolutionary of the first half of the century, of the revolutions of 1830 and 1848, affiliated to the French Carbonari from the age of 19.

Blanqui's critique of Jacobinism seems original for the period, no doubt because of his Babouvist heritage, but also because he realizes the limits of a certain type of bourgeois republicanism. He thus strongly criticizes Robespierre for having, with Cloots's head, 'immolated the rebel subjects who took refuge in the French Revolution' and with Chaumette's pledged his commitment to the priesthood. Behind the Incorruptible – 'a premature Napoleon' – he already sees the emergence of Bonaparte; behind the Supreme Being, republican bigotry (and the continued theological fetishism of the state).²⁶

A new revolution is thus taking shape that has yet to be named. It is still only a spectral revolution, which Michelet christened 'romantic' in his *Histoire de la Révolution française*, perceiving in the *Enragés* of 1793 'the vague germs of an unknown revolution': 'The classical republicans had behind them a spectre that walked quickly and overtook them: romantic republicanism of a hundred heads, of a thousand schools that today we call socialism.' To a certain extent Blanqui is their heir who seeks to go beyond the idea of an unqualified Republic, of a republic *tout court*, to better determine its social content. He thus writes in 1848:

The Republic would be a lie if it were nothing more than the substitution of one form of government for another. Changing words is not enough; we must change things. The Republic means the emancipation of the workers; it means the end of the rule of exploitation; it means the coming of a new order that will free labour from the tyranny of Capital.

Henceforth, the republic will be social, or it will not be. This social extension of the political revolution echoes Marx's critique (in his 1844 article *On the Jewish Question*) of mere 'political emancipation' in the name of 'human emancipation', and of religious alienation turning into social alienation. Blanqui retained from his lessons with Jean-Baptiste Say a still poorly conceptualized critique of capital. Just as for Marx Christianity (particularly Protestantism) splits the private from the public to allow free rein for egoist interest, Blanqui sees in triumphant Protestantism 'our absolute opposite' as 'the religion of egoism and individualism' – in other words as the spirit of capitalism.²⁷

What force will be capable of taking the new revolution beyond the limits reached by the French Revolution? Blanqui's speech of 2 February 1832 before the Society of the Friends of the People already presents a lucid analysis of the class conflict and its dynamics: after the July Revolution,

the upper class was crushed, the middle class, which hid during the fighting and condemned it, showing as much shrewdness as prudence, snatched the fruits of victory won in spite of it. The people, who did everything, remain nothing as before. But the people entered onto the political scene like a thunderbolt, taking it by assault; and though almost immediately driven away from it, they nevertheless stated their claim as masters, they withdrew their resignation. Henceforth, a bitter war will be waged between them and the middle class. No longer will it be between the upper class and the bourgeoisie, who will even need to call on their old enemies in order to support their resistance [to the people]. Indeed, for a long time the bourgeoisie has not hidden its hatred of the people.²⁸

In his letter to Maillard from 6 June 1852, in light of the events of 1848 Blanqui once again makes clear: 'You say to me: I am neither bourgeois nor proletarian. Beware of undefined words, it is the favoured tool of schemers.' We since know the extent to which the use of neither/nor is characteristic of the bourgeois ideology of the middle ground [*juste milieu*]. But what does 'democrat' mean if not an ecumenical mask to conceal class struggle?

This continually revived myth dates back to 1789. The middle class launches the people against the nobility and the clergy to cast them aside and take their place. The *Ancien Régime* was hardly beaten by the collective effort when the struggle began between the two victorious allies, the Bourgeoisie and the Proletariat.

In *Le Peuple*, Michelet noted as early as 1846 that the bourgeoisie only needed half a century for the mask to slip on its class cruelty. After 1848 it was *a fortiori* necessary to call a spade a spade. However, Blanqui's notion of social class gives him a much broader and more open understanding than the workerism of a Tolain (which prefigures a tenacious tendency of the French workers' movement) who only wants to allow sociologically approved workers into the First International and the cooperative movement. Blanqui is, by contrast, in favour of accepting in all *les déclassés* (we would say the excluded or the precarious), who 'are today the secret catalyst which silently rises the masses and prevents them from collapsing into stagnation. Tomorrow, they will be the reserve for the revolution.'

Clarifying the basis of the class conflict has, however, a major political implication: demarcating the nascent workers' movement and affirming its political independence from the republican bourgeoisie. Thus, during the 1848 revolution, Blanqui supported Raspail's candidacy against Ledru-Rollin's: 'For the first time in the electoral arena, the proletariat as a political party completely broke away from the democratic party.'²⁹

What will be the politics of the unknown revolution maturing in the class struggle? Blanqui categorically refuses both Proudhon's form of libertarian utopia and Bastiat's – 'the most brazen apologist for capital' – brand of 'consenting market'. What was not yet called 'market socialism' could only be, in his eyes, a pact with the devil as capitalist oppression is founded on 'the bloody victories of property'. But communism must also 'beware of the allures of utopia and never separate itself from politics'. Blanqui displays a robustly practical understanding of the possible: we must, then, be wary to not 'dictate the future' and 'avert our eyes from these remote perspectives that pointlessly tire our eyes and thought, and let us resume our struggle against sophisms and subservience'.³⁰ Like Marx, he execrates all forms of doctrinaire utopianism or socialism and seeks out the internal logic of the real movement capable of overthrowing the established order. Hence his mistrust of the co-operative movement for production, consumption or credit, and particularly towards the first, which seems to him as laying an ambush, leading to either despondency in the case of failure, or to a social advancement (or co-opting) that creams off the people without transforming society. Within the hostility towards social experiments of the nascent workers' movement he adds an undeniable dose of

sectarianism associated with a lucid critique of the 'social illusions' widespread within certain currents, like the Proudhonists, who evade the question of political power.

For Blanqui, by contrast, the conquest of political power is the key to social emancipation. His approach is thus the inverse to that of Saint-Simon or Proudhon, who subordinate political revolution to



social reform, the goal to the movement, to the point of dissolving this goal within the illusory gradualism of the process. Blanqui is convinced that

the social question can be seriously discussed and put into practice only after and through the most energetic and irrevocable resolution of the political question. To act otherwise is to put the cart before the horse. We tried doing so once already and the social question was annihilated for twenty years.³¹

In just settling to invert the dialectic of ends and means, of process and action, does he not arguably carry out an oversimplification, and does it prevent him from resolving the crucial question of how to become everything from nothing? It would be futile to look for a critique of hegemony in his thought. Even if the reformism that already shows signs of the bureaucratization of the trade-union movement is the foremost danger, it is the unilateral insistence on the moment of political decision that brought Blanqui – and the Blanquists further still – the reputation of putschists that was spread throughout the First International as much by the old Engels as by Rosa Luxemburg. But the use of this very accusation against Lenin would seem to prove that Blanqui had well and truly recognized, however still incoherently, what would become the senile disorder of socialism.

The other side of this almost exclusive obsession with the revolutionary seizure of power is Blanqui's extreme, even excessive, caution and an evasive vagueness regarding the implementation and rate of economic and social transformation. One should also recall that the ten measures that serve as a programme in Marx and Engel's *Manifesto of the Communist Party* also remain in the realm of necessary generalities. In subsequent critiques of utopia as 'the impractical understanding of the possible', just like Blanqui they want to avoid writing recipes for the cook shops of the future. However, in the circumstances, and unlike the authors of the *Manifesto*, Blanqui appears as a revolutionary from a time of transition, formed in the first half of the nineteenth century during a period in which the critique of capital is still only beginning. Thus, he highlights on several occasions that the 'infinitely more complex' economic domain must be travelled 'with probe in hand'. This caution is very wise. It is consistent with his critique of utopia and with his conviction that it is vital to learn how to run the economy. Worse would be to claim to be able to create a social organization from one's imagination. For Blanqui, ignorance is the 'great barrier'. The priority (the prerequisite) in the aftermath of the seizure of political power is, then, the pedagogical task that the Conventionnels had previously obsessed over. But this unconscious 'educational utopia' greatly overlooks a major question. What form of power will there be while the people come of age? An enlightened dictatorship? In that case, Blanqui does not avoid the impasses of the nineteenth-century revolutionaries Garrone describes, in search of a political formula for transition that invariably revolves around a temporary power exercised by a virtuous elite.³² In 1867, Blanqui described the bourgeois state as 'a gendarmerie of the rich against the poor'. It is, then, as Marx will repeat in light of the Paris Commune, a machine to be smashed. But Blanqui curiously mixes evolutionary metaphors and the suddenness of the seizure of power. Revolutions are, he says, like 'the emergence from the chrysalis'; they 'slowly grew beneath the broken cocoon'. They are also a sudden event, a break, a moment of enthusiasm and exhilaration even: 'One hour of triumph and power, one hour standing tall for so many years of servitude.' The aftermath of revolution is often, however, a melancholic coming back down to earth: 'Men and things are the same as before. Only hope and fear have changed camps.' Everything thus remains to be done. It was only a start, an opening, a beginning. Yet the maturity of the chrysalis justifies the seizure of power that will

ultimately only be a push. The unposed strategic question is thus resolved through the techniques illustrated in his famous *Instructions pour une prise d'armes* of 1868.

The experiences of 1830, 1839 and 1848 highlighted the risk of 'democratic counter-revolution' that threatens the social revolution; the bourgeoisie thus plays institutional legality against popular sovereignty. During the trial at Bourges in April 1849, Blanqui thus explains his struggle during the spring of 1848 to postpone the elections:

If we had elections immediately after the revolution, all that would happen would be that the population would vote in line with the ideas of the deposed regime. It did not concern us; it did not concern the courts, for when you plead before a court both sides have the right to take the floor. Before the court of the people which will judge, we needed our turn to speak as our enemies had theirs, and for that we needed time.

Time! Hence the protests of 17 March calling for the provisional government to adjourn the elections. But nor was it a question of demanding an indefinite postponement; as such Blanqui did not oppose the bill of 31 May when it appeared. He decided to just remain silent, convinced of the inadequacy of the delay; more time was necessary, but how much? Indeed, on 14 March he wrote: 'The people does not know. It must know. It is not the work of a day or a month. If the elections take place they will be reactionary. Let the people awaken to the republic.' We find here the idea of the educational prerequisite that he holds dear.

But the contradiction thus appears to be a vicious cycle. The revolution requires an educated people, but to enable this education the people must begin by taking power. How to become everything from nothing? That is the recurring issue. It is the enigma that haunts modern revolutions. Marx himself, who lucidly describes the physical and mental mutilation suffered by the proletariat through exploitation, posited his response on the fact that the growth and the concentration of the industrial proletariat would translate into a corresponding progress in its consciousness and organization. But Blanqui's silence at the moment of setting an electoral deadline prefigures the conflict of legitimacy at work in nearly all modern revolutions between a permanently exercised constituent power and the institutions of constituted power, between the soviets and the Constituent Assembly in Russia, between committee meetings and the elected National Assembly in

Portugal, between the street and parliament, between the 'havoc' (or the 'scum') that horrified de Gaulle in 1968 and the respectable forms of parliamentarism. 'The worst of all dangers at the time of crisis', Blanqui warned in 1870 following the capitulation of Sedan, 'is a deliberative assembly ... We must put an end to the disastrous prestige of deliberative assemblies.'³³ He certainly did not have the answer. Nonetheless, he put his finger on the essential fact that a new legal order is not conceived in the continuity of the old legal order. There is no authentic revolution without rupture, without passing through a state of emergency, without suspending the old laws, without the sovereign exercise of the constituent power.

As early as 1836 Blanqui had declared in a speech that for a long time remained unpublished:

Citizens, we have in mind less a political change than an overhaul of society. The extension of political rights, electoral reform and universal suffrage can all be excellent things but only as means, not as ends. Our goal is the equal distribution of the costs and the profits of society; it is the complete establishment of the reign of equality. Without this radical reorganization all changes in the form of government would only be lies, all revolutions, charades for the benefit of an ambitious few.³⁴

In 1848 he proclaimed: the conflict of 1793 'has just resumed'. In the meantime, the tricolour had been sullied so the time had come to show one's true colours, to move to the red flag. The bourgeoisie had even usurped the beautiful name 'republican' and the revolutionary motto, but 'fortunately it rejected our flag, which was a mistake: it remains ours. Citizens, the Mountain is dead! To socialism, its sole heir!³⁵ The toast sent from Belle-Île which inspired Marx and Engels subscribed to the same logic in exposing the responsibility of the provisional government and the bourgeois liberals.³⁶ The text indeed announces a break that draws lessons from events: 'it is not enough that the fraudsters of February be permanently ejected from the Hôtel de Ville; we must guard against new traitors.' The reaction had only fulfilled its vocation of executioner [*d'égorgeuse*].

It is worth citing this famous toast at length:

What danger threatens the Revolution of tomorrow? The danger that shattered that of yesterday: the deplorable popularity of the bourgeois disguised as tribunes.... The provisional government killed the revolution; it is upon its head that the responsibility for all the disasters, the blood of so many thousands of victims must fall. The reaction only fulfilled its vocation in cutting the throat of democracy. The crime is that of the traitors, those

the people had trusted and accepted as guides, who delivered them to the reaction.... Woe betide us if, on the day of the next popular triumph, the forgetful indulgence of the masses allows a single one of these men who forfeited their mandate to return to power! Should that recur, the revolution would be over. Let the workers forever have before their eyes this list of accursed names, and if ever one should appear in a post-insurrectionary government, let them cry out as one: treason! ... Governments brought to power by the proletariat would be treacherous if they do not immediately implement: (1) the disarmament of the bourgeois guards; (2) the arming and organization of all workers into a national militia. There are undoubtedly many other essential measures, but they would naturally emerge from this first act as the prerequisite guarantee, the only guarantee of security for the people But for the proletarians who allow themselves to be distracted by ridiculous parades through the streets, by planting the trees of liberty, by the sonorous words of lawyers, there will first be holy water, then insults, finally bullets – and destitution forever. Let the people choose!³⁷

Can one find here evidence of the putschist Blanqui? In his 1895 'Introduction' to *The Class Struggles in France*, Engels writes: 'The time of surprise attacks, of revolutions, carried through by small conscious minorities at the head of unconscious masses, is past.'³⁸ Rosa Luxemburg also reproached Lenin for his Blanquism. She strongly criticized the Blanquist manifesto of 1874, *Aux Communeux*, in which 'daily activity becomes mere speculation about the impending "outbreak" which will immediately usher in the social transformation.'³⁹ Trotsky and Daniel Guérin added their voices to this critical chorus from the perspective of self-emancipation. Blanqui certainly exemplifies a period of transition, of the birth and education of the workers' movement. But it would be wrong to forget that he is also the link between two periods. Despite his limits and shortcomings, it is not by coincidence or leniency that Marx always treated him with respect. Thiers knew well, Marx affirmed, that to release Blanqui from prison 'would give the Commune a head'. Perhaps with him the Commune would have marched on Versailles when the time was right and would have been bold enough to seize the reserves of the Bank of France. At the decisive moment, audacity and initiative are necessary. Marx was thus not mistaken when he wrote in the aftermath of 1848 that for communism and the declaration of permanent revolution the bourgeoisie had invented the name of Blanqui. One could not offer a more beautiful tribute to the Prisoner [*l'Enfermé*].

With Blanqui, the strategy of future revolutions is what falters, clumsily posing questions to which it still responds with the techniques and conspiracies of an era that is coming to an end. In 1830, only popular fervour was needed to overthrow 'a power terrified by armed uprising'. But a 'Parisian insurrection repeating the old mistakes today no longer has any chance of success', the old fighter recognized in 1868 in his *Instructions*. In 1848 the people had won by the 'method of 1830' but was defeated in June 'because of lack of organization'. For the army only has two advantages over the people: the chassepot rifle and organization. One could not therefore remain static and 'perish by the absurd' in fearing the Haussmannian transformation of Paris. One had to dare to take the initiative, to take the offensive.

Hence Blanqui's virulence towards positivist sociology, which is essentially anti-strategic. Even though 'in the trial of the past before the future, history is the judge and the verdict almost always an iniquity', 'the appeal remains forever open'. A theory of order and of orderly progress, of progress without revolution, positivism is an 'execrable doctrine of historical fatalism' elevated to a religion. However, 'the sequence of human things is not inevitable like that of the universe, it can be changed at any moment.'

At any moment! Each second, Benjamin will add, is a narrow door through which the Messiah can emerge. Against the dictatorship of the *fait accompli*, for Blanqui 'Only the chapter of bifurcations remains open to hope.'⁴⁰ Against 'the mania of [continuous] progress' and 'the infatuation with continuous development', the eventful irruption of the possible within the real was called revolution. The debate overriding history laid out the conditions of a strategic, and non-mechanistic, 'homogenous and empty' temporality.

Translated by Philippe Le Goff

Notes

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1. 'With Sorel, with Lazare, Péguy is the exception to the oppressive scene of French positivism' (Daniel Bensaïd, *La Discordance des temps. Essais sur les crises, les classes, l'histoire*, Éditions de la Passion, Paris, 1995, p. 206).
2. Auguste Blanqui, *Critique sociale*, Volume I: *Capital et Travail*, Alcan, Paris, 1885, pp. 41–5; and V.P. Volguine, 'Les idées politiques et sociales de Blanqui', in *Auguste Blanqui. Textes choisis*, ed. V.P. Volguine, Éditions sociales, Paris, 1955, pp. 29, 162.
3. Blanqui, *Critique sociale*, in *Auguste Blanqui. Textes choisis*, pp. 148–52.
4. On the elective affinities between Benjamin and Blanqui, see Miguel Abensour's beautiful text, 'W. Benjamin entre mélancolie et révolution. Passages Blanqui', in Heinz Wismann, ed., *Walter Benjamin et Paris*, Éditions du Cerf, Paris, 1986.
5. Blanqui, *Critique sociale*, p. 74.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 144, 158.
7. Gustave Geffroy, *L'Énfermé*, vol. I, Éditions G. Crès et Cie, Paris, 1926, p. 65. This book was one of Walter Benjamin's principal sources on Blanqui.
8. Blanqui, 'Qui fait la soupe doit la manger' (1834), in *Critique sociale*, p. 128.
9. Cited in Gustave Geffroy, *L'Énfermé*, vol. II, Éditions G. Crès et Cie, Paris, 1926, pp. 19–20.
10. 1869 manuscript, published under the title 'Contre le Progrès', in Auguste Blanqui, *Instructions pour une prise d'armes, L'Éternité par les astres et autres textes*, ed. Miguel Abensour et Valentin Pelosse, Éditions de la Tête de Feuille, Paris, 1972, pp. 103–5.
11. Walter Benjamin, 'Central Park', in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, Volume 4: 1938–1930, trans. Edmund Jephcott et al., ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, Belknap/Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA and London, 2003, p. 188.
12. Blanqui, *Auguste Blanqui. Textes choisis*, p. 119.
13. Karl Marx, *The Class Struggles in France 1848 to 1850*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1972, p. 117; emphasis in original.
14. Blanqui, *Auguste Blanqui. Textes choisis*, pp. 122–4.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 125.
16. *Ibid.*, 219–20.
17. Blanqui, *Critique sociale*, pp. 141–2, 159.
18. Blanqui, 'Discours à la Société des amis du peuple (2 février 1832)', in *Auguste Blanqui. Textes Choisis*, p. 93.
19. Blanqui, 'Lettre à Maillard', in *Auguste Blanqui. Textes Choisis*, p. 129.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 138–9.
21. Blanqui, 'Contre le positivisme', in *Instructions pour une prise d'armes*, p. 110.
22. Blanqui, *Critique Sociale*, pp. 166–7.
23. Blanqui, 'Lettre à Maillard', p. 130.
24. Blanqui, *Critique Sociale*, p. 153.
25. *Ibid.*, pp. 153, 160; and Auguste Blanqui, *Critique sociale*, Volume II: *Fragments et notes*, Alcan, Paris, 1885, pp. 115–16. The passage from 1848 is cited by Abensour and Pelosse in their afterword to *Instructions pour une prise d'armes*, pp. 208–9.
26. See Louis Auguste Blanqui, *Écrits sur la révolution*, ed. Arno Munster, Galilée, Paris, 1977.
27. *Veillées du Peuple* 2, March 1850.
28. Blanqui, *Écrits sur la révolution*, p. 75.
29. Maurice Dommanget, *Blanqui*, EDI, Paris, 1970, p. 21.
30. Cited in *ibid.*, p. 75.
31. Letter from November 1879, cited in *ibid.*, p. 54.
32. Alessandro Galante Garrone, *Philippe Buonarroti et les révolutionnaires du XIXe siècle*, Champ Libre, Paris, 1975.
33. He said this while the government of national defence that succeeded the Empire wanted to convoke an assembly in order to form a 'conventional government'.
34. Blanqui, *Écrits sur la révolution*, p. 75.
35. This appeal was made on 28 November 1848 from the dungeons of Vincennes where Blanqui was held.
36. See the correspondence between Marx and Engels from 10 February 1851.
37. See Dommanget, *Blanqui*.
38. Frederick Engels, 'Introduction', in Marx, *The Class Struggles in France*, p. 22.
39. Rosa Luxemburg, 'In Memory of the Proletariat Party' (1903), www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1903/02/proletariat-party.htm.
40. Cf. Louis-Auguste Blanqui, *Eternity by the Stars*, trans. Frank Chouraqui, Contra Mundum Press, New York and Berlin, 2013, p. 147.