Left with TINA: Art, Alienation and Anti-Communism

Angela Dimitrakaki

Abstract: The article traces the haunting of the contemporary art field by a post-1989 cultural and political imaginary captured in Douglas Coupland's novel *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (1991). This was a formative literary work for its anti-work stance but also the narrativisation of withdrawal in awe of processes of acceleration that saw production principles translating into "dazed and confused" lifestyles. The preference of Gen-Xers for "microcosms", where withdrawal encountered low-fi collectivism, became more prevalent in subsequent decades and aligned with a democracy realised, and idealised, as the politics of "anti" (including anti-fascism) – exemplified in the art field in its association with an ethical left. Constant and glorified antagonisms join the liberal art field to the social field, forever re-scripting 'anti' as TINA – the principle that "there is no alternative". TINA, it is argued, is assuming specific figurations within the largely left-inclined art terrain where commoning practices remain cut off from the propositional politics of communism while, both within and beyond the art field, technophilia is legitimised left and right as a substitute for the desire for communism. The main theses of the article are that: (a) such developments are intertwined with a political process of struggle that delivers alienation as their main outcome – that is, alienation from an imagined endpoint of the struggle and (b) that such alienation cannot be considered separately from the hegemony of acceleration in light of the traumatic withdrawal from, and of, communism and capitalism's continuous re-working of prefigurative anti-communism.

A post-1989 transition: Generation X as a passage from the proletariat to the precariat

In the early 1990s, Douglas Coupland's *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (1991) captured the state of disaffection that defined a transnational western youth stretching from Canada to Greece. A selection of the novel's chapter titles and slogans, which adorned the margins of its pages as an aesthetic hangover from yesterday's postmodernism, are revealing: (Titles) *Our parents had more. Quit your job. Purchased experiences don't count. Remember Earth Clearly. Define normal. Trans form. Why am I poor?* (Slogans) *Semi-Disposable Swedish Furniture. Economy of Scale is Ruining Choice. Eroticise Intelligence. Air Family: Describing the false sense of community experienced among coworkers in an office environment. You might not count in the new orde*r. And, importantly: *Rebellion postponement.*

Focused on labour, typically marginalised in the visual arts and literature of the postmodern 1980s, Coupland had, nonetheless, intuitively moved his narrativisation of discontent from the industrial proletariat to the service and experience economy in post-Fordism. This is where we find the novel's protagonists, ready to drop out. If in 1967 Roger Zelazny's *Lord of Light* provided the salient science-fiction/fantasy reference to accelerationism, where the "Accelerationists" wish to enlighten a "primitive" agrarian, non-Earth society through the speedy introduction of technology, by 1991 accelerationism had migrated into a novel title of a work that intimated to its readers the lived reality, dilemmas and sense of earthly history of a post-1989 generation. At first sight, this generation embodied the collapse of American-Dream capitalism; and at second sight (induced by the novel's subtitle), it appeared trapped in the vertigo of speed as capitalism's best, new lifestyle – generating magazine titles such as *Dazed and Confused* (which appeared also in 1991). But the generational trauma lay elsewhere. Just before the global financial crisis of 2008, a Gen-Xer (Neate 2007) reflected on what was his generation's "Vietnam" and answered "the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Eastern Bloc", connecting this retrospective wisdom with how and why Coupland's novel became the bible of post-1989 western youth, self-diagnosed with "career insecurity" and above all "alienation". In the wake of this collapse, *Generation X* perceived and described capitalism's full embracing of accelerated production sold as ultimate freedom – a state of affairs from which the 1990s youth dis-identified by becoming, or at least posing as, "slackers" and "idlers": the iconic magazine *The Idler* was founded in 1993 (which, as Wikipedia informs us, infused its commitment to idling as a life goal with "pre-industrial revolution idealism"). Understandably, the terms in which this dis-identification from the status quo was expressed were not conducive to revolutionary action: "rebellion postponement".

As the 1990s advanced, the anti-globalisation movement opposing G7, the IMF and the World Bank mobilised only part of this disaffected youth, setting the tune to the oppositional

politics of "anti", while the suspicion that "you might not count in the new world order" became a certainty in the advent of "the precariat" of the early 2000s (Standing 2011), so familiar to the art world, as suggested by a voluminous art literature (indicatively, see Abbing 2002; Aranda et al. 2011). A generation less bonded by birth date and more by a shared historical experience of redundancy, the precariat included anyone from students trapped in unpaid internships, the "economically active" trapped in job poverty, pensioners robbed of their pensions, not to mention those hit by capital's commitment to expelling labour – associated with accelerated automation by Jeremy Rifkin's *The End of Work* in 1995 but reviewed in terms of more but worse jobs by contemporary Marxists (see Moody 2018). The precarious were forced to take louder action in their confrontation with the intersecting and varied forces sustaining neoliberalism and its political outcomes. Who does not remember 2011 as the year of the protester, as per the *TIME* magazine cover? Insurgencies were noted across the best part of the globe. Hopes arose. In 2012, Jodi Dean would write about Occupy in terms of offering the outline of a new party: "the remarkable rupture the movement effects arises out of its organisation of a radical collective response to capitalism" (Dean 2012, 246). In January 2015, a coalitional "radical left" party drawn from social movements and headed by a late Gen-Xer (Alexis Tsipras, age 15 when the novel came out) seasoned in the 1990s student uprisings, became government in Greece on which a very dirty debt game was, and is, being played. In 2019, hardly anyone needs to be reminded what the fate of Occupy and the party of Syriza has been. In both cases, considerable and diverse forms of violence – from bulldozers to capital controls – were exercised to make the insurgents capitulate. If such a development was up to a point predictable, the basic lesson to be learned is that that mobilisations relying on collectivism and scripted merely as oppositional politics tend to not deliver, with the anti-globalisation movement being already symptomatic of the limitations of an "anti" political culture and carrying the GenXers' alienation – an *anti-work stance without an alternative* – at its core. The principal contention of this article is that this complex configuration of a political impulse premised on "without" and witnessed, at the very least, in the western 1990s still haunts what Fredric Jameson identified as a historically shaped "political unconscious", arguing already at the dawn of the 1980s that:

> […] a Left which cannot grasp the immense Utopian appeal of nationalism (any more
> that it can grasp that of religion or of fascism) can scarcely hope to 'reappropriate' such
> collective energies and must effectively doom itself to political impotence (Jameson
> 1981, 298).

In 2019, Jameson's words can be rethought as a warning to the left – a warning that the left ignored. As the second decade of the 21st century is drawing to a close, nationalism, religion, and updated iterations of fascism are a winning political formula filling the void of a so-called

"utopian" vision that the left abandoned in succumbing to the historical pressures of the 1989 trauma.

The 'anti' struggles

Yet the world (read: history) did not end with these and similar containments. The anti-capitalist struggle goes on as part of a wider political culture attached to what we could call "opposition politics" or "politics of response" to the phenomenal range of offensives launched by the *status quo*: police brutality, low pay, debt, privatisation of resources, environmental destruction, attacks on reproductive rights, welfare, and education; border fortification and new concentration camps; structural adjustment policies, settler-colonialism and land grabbing, and so on. All these, and more, are vehemently opposed. It would be disingenuous to say that the left has given up. Yet my main tenet in this exposition (as part of a broader, incomplete enquiry) is that the historically specific articulation of this struggle as a political process premised on opposition, or "anti" politics, is but another expression of the angst-ridden withdrawal at the heart of the post-1989 political impulse. It is an expression that makes, in fact, this angst-ridden withdrawal less and less recognisable, more and more disavowed – *an alienation of the alienation*, if you will – and threatening to hollow out the struggle in terms of an updated Sisyphus parable: a project of estrangement between *the actually existing subject-in-struggle* and *the actually non-existing end-point of the struggle.*

Gen-X lasted very little, the short '90s, a threshold decade with "change" on the agenda: this is when the women of Eastern Europe were instructed to move speedily from feminism to post-feminism so as to catch with a particular expression of Western hegemony serving the interests of capital in its most powerful global moment (Dimitrakaki 2000), given the feminisation of labour and of poverty that was underway and the analysis of which required an updated rather than a dead feminism; this is when, in the concluding chapter of his highly influential study *The Return of the Real*, American art historian Hal Foster detected the speedy return of a fascist subject in electronic culture (Foster 1996); this is when those who followed upon a defeated, dispersed, pacified or even suburbanised, and eventually indebted, proletariat would exorcise their alienation from a world in which they "did not count" by seeking refuge into "microcosms". In 1997, I described my own alienated microcosm, an Athenian communal apartment the residents of which shunned both their immediate urban reality and the global whirlpool outside the apartment as alien – in the semi-autobiographical novel *Antarctica*. But as regards the art field, French curator Nicolas Bourriaud's "microcosms" of interpersonal relations re-purposed alienation as pragmatism conducive to "better living" (Bourriaud 2002), renewing thus art's promise of de-alienation in a surprising way that captured the art field's imagination.

As a trope for turn-of-the century living, microcosms proved enduring: preserving collectivity in an elementary form while allowing for atomised *ennui*, they legitimised further an articulation of the social through "different" and, why not, antithetical goals. The ongoing mutation of feminism into plural "feminisms", strongly present since the 1990s, is but an example – where, for instance, neoliberal feminism could forever run in parallel with anti-capitalist or Black feminism. Justifying the co-habitation of microcosms, "difference" and "diversity" became the buzzwords of the liberal West and its "healthy" democracy where "political correctness" was prescribed as the medication of choice for addressing chronic antagonisms. As divisions deepened and antagonisms became exacerbated, microcosms pulsating around the negative space of the "postponed rebellion" eventually flourished into the all-engulfing culture of "anti" politics. In environments defined by steep divides, such as crisis-ridden Athens, this is plain for all to see – from the city's now ubiquitously marked walls (with people coming from all over the world to stamp their "anti" as graffiti), to a parliament of regular fierce debates, to endless issue-based street protests (on "issues" that can range from the abhorrent "accidental" public lynching of an HIV-positive gay activist to sector-specific strikes over pay), to packed art events of heightened affect and deferred effect: the participants' raw emotions and agitation seldom translate into actual change.

Given the above, it strikes one as less of a coincidence that the Athens Biennial 2018 edition came under the theme and title of ANTI[1]. The Athens Biennial 2018 theme became known to me through a controversy carried out through the social media and the international art press and involving two invited artists: Luke Turner withdrew from ANTI after the Athens Biennial refused to drop Daniel Keller, who had reportedly abused Turner on Twitter in support of artist Deanna Havas (not invited to the Biennial), known for her alt-right posturing – Havas had "liked" an image where a far-right symbol subverted an anti-Trump piece by Turner. This tragedy of tweets has many jaw-dropping aspects that relate to our proliferating "anti" culture – especially the gluing of emancipatory politics (in this case, feminism) to whatever reactionary posturing: in his tweets, Keller repeatedly stated that he was defending a "woman artist" drawn from "poverty" (read: working class) and abused by an established male artist. Yet this woman artist's tweets included "Bannon is cool" as well as her wish to issue "a

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[1] I was unaware of the Athens Biennial 2018's title ANTI when I started working on an earlier version of this paper on "anti" politics upon the invitation of Kunsthalle Wien to contribute to Antarktika: A Symposium on Alienation, 4-6 October 2018, details of which can be found at http://kunsthallewien.at/#/en/events/antarctica-symposium-alienation-2. For a summary of the symposium, see Chwatal, Christoph. 2018. "Notes on Antarctica: A Symposium of Alienation." *Kunsthalle Wien Blog*, October 12, http://kunsthallewien.at/#/blog/2018/10/notes-antarctica-symposium-alienation.

fatwa on socialist students" (a selection was wisely anthologised by Turner on this webpage: http://luketurner.com/Deanna_Havas/).

Following the social media heat, the controversy quickly unfolded as a questioning over the role of an art institution in the specific form of alienation known as the aestheticisation of politics – with the crux of the matter being that this could apply to *any* politics. Critics of the Athens Biennial's stance in the controversy took issue with its very focus on "anti":

> The Biennial's vision of "ANTI" […] as an "attitude", as non-conformity detached from any definite political orientation, and of "marginality" abstracted from social history, is presented as a daring transgression of rigidified political correctness. It is in fact a badly written celebration of the "pleasure" of political centrism. […] ANTI begins with a list of places where middle-class artists go […]: "[T]he gym, the office, the tattoo studio, the dating website, the migration office, the shopping mall, the nightclub, the church, the dark room" (SDLD50 2018).

And the critics, the London-based anti-fascist group SDLD50 that in 2017 had led the protests against gallery LD50's platforming of neo-reactionaries, conclude:

> They [the Biennial] say that "ANTI is not a neutral discussion platform but an agonistic space hosting different approaches on how to deal with ominous tendencies in politics and culture. Diverse voices are essential to initiate a meaningful discussion on how to combat such issues. Dealing with these controversial issues is the exact core of the conceptual framework of the exhibition and denotes the urgency of ANTI". But all that this amounts to is yet another confirmation of the disabling self-regard of the bourgeois arts professional for whom nothing is more urgent, or more terrifyingly under threat, than the "diverse", "meaningful", "controversial", and "agonistic" sound of their own voice, along with all of the vulnerable adjectives that they are paid by the word to say it (SDLD50 2018).

The crucial question for SDLD50 is one of *strategy*: anti-fascists in the art field must prioritise the material impact felt by those oppressed and destroyed by such hatred. SDLD50 accused the Athens Biennial that rather than doing that, it adopted the liberal strategy of dialogue – effectively, a dialogue among the proliferating "anti" – thus offering public visibility to positions that can range from the "non-explicitly anti-fascist" to the "fascist-curious", to the "crypto-fascist" (to my knowledge, the Biennial would exclude self-identified fascists). In short, SDLD50 implicitly charged the Biennial with *replicating the model of representative parliamentary democracy* where a spectrum of fascist-related political parties such as Golden Dawn (Greece), the AfD (Germany), the Front National (France), to name but a few, compete with everyone else for attention and power. Indeed, the argument that art institutions "reproduce the

limitations of parliamentarianism and retain the concrete space of liberal democratic parliament as a kind of imprint or inner image wherever they go and whatever they do" was recently made by Egyptian curator Bassam El Baroni (2017, 232–233), who has examined a number of nuanced philosophical positions on the matter.

There is nothing simple then about this "anti" controversy in the art world. The contradictions this seemingly internal controversy reveals constitute the consensus on what democracy means at present: a "democracy of equivalence", an electoral accounting potentially at least legitimising the power of *any* majority over *any* minority. It is this equivalence that we witness as "the free, public expression of opinion", registered in Artur Zmijewski's *Democracies* (2009) where micro-collectivities advocate their possibly antithetical politics (Dimitrakaki 2015). This is then registered and signified as an unsolvable problem, a necessary shortcoming of the condition of democracy as practised in civil society. But if so, on what grounds can an antifascist group criticise an arts organisation for operating according to the consensus on democracy, committed to engaging "diverse approaches on how to deal with ominous tendencies in politics and culture", as per the Biennial's ANTI mission statement?

I might as well ask, as a self-identified anti-fascist: is there anything that makes my position not equivalent to that of a fascist within the current consensus? The moral argument – that I am in solidarity with the oppressed whereas the fascist is on the side of the oppressor – does not stand. Neo- and historical fascists typically name an oppressed group (e.g. x nation oppressed by "foreign" elements figured as an external or internal enemy) they speak for and, as populism puts it, *with*. In the politics of anti, their oppressed are locked in an endless confrontation with my oppressed. In the art field of anti, I have also been asked if a "cool antifascist" throwing a stone and killing someone is better than a "fascist asshole" who does the same – and the language used, here culled from my private communication with a leading curator (that I will keep anonymous), reveals the easy corruption of political positions into lifestyles. In the political culture of anti, it has been possible to claim that neo-reactionary philosopher/eugenicist "[Nick] Land could be a Marxist deep troll" and, that "Land himself even remarked that the Alt Right is a mass political movement against capitalism incubating, unexpectedly, from the right" (SDLD50 2017). In this context of ideological daze and confusion, it is thus unsurprising to hear that both artists implicated in the Athens Biennial controversy place themselves on the left – with Keller claiming that their disagreement is merely on "tactics" (Christie 2018).

Observing all this as symptomatic of an accelerated ideological interchangeability, I propose to also read it as a political process which has alienation as its main outcome: embedded in the political culture of anti is the constant threat of being drawn into identifications with what one dis-identifies from. This is not experienced as open-ended textual practice (postmodernism) but as dead-end social practice locked in the Athens Biennial ANTI's

anagram: TINA. There is no alternative. There is only a loop in which everything can be connected with everything. In the political culture of anti, anyone can be praised as an anti-capitalist and anyone can be accused as a fascist. Marx can be called, and has been, "the first accelerationist" (Beckett 2017). Deanna Havas – defended as "poor" and a "woman artist" by Keller in his tweets – stated in an interview that her political sympathies change according to "moods" – and specifically: "My job is really to be apolitical. I can feel one way one day, and if my mood is different another day then I can try on different ideas and ideologies, and just step out of them —and that's fine" (Havas 2016). Or, "we are considering untapped possibilities", arch-accelerationist Robin McKay said – friend of both NRx-er Nick Land and the late author of *Capitalist Realism*, Mark Fisher (Beckett 2017). This is not a hollowing out of political positions, what we would call an "emptying of meaning", along the lines of Jameson's famous appraisal of postmodern art as "surrealism without the unconscious" (see Jameson 1991) – that is, as a paradigm that deploys the fragment yet disinvested from any source that might anchor it to meaning (though the self-association of many Surrealists with communism indicates that more can be read into Jameson's formulation). Rather, we are faced here with an over-abundance of meaning, with a proliferation of content making the form appear rock solid. Before considering why we have a high concentration of content but no indication of social transformation, I will briefly sketch out why the art field is such a fertile ground for the politics of anti and what interests this alignment serves.

The art field as ideal democracy: The labour - participation nexus

The contemporary art field is very hospitable to political struggles because of the blurry line between *labour* and *participation*, both of which are required for the production of value (indicatively, see Sholette 2010; Vishmidt 2013). In the art field, the *exchange* – between (or partial and nebulous overlapping of) the wage-entrepreneurial condition and the uncorrupted-from-money "life" (protest, affect, play, activism, intellect, exploration) of civil society – may not be experienced as an exchange at all, but rather as a fusion of work and life underpinned by relative autonomy. In other words, the art field achieves and glorifies the exact opposite of what *Frédéric* Lordon sees as imperative for extricating the social from the subjugation of desire to capital: "the (re)separation of work and activity" (Lordon 2014, 134).

If your work-*form* as an artist or curator is exhausting and oppressive, at least you can devote its substance-*content* to the political cause of your choice – given especially that the 24/7 work-form leaves no time for "external" occupations. Art is where a social subject can spend, self-consciously and by choice, a lifetime dedicated to a political cause without the pressure of taking power and without changing the world – turning thus John Holloway's political

proposition "to change the world without taking power" on its head (Holloway 2002) and instantiating it as the distillation of what is worth preserving from the messier world of actually existing democracy. The struggle continues in the art field day and night, when the outside world goes to the gym, watches Netflix, worries *only* about money, migrates for work rather than rebel against work, joins the protest rally but then returns to flattening everydayness for the next two months. "We're here all night debating nationalism, and the nation watches football!" an artist from post-Soviet Estonia complained to my art history student-self in 1998. This state of affairs is well known. It is, in fact, the one described in the curatorial statement of ANTI twenty years later.

I did not include however "*goes to artist-run space*" as part of this state of affairs because doing so would have brought forth the charge that by "state of affairs" I mean the middle class – just as SDLD50 connected the Athens Biennial ANTI theme with "the bourgeois arts professional", irrespective of the class background of the curators. Investigating and identifying individuals' class backgrounds would have been superfluous – as superfluous as the adjective "bourgeois" in the phrase – because art as an "ideal democracy" carries an indelible class stamp, marking anyone who enters it, and no number of precarious art workers has been big enough to challenge the radiance of the imprint. There is, of course, adequate evidence about the diverse connections between art and the rich: from British Petroleum sponsorship to offshore and real estate (for instructive recent cases in relation to offshore and real estate see Garside, Bernstein and Watt 2016 and Miranda and Lane-McKinely 2017, respectively). Yet here I am not referring to this kind of articulation of art and class, analysed extensively in contemporary art literature (indicatively, see Davis 2013). Instead, I am interested in how the *process of struggle in the art field's ideal democracy* serves specific class interests.

First, this process makes failure acceptable and heroic by incorporating contemporary struggles into the lineage of the "failed" historical avant gardes – a position polished to sparkling clarity by Boris Groys in his positively inflected account of the dead ends of activist art:

> […] art activism cannot escape a much more radical, revolutionary tradition of the aestheticization of politics—the acceptance of one's own failure, understood as a premonition and prefiguration of the coming failure of the status quo in its totality, leaving no room for its possible improvement or correction. The fact that contemporary art activism is caught in this contradiction is a good thing. First of all, only self-contradictory practices are true in a deeper sense of the word. And secondly, in our contemporary world, only art indicates the possibility of revolution as a radical change beyond the horizon of our present desires and expectations (Groys 2014).

What makes, then, art an ideal democracy is that it also includes the revolution that never comes – is there a position that captures more exuberantly the hypocrisy of the so-called liberal left? Why bother to identify with precision "desires and expectations" when you can remain in the familiar, nebulous but all the same hopeful state of "possibility" and operate as if an unspecified "revolution" is bound to happen at some point? As such, the process of struggle in the art field becomes the salient, updated case study of Jean-Francois Lyotard's *Libidinal Economy* (1974 (1983)) where selective enjoyment of oppression is linked with the suspicion that "the system of capital is, when all's said and done, natural" (Lyotard quoted in Beckett 2017).

Second, the art field pacifies critique, in self-identifying as the most experimental, open-minded, self-critical context for pursuing political causes, where the most acute and animated exchanges are safely accommodated as pre-eminently *discursive*. Art is where the far ends of the spectrum of the politics of anti can sublimate their antitheses in a shared room as words separated from deeds, despite the materiality of object-based or performative artworks – and the relatively recent adoption of so-called discursive practices by art institutions exemplify this. The art field *is* the over-production of discursivity. Art, for the most part (unless it collides with the law), is the opposite of what in recent years has been identified as "Trump-ness". As Dean notes in claiming Trump as "the most honest" US politician, Trump-ness ultimately reveals the "truth of economic inequality: civility is for the middle class" (Dean 2015).

Accelerationism, commoning, alienation, art: The politics of anti as the hegemony of prefigurative anti-communism

In the beginning, we are told, there was May '68, the Western political experience, which marks the rise of contemporary art, often posited as distinct from, if related to, modern art. American art historian Grant Kester, in his article "Lessons in Futility" (2009), and especially the section "May '68 and the Third Way", summarises the intellectual justification of the Foucauldian take on diffused power and of postmodernism (without naming either) following the dead end of May '68 as a politics of opposition – or "refusal": "We push our refusal to the point of refusing to be assimilated into the political groups that claim to refuse what we refuse", as the Student-Writers Action Committee wrote in a statement on 20 May' (quoted in Kester 2009, 411). Kester comments ironically on the outcome: "We cannot yet be trusted with the freedom that would result from a total revolution. Instead we must practise this freedom in the virtual space of the text or artwork, supervised by the poet or artist" (Kester 2009, 412). When it comes to how these developments impacted post-2000 art, he lists the following: "dissensus over consensus", "rupture and immediacy over continuity and duration", "extreme skepticism concerning organized political action", "re-coding of political transformation into a form of ontic disruption directed at any coherent system of belief, agency or identity" (Kester 2009,

407). Yet, the list provided by Kester has a longer history, as it outlines the political programme of postmodernism, at least as implemented in the art world – merely hinted at by Kester who notes "the rapprochement between neo-conceptual art practice and poststructuralist theory during the 1990s" (Kester 2009, 407). Yet, had he paid attention to the direction of feminist art theory from the mid-1970s onwards, he would have been able to piece together a longer narrative implicating precisely his noted "rapprochement": gradually abandoning both Marxism and references to the material articulation of gender and class, feminist art theory focused on artworks as "texts" requiring complex decoding. Let us then say that Generation X lived the post-1989 "disappeared" East as trauma *because* it was already told repeatedly that whereas opposition is desirable, only failure is possible – at least when the battle is situated in the material field of socio-economic relations; and that failure can still be celebrated, with art providing a roller-coaster model of climactic promises and anticlimactic groundings, available to the individual and collective libidos of its workers/participants.

Writing in 2008–2009, Kester notes however the change underway: the mass shift to collectivism in contemporary art, highlighting both "the possibilities" but also "the aporia of contemporary collaborative art practice" (Kester 2009, 419). A decade on we are confronted mostly with the aporia and must wonder why the wave of collectivism is proving powerless against the seemingly invincible principle of "dissensus". What the wave of collectivism has led to is the disposition of the art field as an *ethical left* – what outspoken right-wingers or "centrists" complain about in arguing against this left's "political correctness" – which cannot be comprehended in isolation from the trajectory of the political left. Both lefts exist as spectrums that at times align and at times do not – the ethical left mostly given to grassroots activities, activisms and "communing"; the political left organising into programmes that entail access to state and institutional power (ridiculed by the right as "Corbynomics") that respond to "ills" and "injustice". Both lefts find it altogether hard to overthrow the consensus on "There is no alternative", TINA, which permitted both the dominance of neoliberalism as a decades-long project of restoring and securing "upper-class power" (Harvey 2007, 28) and the impoverishment of democracy as the political culture of "anti". In this system of values and evaluation of social movements and social practice, dissensus has been extolled as the single possible consensus. This is the case at least since 1985 when Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* launched post-Marxist political theory. Providing us with two lengthy critiques of the influential book, Norman Geras notes (among many other things) that the argument "is […] normatively indeterminate, fit to support virtually any kind of politics, progressive or reactionary" as well as how "disappointingly thin are the ideas on democracy" and indeed connected with "some of the more standard tropes of Cold War anti-Marxism" (Geras 1988, 35; see also Geras 1987). To remind us, this is the book that British art historian Claire Bishop cited in her widely influential *October* article (Bishop 2004) in developing

her argument about how art can be *really* a site of democratic politics and revelatory aesthetics, as a response to Bourriaud's investment in temporary, site-specific conviviality despite antagonisms in his *Relational Aesthetics*. That is, anti-politics is promoted as the *sine qua non* ground of contemporary art entanglement with the social, from which we learn that all roads lead to Rome. Needless to say, but I do, that both Bishop and Bourriaud's position form part of art's left critique.

Yet, what counts as "left critique" in times of ideological interchangeability boosted by social media plots is an issue in its own right. This is clearly demonstrated in a 28 February 2019 podcast (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yvUcO8sQZSI) where renowned Marxist feminist philosopher Nina Power is in conversation with the neo-reactionaries DC Miller (who opposed the closure of antifascist activists against the LD50 gallery among his other achievements) and anti-secularist, pro-Catholic Justin Murphy (who tweets "Make Communism Elite Again", 31 August 2018 and writes even more confused stuff at his theotherlifenow blog). The video is a textbook case of how the erosion of left credibility is actualised in the political culture of anti where "anything goes". It presents a vista where a Marxist feminist scholar embraces paganism and spiritualism but rejects "contemporary feminism" (including, one assumes, the International Women's Strike and any other anti-capitalist feminisms) and advocates "free speech" while counselling us against the repudiation of "fascists" and "Trump supporters"; where "communism" and actual, historically documented religious "human sacrifice" are matters that elicit silence and giggles by the philosophically inclined interlocutors; where anti-intellectualism is adopted as a starting point for discussion; where Catholicism is promoted as a community while not a word is uttered about women's oppression and abortions. The video has been promoted by platforms such as Red Scare on Reddit, as it expresses adequately the platform's purposeful ideological confusion which, in its own right, exemplifies the lengths at which neo-reactionaries will go to undermine any vector of the critical left and especially anything and anyone associated with communism. In the politics of anti, self-identifying as a communist, as Justin Murphy does, can be the most effective anti-communism. Indeed, Power herself brings up Slovenian band Laibach to argue the benefits of "testing the limits of society", obscuring completely, or being ignorant of, the political context of strategies of over-identification in parts of pre-1989 Eastern Europe. Yet "testing the limits of society" clearly belongs to the privileged, and embracing such "testing" proves right the suspicious stance of anti-fascists such as SDLD50 (discussed earlier in this article) over how the art field accommodates such privilege against the material reality of the social subjects that suffer these "limits".

The contemporary "anti" political culture of accelerated ideological interchangeability lends Geras's remarks from thirty years ago the clout of a prophecy. Saving face as "post-Marxism" while the Soviet paradigm was being discredited and China was "reforming" (de-

collectivisation of agriculture, foreign investors, private businesses between 1978 and 1985), the left did participate and even led the democracy of equivalence or "of any kind of politics". Yet I disagree with Geras when he proposes "Cold War anti-Marxism" as the pool of ideas responsible for this twist of the plot. The anti-Marxist turn was rather symptomatic of capitalism's most successful and long-term campaign – anti-communism – always adapting to capitalism's own complex trajectory. Along with the ascent of neoliberalism, we see Marxism itself becoming the endless analysis of capitalism, marginalising severely the analysis of communism (bar the historical execution of state-run experiments) and elaborations of a communist imaginary.

If it can be inferred from Silvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch* (2004) that capitalism arose as a response to the emergent threat of communism, if the suppression of the Paris Commune by the Republic fits in such a narrative, the story of modernity splinters from the outset – making capitalism as anti-communism the terrain of realised modernity. Yet fleshing out speculations over "what would have happened if…" lies beyond the scope of this article. The fact is that, today, a left unable and in part unwilling, to deploy its intellectual, organisational and grass-roots capacities to foreground communism as an alternative, lacks orientation and is confined to a politics of opposition (including anti-fascism) when it faces again an updated, techno-modernised fascism as an increasingly credible *politics of proposition*. It is this ominous yet actual political development that forces me to suggest that the first step towards ending the left as merely a politics of opposition and response and towards re-uniting the ethical and the political left is to combat the hegemony of anti-communism and its power of shaping subjectivities through degrees of alienation.

Such combating would require careful analysis and mapping to join the dots of the many facets of this – at times, violent; at times, subtle – evacuation of the historical scene. The hegemony of anti-communism is global – executed materially and discursively. We can observe it across the former East in long-term campaigns of evacuating public space from any traces of an annoying and embarrassing past: change of street names, removal of statues, closure of archives (and of course, reclamation and normalisation of reactionary histories). We can observe it in the former West's regular press features against "totalitarianism", including the European Union's Remembrance Day for Victims of Totalitarian Regimes, agreed in 2008, as the combined evils of fascism and communism – while, as curators Antonia Majaca and Jelena Vesić have noted in the context of the outstanding *Parapolitics* curatorial project (HKW, Berlin 2017), totalitarianism, "a term of cultural othering during the Cold War […] became a pretext for the birth of contemporary art and the process of its elusive canonization" (Majaca and Vesić 2017). In post-2010 Greece, with the right fighting endlessly the grab of power by the left (no matter how humiliated the latter is), we note particular variations of anti-communist propaganda, with the mainstream press featuring recently an article on how Greece is the only

communist country in the civilised world thanks to Syriza (Παπαδόπουλος 2018), and with right-wing ideologues rewriting the history of the country's Civil War. We find anti-communism in China where the regime reportedly attacks and imprisons communist students who, in taking seriously their school texts, reflect on what communism can be and take action (indicatively, see Haas 2018; Hernandez 2018; Yang 2019). Even the "communist" party leading capitalist China is worried about the possibility of people thinking seriously about communism – at present, all regimes sustaining the global distribution of power and wealth are.

Indeed, the perception that contemporary China *is* communist plays perfectly as part of global anti-communism, making Stalinism as communism a less exciting episode of the saga. In his chapter on "communist accelerationism", Benjamin Noys points to the connection between the pitfalls of Soviet accelerationism, especially in its mutation to Stalinist "labour discipline", to the thread that leads to the current status of China in technophiles' imaginary when he says that "the Maoist 'Great Leap Forward" would also repeat the tragedy' (Noys 2014, 35). At the core of this tragedy, we find the resistance of capitalist technology, inevitably adopted by the young Soviet Union, to be re-purposed towards "communist ends" (Noys 2014, 33) – a lesson of history still not learned by some on the left. Predictably, China pleases accelerationists enormously – first and foremost, the afore-mentioned Nick Land, born 18 days before Douglas Coupland and a founding member of Warwick's Cybernetic Culture Research Unit in the 1990s. Land eventually moved to Shanghai and in 2004 "described the modern Chinese fusion of Marxism and capitalism as 'the greatest political engine of social and economic development the world has ever known'" (Beckett 2017). Eleven years later, Land became the "guru for the US-based far-right movement neoreaction" or NRx, advocating the "replacement of modern nation-states, democracy and government bureaucracies by authoritarian city states" (Beckett 2017). Fifteen years later, he participated in the neo-reactionary conference accompanying a neo-Nazi art show at the now shut LD50 Gallery in London, whose director and Trump-policy-supporter, Lucia Diego, described the left as "more like a fascist organisation than the real fascists" while claiming that the audience was "liberal" (Ellis-Petersen 2017). As argued already, one never escapes the accelerated ideological interchangeability of the "anti" loop. More important however for the purposes of the present account is that accelerationism – a technophilia with a philosophical and a flexible social programme – has come to fill the void in the social imaginary created by the hegemony of anti-communism, satisfying simultaneously a left that sees the mirage of a "future [that] remains open as a site of radical recomposition" (Hester 2018, 1) and a right that pushes for the legitimation of assisted yet "natural" supremacy of the fittest. If "openness" is the inherited yet futurological essentialism of post-structuralism (nothing is fixed; everything can change forever), supremacy, from the NRx perspective, is the historically lived yet also *projected*

outcome of openness: technology will rescript "natural selection" as a matter of course if obstacles are removed from technology's way, and this carry on and on in an infinite evolution. This, of course, presupposes an abstract view of what we apprehend as technology today rather than an understanding of its origins in capital's biopower exercises and capitalist modernity at large. But, as Groys assured us earlier, "contradictory practices", or for that matter contradictory techno-speculative propositions, "are true in a deeper sense of the word". True in proclaiming antagonisms as the eternal curse of post-Eden humanity, perhaps? This is history seen through the prism of 'anti' politics.

But, you will say, it is not exactly like this. Civil society is not just a loop of "anti" and the left is not just a politics of opposition. There are many, if dispersed, initiatives of proposition, clustered around the common and the commons – words that, after all, have *the same root* as communism. The art field is a keen facilitator and mediator of such practices: the previous iteration of Athens Biennial (2015–2017) focused on "communing"; as also partly did the public programme of Documenta 14 (2017), especially its leg in Athens; as many others. The irony underpinning my choice of art-field examples should not be lost. This irony does not refer to the two institutions per se, but to how they became engulfed in the political culture of anti, despite intentions – with Documenta 14's entrapment in the debt-nationalism nexus defining the post-2010 relationship of Greece and German capital preoccupying the international press since 2015.

Without irony, I want to follow Dmitri Vilenski of Chto Delat who said a decade ago: "Notice how few people would call themselves communists, but there are many 'commonists'" (Riff and Vilensky 2009, 469). The conversation in which he made this remark was appropriately titled "From Communism to the Commons?" and another issue raised in it was that "neoliberalism is all about allowing commons to arise for the sole purpose of their subsequent privatization" (Riff and Vilensky 2009, 466–467). The language of "social innovation" oft-deployed in justifying such initiatives outside the art world is symptomatic, as is the fact that worker-owned cooperatives such as the Greek VIO.ME must ultimately sell products in a competitive market, as seen on the site www.viomecoop.com. As for the art field, insofar as "society is outsourcing its politics to art, and that has become extremely profitable", it is hard to rid yourself of the impression that "you have been installed as a readymade on a certain cultural field, and […] given a set of privileges, which even include free collaboration and political radicalism" (Riff and Vilensky 2009, 470): this is both the metaphorical and at times literal script of alienation in the struggle's *political process* that acquires clearer contours in the art field's ideal democracy. It is a cumulative but also dispersed effect that organises subjectivity by asking it to self-organise within a setting that resembles that of drama-fantasy film *The Truman Show* (directed by Peter Weir, 1998): the point of the film is not that the protagonist unknowingly lives his life observed by an audience but that his world has no real

horizon – yet, unlike many commoners, he at least eventually confronts his reality of "nowhere to go" within his current setting (sic).

For these reasons, I would argue that the proliferation of commoning practices today, in art or the broader social field of antagonisms, *when detached from explicitly combating anti-communism*, intellectually and on the ground, merely recycles alienation as much as it helps make life livable, generating heterotopias of conviviality or controlled conflict, not too far removed from the principles of relational aesthetics and its obverse manifestation as the replication of friction – after all, is there anything else to do? I fail to see how this differs from the stance of Generation X in the 1990s: "We didn't believe in global communism, but that doesn't make us advocates of global capitalism" (Neate 2007). Thirty years later, does it not?

Capitalism, which presents the democracy of equivalence as its great achievement, will have no problem with anti-fascism, diluted as yet another "anti". Anti-fascism becomes more content *within the form*. Capitalism hardly has a problem with anti-capitalism, including the soft proposition politics of commoning without communism. As for art's attachment to "agonism", I concur with El Baroni that this "franchising [of] the empty signifier of democracy" happens "in the hope that this in itself will disrupt normal flows of information and exchange, and destabilize the totalitarian streak in liberal capitalism" (El Baroni 2017, 234). The futility of the hope is analogous to the number of destabilisation strategies we have seen since the emergence of post-structuralism. Yet El Baroni's suggested solution of bringing forth "intersubjective practices of reasoning" would not break the loop of the politics of anti, precisely because such practices would merely "set out to construct new shared perspectives irreducible to, and transformative of, our individual perspectives" (El Baroni 2017, 235). Such practices would just generate more resilient forms of collectivism, but, given that this would necessarily happen within the democracy of equivalence, what would actually prevent such resilient collectivisms from being contained into fascist politics, which by default must always seek out and identify "the other" as the locus on which necropolitical power must be enacted? Understanding the project of 21st-century fascism is crucial here, and it becomes transparent in the case of Bolsonaro's election to the Presidency in Brazil, of which Antonio Negri has offered an engaging analysis (Negri 2019), focusing precisely on what the Frankfurt School had identified as more perilous: fascism's grab of power through democracy than through a *coup*:

> What is 21st century fascism? That of the 20th century sought to destroy the Soviets, in Russia or in any other part of the world where they could be found. Where are the Bolsheviks today? They are obviously fantasies. But neoliberalism's fatigue in consolidating itself and the political crises that are added to the economic ones revive the fear of Bolsheviks. That insistence is astounding (Negri 2019).

What makes Bolsonaro a pertinent case study is, as Negri also asserts, his explicit commitment to eliminate the left (alongside his racial project of attacking "Blacks", Brazil's largest constituency) as the crucial (pre)condition for securing and deepening neoliberalism. Negri however does not refer to the left in his text but to "communists", though we have not seen more self-identified communists in Brazil than in anywhere else. It would be more accurate to suggest that the revival "of the fear of Bolsheviks" pushes for a *prefigurative anti-communism*, which is what 21st-century fascism is fundamentally about. Negri himself briefly insinuates this when he tries to explain how the authoritarian turn of capitalism relates to the multitude:

> In productive terms, that cooperative power leads the multitude toward the common. However, when strong tensions intervene that act on the singularities (that compose the multitude) in terms, for example, of economic or environmental insecurity and fear of the future, then the multitudinous cooperation can implode as a defense of identity. The fascism of the 21st century seems to be sustained by such incidents in the cooperative nature of the multitude (Negri 2019).

The issue raised deserves much more than the one paragraph Negri devotes to it, but we may wish to observe that the multitude, as Negri himself asserts, is led "toward the common" because "*the development of the mode of production* has placed the multitude in the center of class struggle" (Negri 2009, emphasis added). It should be obvious then insofar as the common serves the development of the mode of production, capitalism's survival is dependent on keeping commoning separate from the prospect of communism – which is what requires both the violent anti-communism of Bolsonaro (and others) and the ideological anti-communisms elsewhere: liberal contexts take care of the matter not by direct suppression but by naturalising an anti politics without end as the essential feature of democracy. Art is such as liberal context – its illustration as an ideal democracy serves this purpose – and as artist Owen Logan noted in his talk "The Spirit of Fascism in the Arts" (19 January 2019, City Art Centre, Edinburgh), contrary to popular opinion, art, in general terms, has the effect of keeping subjects tied to hegemonic ideology as opposed to making subjects "open minded". Logan's analysis proceeds from reminding us of art as a "state craft" already in the service of "despotic Enlightenment in the 18th century" to the inscription of the "master" through authorship retained to this day. Thus, Owen's recent analysis affirms Kester's observations, cited earlier in this article, about the supervisory role of the artist in overseeing the desire for revolt carried from the field of the social to aesthetico-critical practices. Making this view more concrete, Marxist art historian Danielle Child (2019) recently showed through case studies how contemporary art is literally patterned on changes in capitalist production. Her narrative allows us to see that art, even if unwilling to admit it, exemplifies the limits of an imaginary rooted in the actually existing

economy. As I have said elsewhere (Dimitrakaki and Lloyd 2015), it is capitalism that practices economic reductionism rather than Marxism.

If then El Baroni sees his preferred practices of reasoning as realised principally in the art field, would they not contribute further to the latter's pacifying function as an even *more* ideal democracy? Intersubjective practices of reasoning are adequate guidance for the minute microcosms of love relationships – but to this we should counter-argue not only that fascists also love (on this see Håvard Bustnes's documentary *Golden Dawn Girls*, 2017) but that when such practices are executed in the field of the social, dominated by the politics of anti, no one's reasoning is ultimately better than anyone else's in undermining the affective bonds required by the utopias that capital authorises as beneficial to its reproduction – as per Jameson's quote in this article's first section. This is why Lordon proposes a move to a reconfigured binary, which I would see as a way out of the recycling of anti:

> Today's situation echoes the long-past slogan "socialism" or "barbarism": on the one hand the paradoxical idea of the artist-employee escaping into the free association of workers, and on the other hand capital's demand for the total subordination of the desires and affects of its subjects. The two seem to usher the present toward a formally very simple bifurcation: *communism or totalitarianism* (Lordon 2014, 126; emphasis added).

The question is therefore whether reasoning might evolve into a political process that would eradicate alienation-in-the-struggle by returning to the negative space at the heart of democracy the content of a future in terms of this bifurcation – already underway where capitalist totalitarianism is concerned. Communism is, at present, the absent problem for capital, but which capital nonetheless foresees and solves with prefigurative anti-communism. Can this problem become present through the art field's commitment to the radicalisation of the desiring subject? We have good reasons to doubt it. And yet, bringing this question into our field of vision might help at least to make us aware of the splinters of ideology in our wide-open eyes that, in constant surprise, survey the dominion of sameness as the outcome of the procedures that turn us into the means of capital.

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Angela Dimitrakaki – a writer and Senior Lecturer in Contemporary Art History and Theory at the University of Edinburgh where she directs the MSc Modern and Contemporary Art. Her scholarly books include *Gender, ArtWork and the Global Imperative: A Materialist Feminist Critique* (Manchester University Press 2013), *Art and Globalisation: From the Postmodern Sign to the Biopolitical Arena* (Hestia 2013, in Greek), *ECONOMY: Art, Production and the Subject in the 21st Century* (Liverpool University Press 2015, co-edited with Kirsten Lloyd), *Politics in a Glass Case: Feminism, Exhibition Cultures and Curatorial Transgressions* (Liverpool University Press 2013, co-edited with Lara Perry). She sits on the editorial board of *Third Text* and is a Corresponding Editor and a former Editor of *Historical Materialism: Research in Critical Marxist Theory*. Her award-winning fiction work in her native Greek includes six novels and a collection of short stories for which the most recent distinction was an Athens Academy award in 2017.

ADDRESS:
School of History of Art
University of Edinburgh
Room 0.52, Hunter Building
74 Lauriston Place, Edinburgh EH3 9DF
United Kingdom
EMAIL: angela.dimitrakaki@ed.ac.uk

AUTOR: Angela Dimitrakaki

TYTUŁ: Lewica pozostawiona z TINA: Sztuka, alienacja i antykomunizm

ABSTRAKT: Prezentowany artykuł śledzi, w jaki sposób współczesne pole sztuki bywa nawiedzane przez kulturową i polityczną wyobraźnię właściwą dla czasów po 1989 roku, a uchwyconą w powieści Douglasa Couplanda *Pokolenie X: Opowieści na czasy przyśpieszającej kultury* (1991, 1998). Książka ta okazała się formacyjna z uwagi na prezentowane w niej stanowisko antypracy, jak również narrację wycofania w podziwie dla procesów przyspieszenia, która opisywała, jak zasady produkcji przekładają się na „oszołomione i zdezorientowane" style życia. Uprzywilejowanie przez przedstawicieli Pokolenia X perspektywy „mikrokosmosów" – gdzie wycofanie spotyka się z niskiej częstotliwości kolektywizmem – staje się jeszcze bardziej powszechne w kolejnych dekadach i utożsamione z demokracją realizowaną i idealizowaną w kategoriach polityki „anty" (w tym antyfaszyzmu), co znajduje liczne przykłady w polu sztuki

w jego powiązaniu z etyczną lewicą. Stałe i gloryfikowane antagonizmy łączą w tym kontekście liberalne pole sztuki z polem społecznym, każdorazowo przepisując „anty" na TINA – zasadę „braku alternatywy" (ang. „there is no alternative" – TINA). TINA, jak argumentuję, przyjmuje szczególne figuracje w ramach przeważnie lewicowego obszaru sztuki, gdzie praktyki uwspólniania pozostają odcięte od polityki komunizmu, a technofilia – tak na gruncie, jak i poza polem sztuki – jest legitymizowana przez lewicę i prawicę jako substytut pragnienia komunizmu. Główne tezy artykułu prezentują się następująco: (a) opisane wyżej zjawiska są powiązane z politycznym procesem walki, którego głównym efektem jest alienacja – alienacja od wyobrażonego punktu końcowego owej walki; (b) wspomniana alienacja nie może być rozważana oddzielnie od hegemonii przyspieszenia, zwłaszcza w świetle traumatycznego wycofania z komunizmu i wycofania się samego komunizmu oraz stałego dla kapitalizmu przepracowywania prefiguratywnego antykomunizmu.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: sztuka współczesna, polityka anty, demokracja, alienacja, antykomunizm, Pokolenie X, akceleracjonizm, antyfaszyzm, etyczna lewica