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## **Special Section:**

## **Old Ideas, Still Valuable ... (for a Destructive 21<sup>st</sup> Century). A Few Introductory Notes.**

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Many are trying to get to grips with the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We've known for a while now that "something" was, or indeed is, really amiss in this post-post-modern-ist age of ours. Whether it's geopolitical developments, (cancel) culture wars and identity politics, the incessant drone of capital accumulation here and social degradation there, or the speed of viral transmission and the doom and gloom of lockdowns, all of it is now coming to a head. It had been building up for some time, of course, but the early 21<sup>st</sup> century it seems, is when the few fragile stabilities of life in the age after Francis Fukuyama's *end of history* have crumbled apart. *All that was solid* –if indeed *solid* is the word here- *is melting into air*, once again.

But whereas in 1848, when Marx and Engels were writing, the maelstrom generated by the birthing pains of industrial capitalism and the resulting vaporisation ("into air") of ways of life, as well as the relations between them, at least a new world, or better: new worlds, could be discerned, or, if not, imagined, looming as they were on the horizon. I'm not sure if in today's maelstrom there is anything interesting or promising to discern or imagine at the far horizon at all. In fact, one cannot be sure if there still is a horizon at all. Not sooner does a solid shape crystallize out of the formless flows ("life"), than it dissipates again, torn asunder by internal tensions and external impacts ("death"), or simply washed over by the energetic algorithmic force of pure, abstract, lifeless capital –the "living dead" alpha *and* omega of a zombified and zombifying economy.

Ours seems to be an age of utter exhaustion. We've had *post-this* after *post-thats*, promise after shattered promise. In a way, we are, then, much wiser than the revolutionaries of 1848 ever were. But we're also utterly dazed, depleted, exhausted; all, it seems, has been exhausted; all *are* exhausted. Whether we are at an absolute Ground Zero or whether we've already arrived at an utter Beyond, we don't know. Perhaps we are still somewhere in between, or perhaps we are, enigmatically so, everywhere, and nowhere at the same time, who knows? Largely clueless we watch Russian tanks roll across Ukrainian landscapes. We hear the 'culture' wars rage at every turn. We marvel at how any attempt to create something 'solid', melts, very quickly, "into air". We cannot get our heads around the gaping inequalities that carve up the world. We wince at the

juggernaut that incessantly keeps blaring ‘Make money! Take money!’, when it thunders past, everywhere we go. There is no more hope, it seems. Granted, hope might be hiding anywhere, everywhere. Or, perhaps it is nowhere at all. Exhaustion –our exhaustion- could well be total.

It is at times such as these that it pays to slow down, take stock, and, if possible, to look into the historical record to see if there’s anything there that we can use to make sense of the predicament that we, parents and children of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, are finding ourselves in. And that is exactly where this special section comes in. The contributors were asked to think about this 21<sup>st</sup> century of ours, but with an eye on the 19<sup>th</sup>. They were asked to explore if, in their opinion, there might be any ‘old ideas’ that, even if dating back to that equally tumultuous –but so very distant- age, might still be useful for anyone who ponders the *calamity* that we know as the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

As it turns out the authors did not have to think long. Patrick Van Calster was drawn to Nietzsche’s thought –Nietzsche, the philosophical diagnostician, the ‘Doctor of Culture’. Nietzsche’s focus on life affirmation and artful, creative life still resonates today. Nihilism is easy. Forward looking, future-oriented creative life isn’t. It requires the mobilisation of energies in attempts to construct newness; to construct new ways of life, for example. Although this may be easier said than done in our age of entropy, it could also be the case that it is precisely the drift towards entropy that provides the energy needed for anything like a new ‘solid’ way of life to form at all; but then again, the *herd* and their *slave morality* (Van Calster’s focus in his piece) tend to drink from the same fountain of entropic nihilism. Mark Featherstone, on the other hand, investigates Freud’s (and psychoanalysis’) notion of the *death drive*. Freud, the doctor, and healer ... If the creative life force generates solids everywhere in a mad frenzy, and in terrible conflict, there is no denying that there is also a very pervasive destructive force at work. No solids will stand for any length of time. All that is solid will melt into air. Entropy is where we’re headed. At best, it seems, we can only hope for a zombie-like life; life that is over-coded by the utterly indifferent codes of pure, abstract value. The life of the “living dead”, as it were. This is about (very) late modern capital, in other words. My own attention was drawn to yet another of those ‘old, yet still valuable ideas”, i.e., *equilibrium*, or better perhaps: *balance*. Starting from the work (and life) of a now forgotten early 19<sup>th</sup> century physiologist-cum-alienist (Joseph Guislain, ... another doctor!), who wrote against the backdrop of the industrial and social revolutions of the 1830s and 1840s, this slightly conservative-conservationist notion of equilibrium-as-balance does seem to have some relevance today. Maybe the issue, and the problem, is not to navigate a rampant death drive (after all, the death drive is only a manifestation of life), or a frenzied, conflict-ridden multiplication of *solidified*, and therefore exclusive, destructive ways of life (after all, any ‘solid’, *frozen* way of life is just a repetitive manifestation of the death drive; remember ‘Fort! Da!’). It is, rather, to make attempts, however futile perhaps, at *balancing* a wide variety of formations of life. ‘Balancing’ here implies a capacity to process those various formations, and to give them space –and oftentimes: *place*, quite literally so- in co-existence. The question though, one readily admits, immediately arises: to what extent can the largely entropic 21<sup>st</sup> century be said to still harbour pockets of such co-existential capacity? Or have we now arrived at a point where all capacity for balance, i.e., this capacity for co-existential processing, has all but vanished?

It is to these discussions that we now turn. It should be clear that in this very brief special section we cannot hope to even cover the mere basics. But we hope to have been able to kindle a flame, somewhere, somehow.

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